

Global Programme Framework for **Children on the Move**



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Definitions

ADOLESCENT	Defined by the United Nations as those between the ages of 10 and 19.
ASYLUM SEEKER	Any person seeking international protection. In some countries, it may be used as a legal term to refer to a person who has applied for refugee status or another form of international protection but is still waiting to receive a final decision on the determination of their status. An asylum-seeker may also refer to a person who intends to apply for asylum but has not yet formally started the asylum application process. ¹
BEST INTERESTS PRINCIPLE	The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states, "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." ² As articulated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the best interests principle serves three purposes: as a substantive right held by children as individual rights holders, as an interpretative legal principle that must inform the interpretation of all other child rights, and as a rule of procedure requiring all decision-making affecting children to include evaluation of possible impacts of the decision on the child or children concerned. ³
BEST INTERESTS PROCEDURES	A formal process with specific procedural safeguards and documentation requirements that is conducted for certain children of concern to UNHCR, whereby a decision-maker is required to weigh and balance all the relevant factors of a particular case, giving appropriate weight to the rights and obligations recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments, so that a comprehensive decision can be made that best protects the rights of children. Best interests procedures include key steps of child protection case management as well as the Best Interests Determination (BID) process. ⁴
CHILDREN ON THE MOVE	Children who have been directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country. This includes child migrants; children in need of international protection, such as refugees and asylum-seekers; internally displaced children; children indirectly affected by migration and displacement, such as children who stay behind while parents or caregivers migrate; stateless children; and child victims of cross-border trafficking. ⁵
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES	Children with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. ⁶
CLIMATE MOBILITY	The term encompasses all aspects of climate change-related migration and displacement, as well as planned relocation and evacuation.
DURABLE SOLUTIONS	Durable solutions for refugees include: 1) voluntary repatriation to the country of origin in safety and dignity, 2) resettlement to a third country, or 3) local integration in the country of asylum. ⁷ Regarding internal displacement, a durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. ⁸

FAMILY REUNIFICATION	The process of bringing together families, particularly children and elderly dependents with their care-providers for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care (UNHCR, n.d.c).
(FORCED) DISPLACEMENT	The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence (whether within their own country or across an international border), in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters. ⁹
HUMAN MOBILITY	A complex process that involves people's movement from one place to another for diverse reasons. It can be voluntary (migration) or forced (displacement), and people may remain in the place of destination for a short or long period of time, be in transit, or practice circular migration. It encompasses all forms of human movement, such as internal migration, international migration, forced displacement and human trafficking, as well as the effects on communities of origin.
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	<p>As per Article 3 of the <u>Palermo Protocol</u>¹⁰, human trafficking refers to:</p> <p>The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, or practices like slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs; ...</p> <p>The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered 'trafficking in persons' even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article.</p> <p>'Child' shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.</p>
INCLUSION	When migrants and displaced persons have access to national systems and services in law and practice and without discrimination in accordance with international norms and standards. ¹¹
INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT	Persons or groups of persons are considered to be internally displaced when they have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of – or in order to avoid – armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed internationally recognized state borders. ¹²
INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION	This is the protection a state offers a foreign national because her or his human rights are threatened or violated in the country of nationality or habitual residence, in which she or he was unable to obtain adequate protection because it was not accessible, available, and/or effective. International protection begins by ensuring admission to a country of asylum and procedures for applying for refugee status, as well as ensuring respect for a person's fundamental rights, including the right not to be forcibly returned to a country where she or he may be in danger (principle of non-refoulement). International protection ends only with the achievement of a durable solution, such as local integration in the host country. In the context of international humanitarian law, this notion may also cover other statutes in addition to refugee status (UNHCR, n.d.c).

IRREGULAR MIGRATION	Movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination. ¹³
MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT	Mental health is a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to her or his community. ¹⁴ Psychosocial refers to the dynamic relationship between the psychological and social dimensions of a person, one influencing the other. The psychological dimension includes internal, emotional and thought processes, feelings, and reactions. The social dimension includes relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices. ¹⁵ MHPSS is any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being or prevent or treat mental health conditions. ¹⁶
MIGRANT	A person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a home country regardless of whether the move is voluntary or involuntary and regardless of the length of stay. ¹⁷
MIXED MOVEMENTS	Movements of people who travel together, irregularly, along the same routes and using the same means of transport, but for different reasons. These people have different needs and profiles and may include, for example, asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children and irregular migrants. ¹⁸
NON-DISCRIMINATION	A principle that prohibits any discrimination based on the status of a child as being unaccompanied or separated, or as being a refugee, asylum seeker, or migrant. This principle, when properly understood, does not prevent, but may indeed call for, differentiation on the basis of different protection needs such as those deriving from age and/or gender. Measures should also be taken to address possible misperceptions and stigmatization of unaccompanied or separated children within the society. ¹⁹
NON-REFOULEMENT	A core principle of international human rights and refugee law that prohibits states from removing individuals, regardless of migration, nationality, asylum, or other status, from their jurisdiction when they would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, gross violations of human rights or other irreparable harm. ²⁰
PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT	<p>UNHCR defines protracted refugee situations as those in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years. Refugees in these situations often find themselves trapped in a state of limbo – while it is not safe for them to return home, they also have not been granted permanent residence to stay in another country instead.²¹ For children this sometimes means spending entire childhoods in displacement - and often without access to national systems.</p> <p>In the context of internal displacement, protracted displacement is generally described as a condition in which IDPs are prevented from accessing durable solutions that would reduce their displacement-induced vulnerability, impoverishment, and marginalization. The criteria for this determination relate to: the duration of displacement (UNHCR defines protracted displacement as three or more years in displacement), locations where durable solutions are not possible (i.e. return, settlement in the area of displacement, or resettlement in a third area), the continued dependence on humanitarian assistance while economic conditions are either not improving or are further deteriorating, and the continuing or worsening psychosocial impacts of displacement and marginalization.²²</p> <p>Displacement lasts 20 years on average for refugees and more than 10 years for most IDPs.²³</p>

REFUGEE	According to Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (as modified by the 1967 Protocol) a refugee is a person, who “owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”
REGULAR MIGRATION (PATHWAYS)	Migration that occurs in compliance with the laws of the country of origin, transit, and destination. Regular migration pathways are options that allow eligible persons to migrate regularly to the concerned country of destination based on conditions and for a duration defined by such country. ²⁴
REGULARIZATION	Refers to a state’s policy response to the presence of irregular migrants residing in the country, which leads to the stabilization of a migrant’s status within a country. ²⁵
SEPARATED CHILD	A person under 18 years of age outside her or his country of origin or habitual residence who is separated from both parents or from her or his previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. ²⁶
SMUGGLING	The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident. ²⁷
STATELESSNESS	The international legal definition of a stateless person is a person who is not considered as a national by any state. Some people are born stateless, and others become stateless. ²⁸ As defined in the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless child is a person under the age of 18 who is not considered a national by any state under its legislation. ²⁹ Children lacking a birth certificate or other identity document may be at risk of statelessness. ³⁰
UNACCOMPANIED CHILD	A person under 18 years of age who has been separated from both parents and other relatives and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for their care. Children may become unaccompanied at any point during their migration or displacement. ³¹
YOUTH	There is no universally agreed international definition of the youth age group. For statistical purposes, however, the United Nations—without prejudice to any other definitions made by Member States—defines ‘youth’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. This definition, which arose in the context of preparations for the International Youth Year (1985) (see A/36/215), was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 36/28 of 1981. All UN statistics on youth are based on this definition, as is reflected in the annual yearbooks of statistics published by the UN system on demography, education, employment, and health.

Acronyms

ALS	Adolescent Learning and Skills
BID	Best Interests Determination
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CCCs	Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action
CCTE	Conditional Cash Transfer for Education
COVID-19	'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, 'D' for disease, and '19' for 2019 (year first identified).
CPSS	Child Protection System Strengthening
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
GBV	Gender-based violence
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
GPF	Global Programme Framework
GRYN	Global Refugee Youth Network
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICAT	Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons
IDAC	International Data Alliance for Children on the Move
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MGCY	Major Group for Children and Youth
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MYCP	Migration Youth and Children Platform
NatCom	National Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SBC	Social and Behaviour Change
SCAP	Sustainability and Climate Action Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sexual characteristics
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SP	Strategic Plan
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and math
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

About the Global Programme Framework

Purpose

UNICEF's work in migration and displacement promotes children's rights and their best interests, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), regardless of their migratory status and in all contexts. This Global Programme Framework for Children on the Move (GPF) refreshes UNICEF's programmatic priorities and guiding principles on migration and displacement in order to equip Country and Regional Offices, Centres of Excellence, and National Committees (NatComs) to be future-facing at a time of change and to inform the Strategic Plan 2026-2029. The GPF contains both the Agenda for Action for Children on the Move (advocacy asks) and action areas (programming guidance).

This revision of UNICEF's 2017 GPF, which established foundational strategies for protecting migrant and displaced children, builds on nine additional years of organizational experience in this area of work. It expands and refines the prior guidance in light of the current global context and seeks to address current and future challenges and opportunities. Since 2017, global consensus on migration governance has been formalized through two Joint General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which provided guidance on legislative measures for child rights in migration, and the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, which respectively promote safe and child-sensitive migration policies and practices and emphasize international cooperation for refugee protection, including children. In 2022, the Secretary General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement led to UNICEF's development of an institutional plan to prioritize prevention and solutions to internal displacement. Partnership modalities, such as UNICEF's Strategic Collaboration Frameworks with UNHCR (focusing on inclusion and protection for refugee children) and with IOM (emphasizing capacity building and child-sensitive services for migrant children and families), have strengthened interagency complementarity. During this time, the numbers of children and families on the move have continued to grow, propelled by increasing disasters and armed conflicts, violence and persecution, economic shocks, and major demographic shifts and policy changes globally.

Methodology

The GPF was revised based on a comprehensive review of relevant global agreements and institutional frameworks, current programming and practices within UNICEF, emerging evidence, and UNICEF evaluations from 2017 to date. Additionally, consultations with colleagues from UNICEF Headquarters, Regional and Country Offices, National Committees, Youth on the Move Fellows, and partners informed its development.

The GPF provides information on the situation of children on the move and what is needed to protect, include, and empower them. The next section lays out our Agenda for Action – our call for all stakeholders to help children on the move realize their rights and reach their full potential.

The heart of the GPF focuses on Five Key Actions to guide UNICEF programming for children on the move. Building on UNICEF's programming for all children, these priority interventions have been chosen because of the opportunity they offer to accelerate impact for children on the move specifically.

A section on “Dilemmas in the Field” and selected case studies seek to ground rights-based principles in the field. They provide guideposts for UNICEF staff navigating the tensions that arise in an increasingly complex landscape. The final sections outline the key programme enablers by which UNICEF implements these interventions, as well as definitions, acronyms, and other reference documents. The [PROSPECTS](#) programme is presented as an example of what works in programme design and delivery.

Who are Children on the Move?

“Children on the move” is a compound concept defined by the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move. The term describes children who have been directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country. The term includes:

- child migrants;
- children in need of international protection, such as refugees and asylum seekers;
- internally displaced children;
- children indirectly affected by migration and displacement, such as children who stay behind while parents or caregivers migrate;
- stateless children; and
- child victims of cross-border trafficking.³²

Children on the move include those in transit, those who have reached their destinations, and those who have been returned to their countries of origin or third countries. Some of these children may be in situations of limbo, such as those waiting at closed borders, in camp settings, waiting for decisions on their asylum cases, or in detention.³³

A Note about ‘Children, Youth and Young People’

In this document, the term ‘children on the move’ refers to children up to the age of 18, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While children, including adolescents, are the focus of the Global Programme Framework, issues pertaining to youth are also considered. UNICEF takes a life-cycle approach to development and participation, identifying critical risks and opportunities that have implications for the realization of children’s rights, from the first decade through the second. The transitional phase of adolescence from childhood to adulthood poses unique challenges and opportunities. The transition into adulthood is not instant – yet migrant children frequently lose protections overnight upon turning 18 years old, which can result in the loss of accommodation, support, access to services and residence permits, and, in some cases, to detention and removal. Knowing that they will face such precarity has a negative impact on children’s well-being while they are children, during that important period of psychosocial development. It also increases risks of children going missing. UNICEF is committed to meeting the needs of all children to reach their full potential, including engaging children and young people as stakeholders to inform policy and programme decision-making.

UNICEF's Role

UNICEF leads global efforts to protect, include, and empower children on the move, guided by its child rights mandate. Through partnerships with governments, civil society, and other partners, extensive field presence, and multisectoral programming, UNICEF delivers impactful interventions in child protection, education, social protection, health, WASH, and more.

It strengthens inclusive, resilient systems and operates effectively across humanitarian and development contexts, addressing the unique needs of migrant, displaced, and returning children worldwide. UNICEF's focus on the protection, inclusion, and empowerment of all children on the move complements the specific mandates of UNHCR for refugees and IOM for migrants. UNICEF's collaboration with line ministries across social services complements IOM and UNHCR's collaboration with government counterparts in the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs. Working in close coordination supports a whole-of-government approach to upholding child rights in migration and displacement contexts and is reflected in our bilateral Strategic Collaboration Frameworks (Appendix 2).

The Global Programme Framework for children on the move is an attempt to keep a bold promise: to build inclusive systems, deliver assistance that responds and minimizes risks related to migration and displacement, and ensure no child is forgotten.

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16-year-old Yassin John Yassin at the Kurmuk Temporary Site for Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia, which UNICEF supported with emergency supplies.



Background

In today's shifting world, millions of children are on the move, propelled by dreams and dire necessities – whether the hope to escape extreme poverty or the harsh push of conflict, persecution, and extreme weather exacerbated by climate change. As of 2024, there were at least 37 million children on the move living outside their country of birth, whether due to migration or forced displacement, representing 12-14 per cent of the total 304 million people on the move globally.³⁴

Among the world's forcibly displaced population, children make up a disproportionate percentage, accounting for 40 per cent.³⁵ The number of children displaced due to conflict, violence, and other human rights violations internally or across borders surged from 16.3 million in 2010 to 48.7 million in 2024³⁶. As for climate-related displacements, between 2016 and 2023, an estimated 62.1 million children were uprooted within their own countries by storms, floods, and wildfires.

Many factors and circumstances influence a child or family's decision to move or stay. Most people who move today do so through regular channels,³⁷ and children are no exception. Families may be pursuing employment opportunities for adults and educational aspirations for their children, often while reunifying with relatives or diaspora communities. However, even as pathways for people from developed countries to move have expanded, regular pathways for those from developing countries have narrowed considerably. For growing numbers of people around the world, including for some seeking asylum, irregular migration is the only option available.³⁸

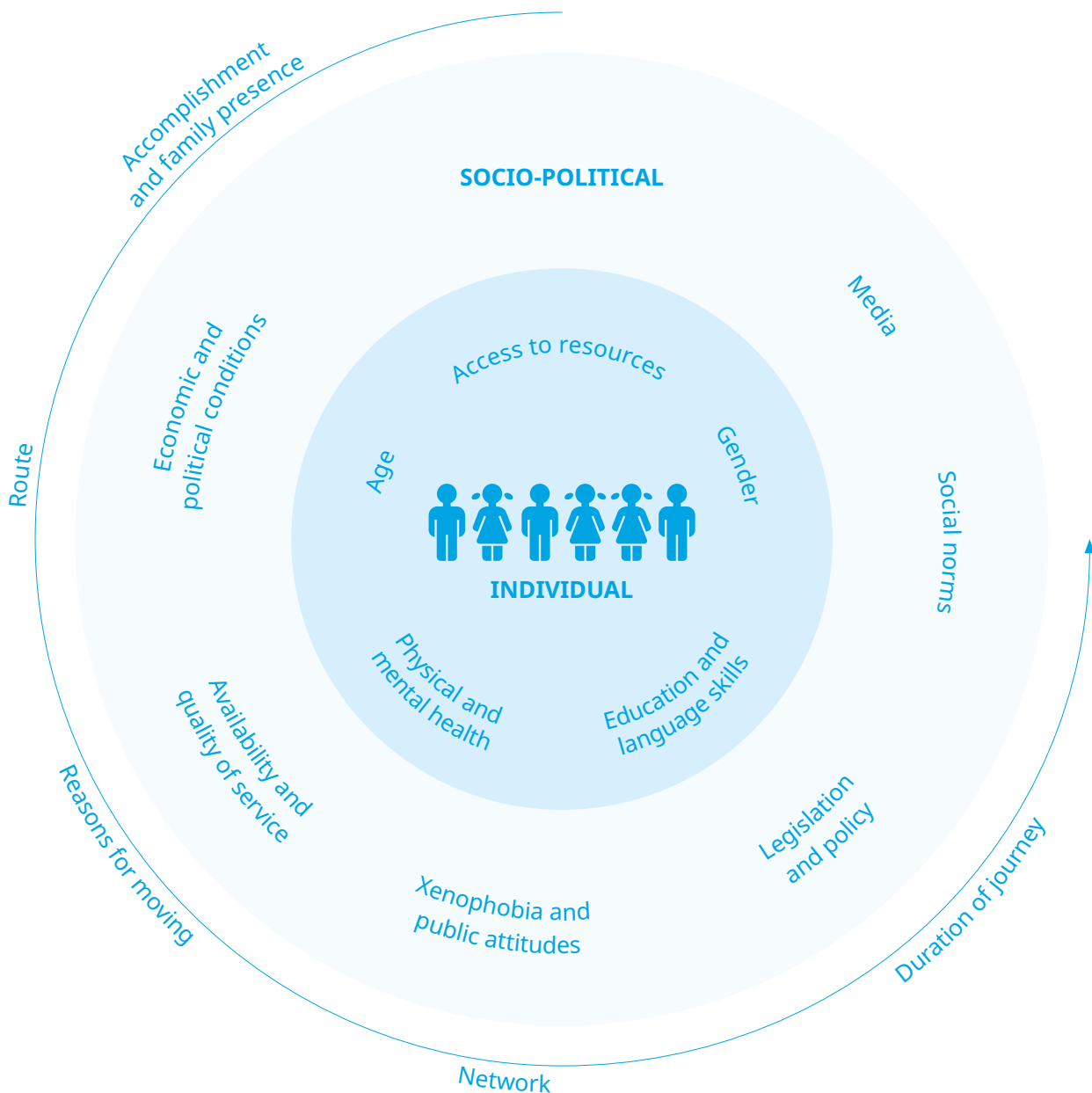
The Convention on the Rights of the Child treats all children in any given territory as having the same rights, with additional protection measures for those who have a well-founded fear that led them to leave their countries. However, this is not always applied in practice. While binding regulations related to displaced children need strengthening, the rights of child migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are further guaranteed under complementary international legal frameworks governing movement of populations. Despite these legal protections under international frameworks, children on the move – especially when taking irregular journeys – may face significant challenges and risks on their journeys, including exploitation, violence, detention, the loss of basic services such as healthcare and schooling, and psychological impacts.

Children in mixed migration movements may fall into multiple legal categories and change categories over time. As individual, family, community, national or international developments unfold, the same child may move to multiple locations, return, and migrate again, moving between various risk environments regularly. A child's journey may also take multiple forms of movement and stasis over time. As displacement is becoming increasingly protracted,³⁹ a child may spend several years or their entire childhood in limbo because it is not safe for

them to return home nor have they been granted permanent residence in another country. In 2022, UNHCR estimated that 23.3 million refugees or 67 per cent of all refugees were in a protracted situation.⁴⁰

Children on the move represent a diverse population. Each child's experience is unique, shaped by an interplay of a number of factors – including intersecting *individual factors* such as the child's,⁴¹ age, gender, ethnicity, and disability, as well as *situational and journey-specific factors* such as the child's decision-making role in the migration process, the distance and route, and *socio-political factors* such as the prevailing political environment, the extent of the safe and regular pathways for movement and opportunities to regularize status, the quality, appropriateness and availability of services, and the extent of xenophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination. While not exhaustive, Figure 1 identifies some of the factors that shape children's experiences with movement.

Figure 1



The rights and needs of children on the move can only be effectively addressed if the diversity of factors that shape their experiences are visible, underlining the need to fill data gaps. As one example, children and families who move due to climate or economic crises and rising inequality are not offered a distinct legal status, and data on these groups are not systematically collected at a global scale. As another example, data is usually not collected on children who stay behind while their parents or caregivers migrate. Even when data on children on the move is available, it is not always disaggregated by age, gender, and disability.

There are also unique challenges that families with children face in mobility. For example, children may become legally and practically dependent on non-parental caregivers when their parents migrate, family dynamics and roles may shift, or, in the case of adolescent mothers, they may face heightened risks while traveling with their children. Unaccompanied children may have been separated from parents or caregivers many years before reunification or experienced a lack of consistency in caregivers, especially children who are orphans and heads of household. In almost all cases, migration involves separation from families and friendships, which may result in loss and grief.

Yet, when children are protected, included, and empowered in transit and in destination communities, mobility may enable them to live in safer communities, access previously unavailable basic services, develop new skills and languages, be exposed to new traditions, and contribute to their families, communities, and society. Children have a tremendous capacity for adaptation and innovation as solution-holders to their own challenges and the challenges facing the world today.

The 2026 Global Programme Framework for Children on the Move recognizes the mixed and fluid nature of children's mobility and the role UNICEF must play along their journeys to ensure they can thrive and reach their full potential.

Global Trends

Some global trends that have shaped and will continue to shape child migration and displacement in the coming years include:

Climate change: in recent years it has become clearer than ever that changes in climate are shifting patterns of movement and large-scale disasters are now more frequent. UNICEF estimates that in recent years, approximately 20,000 children were internally displaced every day as a result of weather-related disasters. Of the recorded child displacements between 2016 and 2021, floods and storms accounted for 95 per cent between 2016 and 2021. 95 per cent of new conflict related displacements occur in countries also highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.⁴²

Armed conflicts: The world faces the highest number of armed conflicts in three decades. Armed conflict was identified as the most pressing global risk for 2025, moving up from eighth place in the previous year's ranking.⁴³ The increasing use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a major cause of displacement, destroying critical civilian infrastructure and forcing families to flee, often multiple times. Forced displacement has reached a historic high; Sudan alone saw 14.3m people displaced – the world's largest current displacement crisis.

Technologies: Existing and rapidly evolving technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), are transforming societies with strong impacts on children and migration. These technologies may bring huge benefits for children on the move, such as portable access to education and learning opportunities and access to information along their journeys. Technology supporting virtual platforms can also be a mechanism to access psychosocial support. They are also being used by UNICEF and other actors to overcome operational barriers faced when reaching migrant and displaced populations and to make responses more efficient by improving operations and automating certain processes. AI and the ‘future of work’ will also have important consequences on the livelihood strategies and movement decisions of future generations.

New technologies also present notable challenges and risks. These technologies have inherent risks for bias, discrimination, and potential ‘machine mistakes’ which pose additional risks to vulnerable migrant and displaced people when used by governments to manage migration. For example, research finds that algorithms in visa processing lead to discriminatory outcomes as applicants from nationalities identified as ‘suspect nationalities’ receive a higher risk score and thereby a higher level of scrutiny by officers. Other risks to children presented by digital technologies include heightened risks of violence, abuse, and exploitation enabled or facilitated by digital technologies.

Rapid urbanization: Many low-income countries are in the middle of rapid urbanization. According to the Mixed Migration Centre, an estimated 64 per cent of people on the move⁴⁴ are drawn to cities in search of safety, shelter and housing, increased access to basic services and better jobs. Many local authorities, especially in cities with already strained capacity, require support to better identify, reach and manage rapid urbanization with a more systems-integrated approach. While most of the movement from rural to urban settings is internal, living in a city may mean people become more aware of international migration opportunities.

Negative perceptions and harmful narratives on migration: Migration has surged as a public concern and harmful narratives around migrants has increasingly permeated political movements, media and public discourse in many countries. Especially in times of crisis, these narratives are used to divert the public’s attention with systematic and deeply entrenched xenophobic attitudes. Research suggests these fears are widespread with people overestimating the size of migrant populations. Notably, hate crimes increase during elections, and children are particularly impacted in their schools and in their mental and psychosocial well-being. These narratives lead to responses and policies that put children at risk.

Exclusion policies: Destination countries are increasingly eliminating long-held policies related to enabling access to asylum. Children on the move may be systematically excluded from national systems (protection, education, health) and the services they offer either as an intentional policy aimed to deter migrants from entering a country or as the result of national law or policy not being fully attuned or updated to the evolving situation of children on the move.

Key statistics on Children on the Move



35.5
million

International migrant
children globally in 2020



45.3
million

Children forcibly displaced
by the end of 2025



27.5
million

Children internally displaced
due to conflict and violence



18.4
million

Child refugees or
asylum seekers



38%

Of the world's displaced
population are children

Children pose for a group photo at the Casa del Migrante, a UNICEF-supported shelter in Escupulas, Guatemala. At the shelter, children and their families can stay for one night before they continue their journey. Here, they can receive medical and nutritional aid and psychosocial services, take a shower, have dinner, and access a child-friendly space.



Agenda for Action for Children on the Move

While the revised Global Programme Framework is a guide for UNICEF's work for children on the move, protecting, including, and empowering children on the move is a collective responsibility. A whole of society approach requires action by a broad range of stakeholders, with governments leading as the primary duty bearers. This renewed Agenda for Action for Children on the Move represents our call to action to all stakeholders and our standing commitment to support these efforts.

UNICEF's vision is a world where all children on the move can realise their rights and reach their full potential, wherever they are.

To achieve this vision, UNICEF calls on all actors to:

Press for action on the causes that push children from their homes.

Armed conflicts, violence, disasters exacerbated by climate change, and extreme poverty drive millions of children from their homes. UNICEF calls for greater efforts to protect children from armed conflict, address the root causes of violence and poverty, and mitigate the effects of climate change. Such efforts should include increasing access to services and protection in countries of origin. Rule of law, social cohesion, and non-discrimination are essential for peaceful development, mitigating the risk that families resort to dangerous migration journeys.

Prepare for climate displacement and provide safe climate mobility options for children and families.

Millions of children are being driven from their homes by weather-related events exacerbated by climate change, with migrant, displaced and relocated children among the most vulnerable and least equipped to cope. UNICEF calls on governments to reduce displacement risk through inclusive disaster risk reduction and preparedness, making systems and services more climate-resilient, portable, and accessible to the most vulnerable children as they move and ensuring planned relocation efforts are child-sensitive. Supporting green skilling programmes and policies for youth, especially adolescent girls, to create pathways for them to participate in the green economy, and providing safe migration options for climate-affected children and families are also key to their well-being and future.

Protect children on the move from harm and keep families together.

Displaced and migrant children, especially those separated from their families, are vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, with girls at greater risk of gender-based violence (GBV). UNICEF calls for more safe and regular pathways for children to migrate and to seek refuge and for policies to prevent family separation. Combating trafficking, strengthening child protection systems, and expanding access to information and mental health support are crucial for keeping children safe. All children should have a legal identity – fundamental for keeping families together. Children and families should never be returned to a place where they face persecution or life-threatening danger.

End the immigration detention of children.

Detention is harmful to children's health, well-being, and long-term development. UNICEF calls on states to increase non-custodial measures for reception and care for all children, such as community-based accommodations with case management services. Unaccompanied and separated children should be placed in foster care, supervised independent living, or other family- or community-based living arrangements.

Ensure children on the move can keep learning and access social services.

Many migrant and displaced children miss out on an education and other essential services. UNICEF calls for increased collective efforts by governments, communities, and the private sector to provide children on the move with access to education, health, mental health, and social and child protection services that enhance their safety and well-being. A child's migration status should never be a barrier to accessing services.

End xenophobia and discrimination against children on the move.

Children on the move face discrimination, xenophobia, and stigma – during their journeys, at their destinations, and if returned, in communities of origin. UNICEF calls on leaders, religious groups, non-governmental organizations, the media, and the private sector to combat xenophobia and the scapegoating of migrant and displaced communities, including misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. Governments should also set up measures to eliminate discrimination and marginalization across services and policies. Communities should be supported to play a leading role in including children on the move in society.

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Children smile at the multi-purpose Centre for Children and Adolescents in a Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where case management, gender-based violence prevention, and other critical child protection interventions are provided.








Five Key Actions for UNICEF Programmes

While UNICEF’s Agenda for Action calls on all stakeholders to act, this section outlines five key actions to guide UNICEF programming for children on the move. Priority interventions identify sector leads and collaborating sectors to clarify roles and promote an effective multisectoral response.

The actions aim to strengthen systems that protect and uphold children’s rights within and across borders. They also seek to expand children’s access to services and opportunities in their communities and improve their long-term prospects for a safe, stable, and healthy childhood.

Five Key Actions

A world where all children on the move are able to realize their rights and reach their full potential - wherever they are.

ACTION 1	ACTION 2	ACTION 3	ACTION 4	ACTION 5
 <p>Minimize displacement risks for children</p>	 <p>Strengthen continuous protection and care for children</p>	 <p>Ensure access to learning and basic services</p>	 <p>Combat xenophobia and strengthen social cohesion</p>	 <p>Promote children’s legal status and integration</p>

Address root causes and minimize risks related to irregular migration and displacement for children



UNICEF's development and humanitarian programming seek to improve conditions in communities of origin related to widespread poverty and exclusion, violence and conflict, shocks and disasters exacerbated by climate change, and to increase the range of viable life opportunities available to families and children. Yet, some of these shocks may push affected populations to flee and the stresses may pressure families or children alone to migrate. Action 1 prioritizes communities most impacted by these drivers and promotes preparedness, anticipatory action, resilience, and response to minimize the risks that children face when they or their families migrate or are displaced. This set of interventions invests in analysis and planning with national and local governments to prevent or mitigate displacement and to make services available and accessible.

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>The root causes and risks of irregular migration are mitigated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include data on emigration when conducting mapping and gap analysis for interventions to target the most vulnerable communities. • In communities most impacted by emigration, incorporate “life planning” into educational, life skills, and case management programming for youth, with information about the risks of irregular migration. • Generate evidence on the most vulnerable children on the move in collaboration with countries of transit and destination to support advocacy for increased public financing for children and the promotion of child rights. • Establish platforms for regular dialogue and information exchange between countries of transit, origin, and destination to address common challenges, share best practices and lessons learned, and enhance coordination. • Strengthen child protection systems to enable the detection of vulnerable children who have stayed behind while parents are abroad. 	<p>Child Protection Climate</p>	<p>All</p>

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>The risk of displacement in the context of conflict and disasters, exacerbated by climate change, is minimized.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate displacement in national and sub-national analysis for programme planning, conflict analyses, Climate Landscape Analysis for Children, and Humanitarian Needs Overview. • Support ethical data collection on the risks faced by children on the move disaggregated by sex, age, and disability. • Support government efforts to include communities in disaster preparedness to plan for and minimize displacement, considering children's diverse needs. • Support children and youth on the move to engage in and inform Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and prepare for displacement. This may include capacity building for meaningful engagement. 	<p>Climate Emergency</p>	<p>All</p>
<p>The capacities of households to absorb shocks and manage mobility are enhanced.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the government and communities to establish early warning and evacuation plans that are child-sensitive, including children with disabilities. • Equip children and families on the move (and those living in climate vulnerable areas) with climate literacy and transferable green skills, contributing both to providing pathways to sustainable livelihood opportunities for youth and increasing climate resilience and preparedness of the broader community. • Include migrant and displaced groups in action on climate change, social cohesion, peacebuilding and mobility, including youth volunteer initiatives and girls' groups. • Develop capacity and integrate MHPSS services and resources that address displacement, including psychological first aid, into CCA and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) plans. • Support the government to develop or expand inclusive social protection systems that help both displaced and host communities to withstand shocks, build resilience, and minimize pressure to move. 	<p>Child Protection Emergency Emergency Climate</p>	<p>WASH EDU Gender Climate EMOPS GCA Social Protection SBC</p>
<p>Systems and services are resilient, portable, sustainable and reach the most vulnerable children before, during and after displacement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in anticipatory action for internal displacement so that child-critical systems and services (education, child protection, health, MHPSS, social protection, WASH) can absorb displaced populations. • Adapt services to be portable - prioritising safe and confidential access to legal and other identity documents, social protection benefits, health records, portable education and training records, and other information that enables children to reunite with family, maintain access to services and stay connected with their communities. • Provide learning continuity during displacement or while in transit, building on existing digital education platforms, such as the Learning Passport. • Provide safe, confidential GBV services throughout displacement. 	<p>All</p>	

Minimizing weather-related displacement risks for refugee children and families in Cox's Bazar

Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, home to the world's largest refugee camp, is at the nexus of two converging crises: one of forced displacement of the persecuted Rohingya minority from Myanmar and the other of accelerating climate change. Home to one million stateless Rohingya refugees – more than half of them children – the district lies in one of the most disaster-prone areas in South Asia, where annual monsoons, cyclones, flooding, and landslides threaten an already vulnerable population. Refugee families with limited legal status, restricted mobility, and scant resources are often highly exposed to recurring weather-related disasters, which can mean secondary displacement, and at the same time excluded from efforts to plan and prepare for the impacts of climate change.

UNICEF's response in Cox's Bazar places disaster preparedness and risk reduction at the heart of its protection and services for displaced children and families. Recognizing that populations already displaced or on the move are among the most exposed to the impacts of climate change, with the least resources to cope, UNICEF is working to ensure that the children living in refugee camps are not vulnerable to further displacement.

Key interventions include:

- **Inclusive early warning and emergency response systems:** UNICEF works closely with the Government of Bangladesh and local networks to ensure that Rohingya families receive timely, accurate early warnings through community volunteers and radio systems, and that evacuation protocols prioritize the safety and protection of children. Pre-emptive evacuation reduces the risks of sudden displacement, including the accompanying risks of family separation and physical and emotional harm.
- **Climate-resilient infrastructure in camps:** UNICEF has supported the construction and rehabilitation of learning centers, health posts, and WASH facilities using flood- and cyclone-resilient materials and elevated structures. These safe spaces remain functional during emergencies and serve as community hubs for response and recovery.
- **Community-based DRR and preparedness:** Recognizing that children and caregivers are often the first responders in climate emergencies, UNICEF has trained thousands of youth and community members in disaster preparedness, first aid, and emergency communication. These efforts empower displaced communities with the tools to act early, stay safe and mitigate risks of further weather-related displacement.
- **Climate resilient systems for displaced children and families:** By integrating climate risk into education, child protection, health, social protection and WASH programming, UNICEF is helping to build systemic resilience. This includes pre-positioning emergency supplies, adapting school calendars and services to seasonal hazards, preparing for further displacement risks, and ensuring continuity of care during monsoon and cyclone seasons.

Provide a continuum of protection and care for children



Faced with limited legal and safe options to migrate or seek protection, children may undertake irregular migration, without the required documents. These movements increase the risk of physical injury or serious health conditions, separation from their caregivers, violence, kidnapping, exploitation, or trafficking. Child trafficking thrives in environments of displacement, conflict, and instability, where displaced and migrant children—especially those who are unaccompanied or separated—are particularly vulnerable.⁴⁵ Children may be detained for reasons of migration status, whether alone or with their families.

Action 2 outlines the vital role UNICEF plays in supporting States to implement policies and practices that protect children wherever they are on their journeys. This work is grounded in strengthening child protection systems that are inclusive of all children on the move, while implementing targeted interventions to address their unique vulnerabilities. It means helping States to incorporate children's rights and needs when developing safe and regular pathways for protection, border management and reception systems, case management and guardianship, family- and community-based care options for unaccompanied and separated children, or in return and reintegration processes.

UNICEF's Multi-Country Programming: The Route-Based Approach

UNICEF leverages its vast presence to design interventions that uphold children's rights across countries of origin, transit, host or destination countries, and upon return. Based on data and trends, UNICEF strengthens linkages between countries to promote coherent policies and programmatic responses. For example:

- In **Honduras, El Salvador** and **Mexico**, UNICEF is developing a sub-regional Learning Passport, a comprehensive digital education platform that enables children and adolescents to have continuous access to high-quality educational content tailored to their specific learning needs. Countries in the region can quickly adopt the platform as their national learning management system or use it to complement and enhance their existing digital learning platforms. Its versatility allows for seamless integration into various educational landscapes, and UNICEF is working with governments to adapt education credential requirements so that children's learning pathways can progress even if they move across countries in the region.
- In the **Horn of Africa**, UNICEF in collaboration with IOM and Save the Children organized a dialogue in 2024 bringing together key government officials, NGOs, and international agencies from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen focused on promoting cross-border case management for the protection, safe return, and sustainable reintegration of Ethiopian migrant children along the route. It set out to establish concrete mechanisms for collaboration across countries and actors and to make commitments towards gender-sensitive durable solutions for migrant children. The dialogue emphasized the need to incorporate migrant children in the child protection and migration policies of the countries involved, including putting in place child-sensitive referral systems, improving children's access to essential services regardless of their migration status, and boosting cross-border collaboration to ensure migrant children's safety. The recommendations from the dialogue provide a strong basis for practical steps forward in child-sensitive migration management throughout the route.

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>Children and families have increased skills and knowledge to protect themselves during migration and displacement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and disseminate protection messaging for children and families on the move related to prevention of family separation, trafficking indicators and reporting, access to assistance and child protection services, including messaging that destigmatizes help-seeking behavior for MHPSS and GBV services. • Provide technical guidance to governments on protection for children on the move at high risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse, such as adolescent mothers, unaccompanied children, children with disabilities. • Enable systematic participation of children and youth in policymaking and feedback related to migration management and asylum systems. • Conduct mapping and capacity gap analyses of the existing social service workforce in countries of origin, transit, destination, and upon return to inform capacity building for inclusive child protection. 	<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>SBC ALS Gender DRR Emergency MHPSS</p>

ACTION 2

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>Legal and policy frameworks, procedures, and practices are aligned with international instruments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate children on the move in national protection legislation, policy, and plans, especially care reform. • Assist governments to end the detention of children on the move. Expand and diversify a range of reception and alternative care options that are rights-compliant, including family-based care and supervised independent living. • Convene regular dialogue between child protection and migration actors across borders to promote coherent rights-based policy and practice. • Build capacity and provide technical support to law enforcement to strengthen child-sensitivity in their interactions with children on the move and create links to the child protection system. • Strengthen the capacity of frontline responders, including border guards and social workers, to identify and refer child victims of trafficking and those at-risk so that they can access protection and other services. • For those children still in immigration detention, monitor the situation, provide protection and assistance, including MHPSS where possible, and advocate for their release, supported by family tracing and reintegration. 	<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>Gender MHPSS</p>
<p>Children on the move, including unaccompanied and separated children, have access to adequate protection services that promote their best interests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support capacity building of the social service workforce and allied workers in health, justice, and security sectors, including immigration and border guards, with a focus on best practices for identifying, protecting, and supporting children on the move, including UASC, to ensure they receive appropriate and timely attention and care. • Provide accessible information and age-appropriate activities that promote children’s mental health and psychosocial well-being and learning. • Provide technical support to service providers on identification, referral mechanisms, and family tracing and reunification programmes for UASC, including procedures for best interest assessment and determination. • Establish cross-border mechanisms, including SOPs, for timely case management support to children on the move, mitigating risks of family separation and promoting family unity and reunification as appropriate. • Provide technical assistance for implementing interoperable case management information management systems in line with data protection standards. • Support the engagement of child protection authorities at border crossings and disembarkation points to ensure vulnerable children on the move, child victims of trafficking, and those at-risk can be swiftly identified, registered, and referred for protection and assistance. • Support the establishment of mobile identification and outreach teams to identify and support vulnerable children on the move, child victims of trafficking and others at-risk to offer personalized assistance. 	<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>SBC MHPSS</p>

Zambia's child-sensitive National Referral Mechanisms for the Protection of Vulnerable Children on the Move

Zambia continues to experience complex internal and international migration movements, as a country of origin, transit, and destination. In recent years, an increasing number of vulnerable children, including unaccompanied and separated children, from the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa have sought asylum in Zambia, or transited through with intentions to move to South Africa. Children, women, and young people also cross into Zambia to engage in informal agriculture, construction, and small trading businesses or to access education and health services. Many risk their lives in transit and are at risk of being exploited, abused, trafficked, or detained.

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At Capeds, a state-owned transit center in Gabon, child victims of trafficking are reached with multidisciplinary support from UNICEF, including psychosocial support, legal assistance in court, and social and family reintegration. UNICEF also works to strengthen the normative frameworks at the center and the capacities of social workers and specialized educators.



ACTION 2: CASE STUDY

Like many countries, Zambia's legal framework had not protected children from being detained for immigration-related purposes. With funding support from the EU, the National government, UNICEF, and partners worked together to reduce child immigration detention by supporting legislative reviews, strengthening case management, bridging immigration, justice and child protection actors around referral and coordination mechanisms and developing the technical capacities of child protection system stakeholders.

In collaboration with partners, UNICEF supported the government to develop a National Referral Mechanism (NRM), promoting child-friendly services for the rights and well-being of children in migration. The mechanism, launched and operationalized in 2023, mapped available services, and promoted multisectoral coordinated care for vulnerable children on the move to increase their access to services. The revised NRM provides critical guidance to the Departments of Social Welfare, Immigration, Foreign Affairs and Labour: it assists first-line officials in screening vulnerable migrant and asylum-seeking children, recognizing their vulnerabilities and needs, and referring them to the appropriated government ministries and services, civil society, and UN agencies. It includes tools to facilitate the reception, service provision, safe return, and reintegration of vulnerable children on the move, fostering engagement with Consular Offices in Zambia and the initiation of a naturalization process for stateless persons and those at risk.

The government of Zambia mandated the use of the NRM for referring trafficking victims to care by law enforcement, immigration officials, and other frontline officers, incorporating a multisectoral approach through integrated case management and district-level cross-sectoral coordination.

The implementation of the NRM, along with the establishment or expansion of Best Interest Determination (BID) panels and multisectoral child protection committees, have been pivotal in reinforcing cross-border collaboration and referring children on the move to the services they need. When the NRM is fully operationalized, children on the move can effectively access national child protection services through an integrated case management system without immigration detention. As another benefit, the NRM has provided a framework that ensures close collaboration between both States and non-State actors, including law enforcement authorities, social welfare, and other stakeholders. Through the use of the NRM, the coordination between UNICEF, UNHCR, and government Ministries around cases of children on the move has also improved.

To Learn more, see [*Compendium of good practices for the effective protection of children in migration*](#).

Strategies for Addressing Protection Challenges for Children on the Move

Despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child and complementary frameworks, putting principles into practice often proves challenging when working with and for children on the move. Amidst political sensitivities and operational constraints, UNICEF is often called upon to support States in finding solutions that uphold child rights in less-than-ideal circumstances. This section outlines common policies and practices that threaten the rights of children on the move, along with suggested strategies and resources to guide practitioners in this effort.

1. Externalization of Migration and Border Controls

States increasingly outsource migration and border control responsibilities to third countries, including border security, asylum processing, and return/readmission processes. This can lead to children being intercepted, detained, or transferred to countries with limited legal protections, often facing indefinite detention or detention-like conditions, with risks of abuse, exploitation, and inadequate care.

Strategies:

- **Operational Protection:** Support child rights-based screening and referral pathways, capacity-building for border officials and social services, and development of alternative care systems to avoid detention.
- **Evidence Generation:** Conduct research on the impact of externalization on children, including experiences during border controls, detention, and returns. Collect data on children in detention and map detention facilities.
- **Advocacy:** Engage governments to halt externalization practices that violate child rights and instead promote child-sensitive procedures, including safe and regular migration pathways.

Resources:

- UNICEF – Internal Key Considerations for Children in the context of Externalization of Migration and Border Controls
- UNHCR – [Note on the externalization of international protection](#)
- European Agency for Fundamental Rights - [Planned return hubs in third countries: EU fundamental rights law issues](#)

2. Refoulement, Pushbacks, and Interception at Sea

The principle of non-refoulement prohibits returning children to countries where they face serious harm, such as torture, child recruitment, trafficking, or gender-based violence. Pushbacks involve summarily forcing children back across borders without assessing their protection needs, violating their rights. Interceptions at sea risk dangerous practices, inadequate rescue operations, and failure to provide safe disembarkation or access to services. Despite often violating international law of the sea and maritime search and rescue, interceptions of people on the move at sea have become a common practice over the last decade.

Strategies:

- **Operational Protection:** Develop child-sensitive screening and age assessment processes, train coastguards and border officials, and ensure safe reception systems for disembarked children.
- **Evidence Generation:** Document child-specific risks of refoulement, pushbacks, and unsafe interceptions, including impacts on access to asylum and services.
- **Advocacy:** Advocate against pushbacks and for access to territory and asylum processes that prioritize children's best interests.
- **Monitoring:** Monitor borders, disembarkation points, and interception practices to ensure child-sensitive procedures and compliance with non-refoulement.

Resources:

- [OHCHR, The principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law](#)
- [UNHCR Emergency handbook – Access to territory and non-refoulement](#)
- [UNICEF Submission to the Thematic Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants on Pushback Practices and their Impact on the Human Rights of Migrants](#)
- [Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants - Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea](#)
- [UNHCR – Interception of asylum-seekers and refugees: the international framework and recommendations for a comprehensive approach](#)

3. Returns and Deportations

Returns, whether voluntary or forced, involve sending children to their country of origin or another country with prior ties. Without child-sensitive processes, returns risk violating children's rights, exposing them to harm, and failing to provide effective reintegration support.

Strategies:

- **Operational Protection:** Develop case management protocols for cross-border collaboration, ensuring continuity of care (health, education, skills) during reintegration.
- **Evidence Generation:** Collect cross-border data on risks children face during returns and their reintegration experiences to improve programming and share best practices.

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Refugee children from Ukraine attending Hungarian language classes at the UNICEF-supported Child and Family Support Hub, where protection and education services are provided.



- **Advocacy:** Advocate for child-sensitive return processes that prioritize best interests and prevent forced returns without due process.
- **Monitoring:** Evaluate return processes to ensure compliance with child rights standards and effective reintegration support.

Resources:

- [UNICEF deep dive on child-sensitive returns and reintegration](#)
- [IOM, UNICEF Reintegration Handbook: Module 6 - A Child Rights Approach to The Sustainable Reintegration of Migrant Children and Families](#)
- [UN Network on Migration Position Paper on Ensuring Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration](#)
- [UN Network on Migration Checklist for Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration.](#)

4. Immigration Detention

Immigration detention deprives children of liberty due to their migration status or that of their parents and puts them in dangerous conditions, violating their rights and exposing them to harm.

Strategies:

- **Operational Solutions:** Work with Governments and authorities to promote Alternatives to Detention (ATD) programs, strengthen alternative care systems, and ensure inclusion of migrant children in child protection services.
- **Evidence Generation:** Research children's experiences in detention, map detention facilities, and develop MEL frameworks to assess ATD.
- **Advocacy:** Push for the release of detained children, moratoriums on further detentions, and legal reforms to end child immigration detention.
- **Monitoring:** Conduct independent monitoring of detention facilities to ensure transparency, accountability, and compliance with international standards.

Resources:

- [UNICEF deep dive on ending immigration detention of children and families](#)
- [UNICEF Working Paper - Alternatives to Immigration Detention of Children](#)
- [UN Task Force on Children Deprived of Liberty - Advocacy Brief: End Immigration Detention of Children](#)

General Strategies for UNICEF Country Offices

- **Evidence and Data:** Generate context-specific data on child protection risks and document best practices for child rights-compliant policies.
- **Operational Solutions:** Build capacity of stakeholders, develop minimum standards, and pilot ATD programs where inclusion in existing services is insufficient.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Ensure independent monitoring of detention, reception, and return processes to uphold child rights and improve conditions.
- **Advocacy and Engagement:** Work with governments to reform laws and policies, promote peer-learning, and leverage UN human rights mechanisms (e.g., CRC, Special Rapporteurs) to advocate child-friendly migration processes.

Ensure access to learning and basic services



Children on the move often live in under-resourced environments with inadequate infrastructure and limited access to basic services. They are disproportionately exposed to poverty, food insecurity, physical injuries, mental health challenges, violence, exploitation, and abuse within their communities. While direct service delivery is essential in humanitarian crises when states cannot meet immediate needs, UNICEF takes a development-oriented approach which focuses on supporting the strengthening and extension of national and local systems to encompass displaced and migrant children alongside host communities. Inclusion requires enhanced case management and inter-ministerial coordination—such as between education, health, and social welfare—to address heightened demand. Compared to establishing parallel systems, this approach is cost-effective, protective, and sustainable, strengthening overall systems and quality of service delivery, fostering social cohesion, building resilient communities, and promoting economic growth.

UNICEF and partners collaborate with governments to revise laws and policies, ensuring migrant and displaced children are explicitly included in national service frameworks. Service providers are supported to provide inclusive services without bias or discrimination and to identify children with specific referral needs. UNICEF's programming supports children and youth on the move to access opportunities for education as well as employability skills and pathways that transition them from education to decent work. These pathways account for the diverse, often non-linear experiences of youth aged 15–24, who may alternate between formal education, informal learning, economic inactivity, and employment.

ACTION 3

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>Quality, age-appropriate, gender-responsive and disability-inclusive services are available for all children, regardless of migration status.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for inclusive systems and services highlighting their benefits for all children, including national children who are out-of-school or other vulnerable children. Benefits include a more cost-efficient, more protective, and more sustainable approach than maintaining parallel systems, while contributing to overall systems strengthening and improved quality of service delivery, greater social cohesion, shared prosperity and economic growth. • Support the government in reviewing public budgets and strengthening public finance to reinforce universal and well-functioning health, water and sanitation, education, social protection, and child protection systems that include children on the move. • Map health, water and sanitation, education, social protection, and child protection systems to measure accessibility and gaps for children on the move, including barriers faced by those with disabilities. • Strengthen laws and policies, practices, data, material resources, and/or the capacity of social service providers to promote the inclusion of children on the move in the critical systems children rely on. • Support government-led social protection systems and the inclusion of children on the move and their families. Where inclusion in national systems is not feasible, provide social protection programmes that can transition to government ownership. • Promote the systematic inclusion of children on the move in national health systems, address gaps in birth registration and immunization coverage, and expand access to primary health care services as well as nutritious, safe, and affordable diets.⁴⁶ • Support the government in strengthening capacity of frontline workers to provide MHPSS to children on the move and their families across services, e.g. education, child protection, health.⁴⁷ 	<p>Social protection Health Nutrition Child Protection WASH Education</p>	<p>SBC ALS Urban Gender MHPSS</p>
<p>Children on the move access education and skills for employability and life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with national and local education systems to create or expand inclusive formal education for children on the move, removing or mitigating legal, administrative, and practical barriers to access. • Support States to ensure flexible learning for children on the move to transition into formal systems, including Early Child Development, vocational training, catchup, and bridging opportunities. This should include policies that recognize past studies and enable certification of non-formal learning that meet the standards for out-of-school children on the move. • Create and expand pathways for skill building and livelihoods. Pathways can include digital, entrepreneurial, or green skilling initiatives focused on sustainability to promote opportunities for youth as entrepreneurs, innovators, and leaders. • Support States to provide alternative education, life skills, and language competency classes for children on the move. 	<p>Education</p>	<p>ALS Health Child Protection SBC</p>

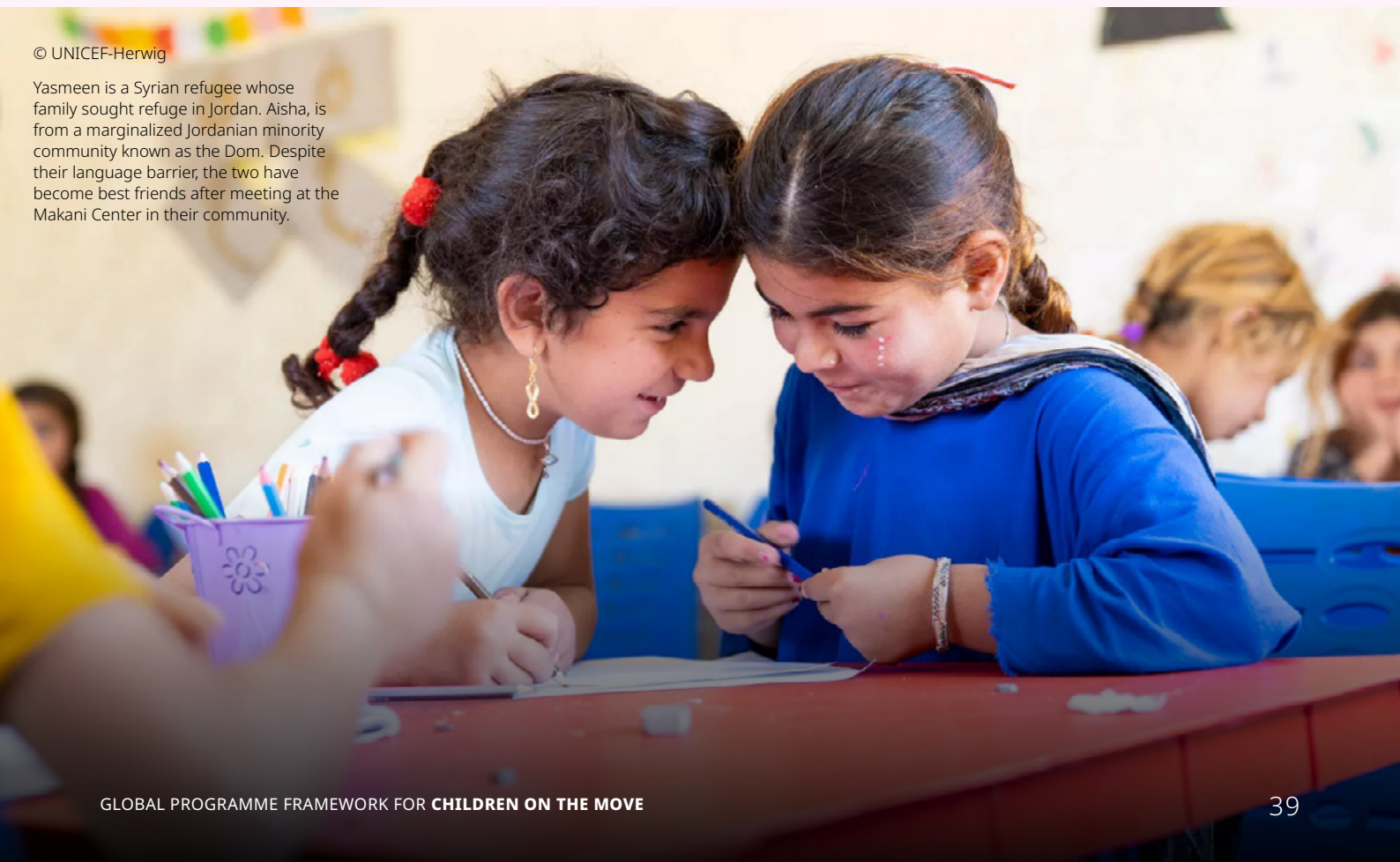
Jordan Makani Centers: A safe space to learn and make new friends

To address the barriers that many vulnerable children face in accessing learning and other basic services, UNICEF employs integrated approaches that include child protection, social protection, life-skills and learning for migrant and displaced children alongside children from their host communities – all in one place. Since 2015, UNICEF Jordan developed the Makani (“My Space” in Arabic) model, which links interventions, provides children access to a package of quality services, and promotes children’s overall social and emotional wellbeing and development. With spaces and services accessible to both forcibly displaced and host community young people and their caregivers, Makani centers also break down barriers and contribute to social cohesion.

The programme includes 235 Makani centers (114 centers in host communities, 99 in temporary settlements, and 22 in refugee camps) with plans to reach 109,000 children annually. UNICEF has been institutionalizing the approach with the government and partnering with national organizations to enhance sustainability and cost effectiveness. In refugee camps, Makani centres have empowered community members to assume more leadership and management roles within the centres. The intention is to ensure vulnerable children and communities continue to access high-quality, comprehensive services which promote their well-being, development, and resilience.

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Yasmeen is a Syrian refugee whose family sought refuge in Jordan. Aisha, is from a marginalized Jordanian minority community known as the Dom. Despite their language barrier, the two have become best friends after meeting at the Makani Center in their community.



ACTION 3: CASE STUDY

Makanis provide children with somewhere safe to go when not in school – which is important in a context like Jordan where an estimated 21 per cent of Jordan’s 15-19 year olds are out of school and unemployed;⁴⁸ those children that are in school are only able to attend for half days due to double-shift school scheduling. Makanis have caring teachers and facilitators trained to identify children who might be facing challenges and help connect them with additional services.

Learning Support Services: Syrian children in Jordan face many challenges to being successful in school due to their displacement and the vulnerability of their households. This is exacerbated by the limited capacity of the public school system to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable children. Children may need extra learning support to bring them up to the required level of learning outcomes for that grade and to prevent them from dropping out of school. The Learning Support Services in Makani centres also provide learning opportunities for out-of-school children to ensure they continue, while support is provided to bridge them into school. Learning support has been a lifeline for Syrian refugee children waiting for spaces to become available in formal education classes.

Community Based Child Protection has been an important component at the Makani Centres. Initially focused on emergency psychosocial support, UNICEF shifted to a more sustainable community-based child protection model appropriate for vulnerable children of all nationalities. In addition, Makani now includes structured Early Childhood Development (ECD) activities, targeting children (ages 0-5) as well as their parents/caregivers. The aim is to strengthen positive and responsive parenting practices and support age-appropriate development for the most vulnerable children.

Life Skills Education programmes in Makani centres provide young people (age 10-24) with training in essential skills for their social, civic, and economic lives. This includes all the cognitive and social skills needed for every day, but also employability skills to prepare them for paid work. The focus is on competencies that enhance effective and successful participation in the workplace beyond any technical qualifications: communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, and entrepreneurial skills, planning and organization, learning and technology and more. Additionally, the programme includes digital literacy, Information and Communication Technology and social media. Makani’s social innovation labs provide adolescents with opportunities to understand the challenges in their lives and community and apply relevant skills to develop innovative solutions. This comprehensive, integrated approach equips vulnerable youth with skills for employment and for life, along with creativity and confidence for their successful transition into employment and adulthood.

Linkages to cash transfers: In Jordan, a cash transfer programme called Hajati is now being integrated into the Makani programmes so that beneficiaries, including vulnerable children, youth and parents, are linked to an integrated package of gender-sensitive and age-appropriate social protection services to reduce multidimensional and economic vulnerabilities.

For more information, please contact Jordan country office

<https://www.unicef.org/jordan/stories/makani-centres-safe-space-learn-and-make-new-friends>

End discrimination and strengthen social cohesion



UNICEF works to end discrimination by providing technical support and advocacy to ensure governments include all children—regardless of location, migration, or citizenship status—in service provision. Nevertheless, conflict, intergroup tensions, xenophobia, and community dynamics can further obstruct these children from accessing services and enjoying their rights in safe, supportive environments—whether at home, in their communities, or in broader society. For children on the move, the impact of discrimination is profound: exclusion from essential services, exposure to verbal and physical violence fueled by discrimination, and the mental health toll of persistent stigmatization.

Action 4 emphasizes the need to deliver conflict-sensitive programming, which bolsters capacities at all levels to shape inclusive, responsive, and trusted social norms, institutions, and justice mechanisms. This requires understanding the public discourse, addressing underlying

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Fetiya (right) is a talented student and the oldest of three siblings. Yet in the Benishangul-Gumuz region of western Ethiopia, Fetiya and her family lost everything when they fled conflict. At the Bambassi camp for internally displaced people, Fetiya has been able to continue classes at the UNICEF-supported school and make new friends.



ACTION 4

concerns, and collaborating with stakeholders like media and migrant communities to craft balanced, empowering migration narratives that recognize the contributions of migrant and displaced children and families to their communities. UNICEF leverages its expertise, field presence, and partnerships in communication, advocacy, Social and Behaviour Change (SBC), and adolescent engagement to support communities effectively and promote sustainable behavior change. Responses prioritize active, inclusive stakeholder engagement at all levels, with impact measured locally.

Creating enabling environments for these children and their families fosters a sense of belonging and the security to invest in their futures. UNICEF actively creates opportunities for children and youth on the move to shape decisions about their lives, influence program design, and act as agents of change and peacebuilding—through initiatives like youth advisory boards and civic engagement programs.

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>Evidence-based responses to xenophobia are tailored to local contexts, address systematic causes, and involve key stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and socialize a set of key messages on children on the move tailored to the country context and aimed at equipping UNICEF colleagues from different sections to advocate for the protection and inclusion of children on the move. • Develop long-term partnerships with media outlets and provide capacity building to journalists and media representatives on ethical reporting and child rights to foster positive narratives about migration. • Support the mainstreaming and implementation of government-led initiatives to combat xenophobia in legislative and policy reform efforts and promote positive and cohesive norms, informed by meaningful and sustained engagement of children from host and migrant and displaced communities. • Conduct analysis to identify political issues that create social exclusion and address the root causes of stigma and discrimination. 	<p>Communications</p>	<p>SBC</p>
<p>Spaces and mechanisms are created or reinforced to promote inclusive community engagement and foster a cohesive environment for children and families on the move.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with youth organizations, girls' networks, and CSOs to co-create or reinforce existing strategies that promote social cohesion among host and migrant and displaced communities. • Integrate social cohesion of children on the move in sub-national governments' urban and social services planning. • Promote government-led national and community dialogue on issues such as tolerance and collaboration, linking this to measures of development progress and ensuring diverse voices are represented in such dialogues, including children on the move. 	<p>Education and ALS</p>	<p>SBC</p>
<p>Youth can access opportunities to build their individual capacity to contribute and participate meaningfully in peacebuilding processes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and expand formal and informal spaces and platforms, particularly at the local level, which support youth to lead in developing and implementing solutions to emerging issues. Make opportunities for civic engagement and political participation inclusive and accessible for youth on the move and youth from host communities.⁴⁹ 	<p>Education and ALS</p>	<p>SBC</p>

Combating xenophobia and building social cohesion in Ireland

In Ireland, a rising cost of living and a housing crisis with record numbers of homelessness were feeding people's fears. This influenced an anti-migrant sentiment, leading to riots targeting refugee and asylum seeker communities. With the 2024 national elections on the horizon, the UNICEF Ireland National Committee (NatCom) recognized the escalating risk, not only of physical violence, but also of toxic rhetoric that threatened to further isolate and endanger new communities, especially children and young people.

In response, UNICEF Ireland launched a multifaceted campaign, centered on youth engagement, education, and public advocacy—with the goal of shifting public discourse and protecting vulnerable communities. The Irish NatCom focused on working with children and young people as influential advocates to respond to public concerns, build a grassroots movement, and shift the narratives ahead of the elections. Engagement in schools included facilitating open conversations about xenophobia and equipping students with tools and confidence to advocate for inclusive values. In addition, UNICEF Ireland created a blended activism course targeting 200 young people (with modules both in person and online), who were trained and equipped with skills to protect their peers from communities who were targeted. The tools and resources utilized were developed together with young people. This was combined with work on public advocacy, with a wider manifesto and toolkit created to engage the broader public in conversations about inclusion, counter harmful narratives around migration, and provide practical ways for individuals and communities to support the rights of all children in Ireland.

The campaign took place in a highly charged environment. Group discussions often reflected the tensions within communities, with some young people repeating negative narratives they had absorbed. Establishing clear ground rules and providing supportive environments were critical to success. This initiative highlighted the importance of timing, with its launch ahead of the elections lending both urgency and visibility. While the campaign helped mitigate harm during a volatile period, ongoing xenophobic unrest in Ireland underscores the need for sustained, long-term efforts. Building partnerships with youth groups and schools emerged as a vital strategy for extending the impact. The initiative demonstrated that even in times of deep division, empowering communities with tools for empathy, dialogue, and advocacy can meaningfully shape public discourse and build resilience against harmful narratives. The campaign played an important role in building social cohesion, built on the basic principle that rights apply equally to all children in Ireland.

To learn more about the impacts of discrimination, see the UNICEF report *Rights Denied: The impact of discrimination on children*. The publication focuses on discrimination against children based on their ethnicity, language, religion, or nationality along with racial discrimination, based on the United Nations' definitions and categories of minorities. <https://www.unicef.org/media/130801/file/rights-denied-discrimination-children-EN.pdf>

Promote children's integration and solutions



Children on the move, whether migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees, or internally displaced face unique vulnerabilities tied to their legal status. Irregular journeys often leave them without documentation or regularized status upon arrival, creating barriers to essential services and leading to social marginalization. Even internally displaced children struggle to access protection when displaced from their home areas. Statelessness poses an additional layer of exclusion, often resulting from unregistered births, discriminatory nationality laws, or lost documents during migration or displacement. In protracted displacement, children can remain in limbo for years, confined to informal settlements, urban slums, or camps. Without legal status, they are unable to attend school, seek medical care, work, or integrate into host communities.

UNICEF prioritizes sustainable solutions to ensure displaced and migrant children have stable homes, can participate fully in their host communities, and thrive alongside their peers. This starts with ensuring children have identity documents with birth registration and legal status to unlock access to services and opportunities. When return to their country or community of origin is in the child's best interests, UNICEF also supports States to put in place child-sensitive and sustainable reintegration programmes and processes as another durable solution, including with tailored accommodations for children with disabilities. More broadly, UNICEF also supports States to consider children and their families in the development or expansion of safe migration pathways, such as through family reunification or education visas. As the impacts of climate change increasingly drive mobility, expanding these pathways becomes a vital adaptation strategy, for expanded options for safe and regular migration before disaster strikes.

ACTION 5

OUTCOMES	INTERVENTIONS	SECTOR LEAD	COLLABORATORS
<p>Children and families can access asylum and regular migration pathways with an informed understanding of their rights and opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide research and data on impacts on children of border, asylum and migration processes in country; strengthen national data systems including disaggregation by age and migration status; map existing pathways and gaps in options for children without regular status • Support governments to enable access to asylum procedures for children through guidance on child-sensitive processes, capacity building, and feedback mechanisms. • Provide technical advice on family unity in labour migration agreements and, for temporary work programmes, processes that permit migrants to regularly return to their families or enable children to visit their migrating parents. • Provide capacity-building and guidance to governments or international organisations on best interest procedures and cross-border case management. Support the systematic involvement of children and youth to participate in capacity building, policymaking, accountability monitoring, and/or feedback related to migration and displacement systems and governance. 	<p>Child Protection Communications</p>	<p>SBC Education & ALS Health/MHPSS</p>
<p>Children and their families/caretakers' can access identity documents.</p> <p>States have expanded options to regularize status and resolve statelessness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical assistance to governments regarding children's regularisation of their legal status. • Create partnerships for coordination and direct service delivery where needed for birth registration processes and inclusive civil registration. • Enable children's access to digital legal identity initiatives. • Support legal assistance services for all children on the move in contact with the justice system, for example, for immigration and asylum proceedings. 	<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>Health/MHPSS</p>
<p>Children are not returned to situations where their safety and well-being are at risk.</p> <p>All return decisions concerning children are based on the child's best interests and have been determined through an individual and participatory process aimed at identifying a sustainable solution with the central involvement of child protection authorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical assistance to governments' policies and procedures for returns to be safe, dignified and voluntary, including individual best interest determination. • When return is determined to be in the child's best interests, support case management and pre-departure reintegration planning. • Provide technical assistance for durable solutions for internally displaced and refugees to be child-sensitive, including considerations for education, social protection, and child protection, including mental health and psychosocial support. • For sustainable integration or reintegration, ensure quality follow-up and support to children and their families, acknowledging the specific needs of different age groups, such as adolescents. 	<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>Emergency SBC Health/MHPSS</p>

Mitigating risks for returned children and child-sensitive reintegration in Honduras

Despite international standards prohibiting the return of children without a best interest's assessment,⁵⁰ children continue to be returned across the globe without an adequate process or consideration of their safety and wellbeing. UNICEF has engaged by monitoring returns and advocating – both publicly and privately – for transforming such processes. At the same time, UNICEF intervenes with comprehensive programming to mitigate risks.

In Honduras, UNICEF worked closely with the Honduran Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia (DINAF) to develop and implement the Case Management Protocol for the Reintegration of Returned Migrant Children and Adolescents and Their Families, which establishes a comprehensive and child-rights based framework to ensure the protection, assistance, and sustainable reintegration of children and adolescents returning to their country of origin. The Protocol addresses the main stages of the reintegration process. In practice this means that children are first received at the UNICEF-supported Belen Center for Child Migrants, a reception centre which provides a general orientation, entry registration, food, water and hygiene kits, medical examination, a psychological evaluation and emergency psychosocial support, safe spaces for playing, temporary housing and specialized protection for those unable to make the journey back to their home communities for fear of violence. When it is safe, children are then linked with reintegration support in their communities of origin.

The UNICEF-supported case management information system links up information from the Belen Center for Migrant Children with municipal governments' information management (IM) platforms to better track and provide social and protection services to returned migrant children and their families. A team of social workers support municipal governments in following up with returned migrant children and their families, ensuring academic levelling and school reintegration, access to housing, workforce development and employment opportunities for parents, food vouchers, and other social services. The goal is to provide children and families with transformative opportunities in their communities, to avoid the need for repeat migration.

There have been key challenges to this work, particularly regarding capacity once children return to their communities of origin. Even prior to a child's return, authorities need accurate and up-to date information about the circumstances that a child would face - their health status, level of education, skills, and concerns need to be communicated to authorities in the country of origin so that children can be properly received, and continuity of care provided. Some children may need to be relocated if their home communities are too dangerous.

ACTION 5: CASE STUDY

It is difficult to ensure effective reintegration of children unless the complex causes of migration are addressed as a part of ongoing development efforts. This includes addressing intra-familial and community-based violence, lack of access to education, and lack of employment opportunities for caretakers and adolescents once they finish school. Therefore, UNICEF Honduras' work to strengthen child protection systems at the municipal level and in violence reduction can be seen as foundational to any reintegration work.

Importantly, while UNICEF Honduras' technical engagement has continued, monitoring and advocacy on the returns of children moves forward in collaboration with the broader region. For example, two peer learning events in 2019 and 2023 were held under Chatham House rules to enable honest exchange, share promising practices and build capacity amongst States and other stakeholders on how to ensure safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration.

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A mural advocating peace is displayed in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. High numbers of children and families from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America - El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala - migrate northwards through irregular pathways, hoping to resettle in the U.S. Some are fleeing pervasive gang violence in their communities, while others seek to escape endemic poverty or reunite with family members already living in the U.S.



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A Syrian refugee student at Gawilan Refugee School in Duhok, Iraq, where rehabilitated facilities now provide quality education and ensure a safe and supportive learning environment.



Programme Enablers

UNICEF's programme enablers are critical components that support the effective implementation of its initiatives for children on the move. These enablers ensure that UNICEF can protect, include, and empower these children across diverse contexts.

Below are the key enablers:

1. Data and Evidence Systems

UNICEF works with governments to strengthen data systems to track displacement risks, synthesizes and shares actionable data across migratory routes, and advocates for data disaggregated by age, sex, and migration status to inform policy and programming. Global guidance on ethical data standards and research support country offices to disaggregate programme data to measure results and identify gaps.

2. Learning & Capacity Building

UNICEF enhances its own capacity and that of partners through training, knowledge sharing, and system strengthening. UNICEF Centres of Excellence convene colleagues and create communities of practice, while country offices train policymakers and practitioners, including first responders, on the priorities of children on the move.

3. Advocacy & Communication

UNICEF advocates for protective environments, resource mobilization, and inclusive policies, participates in migration and refugee forums, and incorporates children's voices into its efforts. It also promotes a balanced narrative highlighting migration's positive aspect and the contributions of migrant and displaced children and families to their host communities.

4. Partnerships & Multisectoral Coordination

UNICEF collaborates with partners like UNHCR, IOM, national authorities, and youth-led organizations to ensure children's needs are integrated into interagency strategies.

5. Differentiation Across Contexts

UNICEF tailors its strategies to country-specific factors like income and fragility, while connecting programming across migration routes through a route-based approach, ensuring context-specific yet cohesive responses.

6. Participation of Children and Youth on the Move

UNICEF supports the meaningful participation of children and youth on the move in decision-making and to influence programmes and policies that affect them. Regional and country offices maintain complaint mechanisms accessible to children and youth reached by our programming, and country offices establish independent feedback systems. Within our own agency, the [UNV Youth on the Move programme](#) offers opportunities for young people of migration and displacement backgrounds to work with UNICEF Country Offices and teams worldwide to develop their careers and influence UNICEF's work.

Collectively, these enablers allow UNICEF to deliver impactful, rights-based programmes that address the unique challenges faced by children on the move, wherever they are.

Proving what works: The PROSPECTS partnership

Responding to the challenges of today's protracted displacement crises requires a new paradigm – one in which governments, forcibly displaced persons and host communities, development and humanitarian actors, and the private sector are meaningfully engaged as partners in designing and implementing solutions.

This is the vision of [PROSPECTS](#) – a groundbreaking, multi-year programme financed by the Government of the Netherlands that aims to improve living conditions for millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes and for the communities that host them.

First launched in 2019, PROSPECTS brings together the International Finance Corporation (IFC), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank, and other stakeholders to test and scale new approaches to forced displacement in eight hosting countries in the Middle East and North Africa and Eastern Africa regions – Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Sudan, and Uganda.

- In close coordination with host country governments, the PROSPECTS programme works to:
- Boost the agency and resilience of forcibly displaced persons and host communities.
- Improve access to rights and protection for displaced and host communities of all ages, gender, and disability status.
- Reinforce the hosting capacity of governments by improving national-level policies and strengthening local and national education, child protection, and social protection systems, as well as national data systems, to be inclusive of displaced children.
- Support the school-to-work transition for displaced and host community youth, by expanding access to quality education, skills-building opportunities, and dignified employment and entrepreneurship.
- Strengthen social cohesion.

In a first phase of the PROSPECTS partnership, 2019-2024, the six partner agencies collaborated on joint interventions at global, regional, and country level, ranging from policy engagement and advocacy to technical assistance and programming, and knowledge generation to capture learnings on what works in responding to forced displacement. You can read about some of these interventions in our 2024 publication, [PROSPECTS-Powered Solutions: Testing and Scaling New Approaches to Forced Displacement](#).

Because displaced children and youth are too often left out of the decision-making for financing, policy, and programmes that shape their futures, PROSPECTS ensured displaced and host community children and youth were systematically and meaningfully engaged in programme design and delivery, including through a dedicated Youth Workstream led by UNICEF's Adolescent Development and Participation team in collaboration with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNHCR, and ILO. This included the establishment of several youth advisory groups.

The first phase was organized around four key pillars: 1) Education and Learning, 2) Employment with Dignity, 3) Protection and Inclusion, and 4) New Ways of Working. The second phase, launched in 2024 and running through 2027, includes an additional focus on Social Protection under Pillar 3 and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector under a new Critical Infrastructure pillar.

The distinctive combination of UN agencies, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and a donor government – each with its own comparative advantage with regards to the humanitarian-development nexus – has allowed the programme to leverage synergies and break down sectoral boundaries for more sustainable solutions that meet forcibly displaced and host communities' comprehensive needs.

With an emphasis on innovation and learning, PROSPECTS has also sought to create a community of practice on the key themes of education, employment, and protection and to influence global policymaking and knowledge generation on displacement solutions well beyond its geographic area of focus. At UNICEF and with partners, we continue to adopt and adapt these programmes and approaches in other relevant locations.

CONCLUSION: A Note to the reader

We hope this Global Programme Framework provides clear guidance for programming and advocacy to protect, include, and empower children on the move. Please consider this GPF your 'north star' for building on existing programming, adjusting it to cover identified gaps, establishing priorities and implementing programme responses and policy advocacy adapted to your various contexts, and helping you navigate tensions that may arise in the increasingly complex migration and displacement landscape. By doing so, you are contributing to an effective and coherent response across UNICEF that accelerates impact for children on the move.

Normative frameworks

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history and serves as an internationally recognized legal framework for the protection of children's basic rights and obligates ratifying countries to respect and protect the rights of all children within their jurisdiction, regardless of a child's background or migration status. The CRC recognizes States' primary responsibility in promoting parental care, preventing unnecessary child-family separation, facilitating family-child reintegration where separation has occurred, where appropriate, and in all matters protecting the best interests of the child.

The **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000)** and **Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000)** provides additional protection to children from all forms of exploitation and involvement in armed conflict.

Further policy and implementation guidance related to the care and protection of children without parental care, including unaccompanied migrant children, has been offered by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. In 2005 the Committee issued the **General Comment No. 6 (2005): Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside Their Country of Origin** and in 2017 issued two joint general comments: **Joint general comment No. 3 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families** and **No. 22 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration**.

The **Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) (2000)** is the key international legal instrument that specifically addresses trafficking in persons, with a focus on women and children. UNICEF's **Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (2010)** guide humanitarian responses, including for children affected by migration and displacement. The **UNHCR's Child Protection Guidelines (2011)** provide specific guidance on how to ensure that refugee children and children in displacement are protected in all phases of emergency response. The **UNHCR Guidelines on Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child (2018)** is a set of principles and procedures to guide decision-makers when assessing the best interests of a child in refugee and asylum contexts.

- The **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)** and the **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM)** were adopted by the United Nations in 2018 as frameworks for international cooperation on refugee and migration issues.
- **Global Compact on Refugees:** Emphasizes the need to protect the rights of children in refugee settings, including the importance of child protection, family reunification, access to education, and mental health support for children affected by displacement.
- **Global Compact for Migration:** Contains commitments to ensure that migration policies are designed with the best interests of children in mind, ensuring access to basic services like education and healthcare, and preventing trafficking and exploitation. It highlights the need to protect children from harm during migration.

Global governance, legal frameworks and organizational commitments for children on the move

[Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

[Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)

[Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#)

Committee on the Rights of the Child Joint general comment No. 6 (2005) on Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin

[Committee on the Rights of the Child Joint general comment No. 22 \(2017\) on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration](#)

[Committee on the Rights of the Child Joint general comment No. 23 \(2017\) on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return](#)

[Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)

Children on the move are affected by all the SDGs, whether poverty (Goal 1), hunger (Goal 2), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), climate change (Goal 13), or violence against children (Goal 16.2).

[Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration \(GCM\)](#) Child-sensitivity is a guiding principle of the GCM. Objective 7 on addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration includes a commitment by States to uphold the best interests of the child at all times, as a primary consideration in situations where children are concerned. There are multiple other commitments to migrant children's rights in the GCM. For references to children see: Destination Unknown Guide (2021) [Children & the Global Compacts on refugees & migration: Understanding what's in the Compacts and how to engage with them.](#)

[Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#)

There are numerous commitments throughout the GCM that relate particularly to children including P.26 on education. For references to children see: Destination Unknown Guide (2021) [Children & the Global Compacts on refugees & migration: Understanding what's in the Compacts and how to engage with them.](#)

[Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)

Principle 4 states that certain internally displaced persons, such as children shall be entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment which considers their special needs. Principle 17 supports family reunion for IDP children, and Principle 23 is about the right to education.

[Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees](#)

The 1951 Refugee Convention does not include child-specific provisions, but it provides the legal definition of a refugee, which also applies to children.

[UNICEF's Institutional Action Plan on Internal Displacement \(2023-2025\)](#)

[UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action](#)

[Guiding Principles for Children on the Move in the Context of Climate Change](#)

[IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises](#)

IOM-UNICEF Technical Note: Inclusion of Children in the Context of Migration into National Child Protection Systems

Relevant objectives from the Global Compacts reflected in UNICEF's Global Programme Framework

PRIORITY ACTIONS	RELEVANT OBJECTIVES FROM THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION	RELEVANT PARAGRAPHS FROM THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES
Address root causes and minimize risks related to irregular migration and displacement for children	<p>Objective 2 - Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin.</p> <p>Objective 5 - Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration.</p> <p>Objective 7 - Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration.</p> <p>Objective 12 - Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment, and referral.</p>	<p>Paragraph 8 and 9 on prevention and addressing root causes.</p>
Provide a continuum of protection and care for children	<p>Objective 4 - Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation.</p> <p>Objective 7 - Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration.</p> <p>Objective 8 - Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants.</p> <p>Objective 9 - Strengthen the transnational response to smuggling of migrants.</p> <p>Objective 10 - Prevent, combat, and eradicate trafficking in persons in the context of international migration.</p> <p>Objective 13 - Use migration detention only as a measure of last resort and work towards alternatives.</p> <p>Objective 14 - Enhance consular protection, assistance, and cooperation throughout the migration cycle.</p>	<p>Paragraph 60 and 76 on the specific vulnerabilities and protection needs of children.</p>
Ensure access to learning and basic services.	<p>Objective 15 - Provide access to basic services for migrants.</p> <p>Objective 16 - Empower migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion.</p> <p>Objective 18 - Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competences.</p>	<p>Measures on education - Paragraph 68 and 69.</p> <p>Measures on health- Paragraph 72 and 73.</p> <p>Paragraph 80 on food security and nutrition.</p> <p>Paragraph 77 on the empowerment of youth.</p> <p>Paragraph 81 on social protection.</p>
End discrimination and strengthen social cohesion.	<p>Objective 7 - Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration.</p> <p>Objective 16 - Empower migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion.</p> <p>Objective 17 - Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration.</p>	<p>Paragraph 44 on the role of sports and cultural activities.</p> <p>Paragraph 84 on fostering good relations and peaceful coexistence.</p>
Promote children's integration and solutions	<p>Objective 5 - Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration.</p> <p>Objective 21 - Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration.</p> <p>Objective 23 - Strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly, and regular migration.</p>	<p>Paragraph 83 on the prevention and reduction of statelessness.</p> <p>Measures on burden and responsibility-sharing – Paragraph 14 to 16; 85 to 86.</p>

Resources

CROSS-CUTTING

- [Children on the Move: Key terms, definitions, and concepts](#)
- [A Child is a Child Report](#)
- [Action for refugee children: Good practices](#)
- [African Action Agenda for #ChildrenUprooted](#)
- [Beyond Borders Report](#)
- [Building bridges for every child](#)
- [Harrowing Journeys Report](#)
- [Lost at home: The risks and challenges for internally displaced children](#)
- [Regional Situation Analysis on Children Affected by Migration in ASEAN Member States | UNICEF East Asia and Pacific](#)
- [Situation Analysis Toolkit \(SITAN\) for Children on the Move](#)
- [UNICEF Six Policy Asks for Migration](#)
- [Uprooted Report](#)

KEY ACTION 1: Minimize displacement risks for children.

- [Child Safeguarding](#)
- [Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action \(CCCs\)](#)
- [Data and Statistics for Children on the Move: Essential sources and good practices](#)
- [Climate Mobility and Childhood](#)
- [Futures at Risk – Protecting the rights of children on the move in a changing climate](#)
- [Activation of Emergency Procedures: Level of Response](#)
- [Disaster Risk Reduction](#)
- [Climate, Energy and Environment Issues in the 2030 Development Agenda: UNICEF's Global Commitments](#)
- [Global Centre for Climate Mobility & Africa Climate Mobility Initiative's African Shifts Report](#)
- [No place to call home – Protecting children's rights when the changing climate forces them to flee](#)

KEY ACTION 2: Provide a continuum of protection and care for children

- [Family Unity Issue Brief](#)
- [Checklist Integrating Children on the Move in Country Programme Documents and NatCom Domestic Programming Strategies](#)
- [Children "Left Behind" Issue brief](#)
- [Four strategies to improve community services for unaccompanied children in the United States](#)
- [Alternatives to Immigration Detention of Children – A Working Paper](#)
- [International Detention Coalition's Captured Childhood](#)
- [International Detention Coalition's There are alternatives](#)
- [MYCP's Report - Working to end children immigration detention](#)
- [Uncertain Pathways: How gender shapes the experience of children on the move](#)
- [Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\): A Practical Guide and Toolkit for UNICEF and Partners](#)
- [Girls and adolescents, migrant, refugees and displaced in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)

- [Adolescent Focus: Country Planning in Humanitarian Action – Building on Core Commitments for Children \(CCC\)](#)
- [Adolescent Girls' Well-being and Empowerment: Five Targeted Priorities](#)
- [UNICEF's Global Multisectoral Operational Framework for MHPSS of Children, Adolescents and Caregivers Across Settings.](#)

KEY ACTION 3: Ensure access to learning and basic services.

- [Education solutions for migrant and displaced children and their host communities](#)
- [Education Uprooted Report](#)
- [Equitable access to quality education for internally displaced children](#)
- [UNESCO Toolkit for urban inclusion in Arab cities: cities promoting inclusion through public participation, access to information, sport, and citizenship and human rights education](#)
- [A Right to Be Heard: Listening to Children and Young People on the Move Report](#)
- [Children Uprooted: What Local Governments Can Do](#)
- [Protecting and supporting internally displaced children in urban settings](#)
- [UNICEF Mapping learning to earning opportunities for youth with disabilities in Eastern and Southern Africa](#)
- [Included, Every Step of the Way: Protecting the rights of migrant and displaced children with disabilities](#)
- [Technical Note Inclusion of Children in the Context of Migration into National Child Protection Systems](#)
- [Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy \(DIPAS\)](#)
- [Including Refugee Learners in National Education Systems.](#)
- [Reimagining Migration Responses: Learning from Children and Young People Who Move in the Horn of Africa](#)
- [Strengthening inclusive social protection systems for displaced children and their families | UNICEF](#)
- [ICAT call to action to prevent and end child trafficking: Call to Action Child Trafficking](#)

KEY ACTION 4: Combat xenophobia and strengthen social cohesion.

- [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Organization for Co-Operation and Security in Europe's Manual on Joint Hate Crime Training for Police and Prosecutors](#)
- [Protected on Paper? An Analysis of Nordic country responses to asylum-seeking children](#)
- [International Centre for Policy Advocacy's Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit](#)
- [MPI Report How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power](#)
- [UN Network on Migration's Anti-Discrimination and COVID-19 Advocacy Tool](#)
- [Communication & Advocacy: Getting Started](#)
- [Taking an Anti-Racist Approach to Advocacy and Communications](#)
- [Vulnerability, Discrimination and Xenophobia Brief](#)
- [IOM Issue Brief: Countering Xenophobia and Stigma to Foster Social Cohesion in the COVID-19 Response and Recovery](#)
- [ODI UK Country profile: Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants](#)
- [Public and political narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: implications for action](#)
- [UNHCR's Guidance on Racism and Xenophobia](#)

- [UNHCR's Integration Handbook: Protecting and Support LGBTIQ+ Refugees](#)
- [UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability](#)
- [UNHCR and IOM's Training package: SOGIESC and working with LGBTIQ+ persons in forced displacement](#)
- [United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities: Checklist to strengthen UN work at country level to combat racial discrimination and advance minority rights](#)
- [United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#)

KEY ACTION 5: Promote children's legal status and integration.

- [IOM-UNICEF Module on A Child Rights Approach to The Sustainable Reintegration of Migrant Children and Families](#)
- [IOM's Return Counselling of Children and Their Families](#)
- [UN Network on Migration Checklist: For safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration](#)

Additional resources

International Conventions and Legal Frameworks

- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
- 1951 Refugee Convention: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/1951-refugee-convention.html>
- 1954 and 1961 United Nations Statelessness Conventions: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/un-conventions-on-statelessness.html>
- Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>

Global Compacts and Declarations

- Global Compact on Refugees Booklet: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>
- New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/asylum-and-migration/new-york-declaration-refugees-and-migrants>
- Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework: <https://www.unhcr.org/comprehensive-refugee-response-framework>
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- Core International Human Rights Instruments: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/core-international-human-rights-instruments-and-their-monitoring-bodies>

Reports and Guidelines

- Joint General Comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: <https://www.ohchr.org/node/84538>
- Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement: <https://internaldisplacement-panel.org/>

- Action Agenda on Internal Displacement PDF: https://www.un.org/en/content/action-agenda-on-internal-displacement/assets/pdf/Action-Agenda-on-Internal-Displacement_EN.pdf
- Joint Statement on Taking Forward the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement PDF: <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-agenda-on-internal-displacement/assets/pdf/Joint-Statement-Action-Agenda-on-Internal-Displacement.pdf>
- OHCHR Report on Improving Human Rights in Migration Governance: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/MigrationHR_improvingHR_Report.pdf
- Accelerating Inclusion for Refugee Children Report: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/accelerating-inclusion-refugee-children>
- Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children: <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/unhcr-unicef-blueprint>
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): <https://www.unicef.org/sdgs>

Platforms and Forums

- United Nations Network on Migration: <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/>
- Executive Committee of the United Nations Network on Migration: <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/executive-committee>
- Global Refugee Forum: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/events/2023-global-refugee-forum>
- Digital Platform for the Global Compact on Refugees: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/>
- Collection of Good Practices for Implementing Initiatives: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/good-practices>

Other Documents and Processes

- High Level Dialogues on International Migration and Development (2006 and 2013): <https://www.un.org/migration/index.html> and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/migration/high-level-dialogue-international-migration-and-development-3-4-october-2013>
- United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/migration/united-nations-summit-refugees-and-migrants>
- Report "In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants": <https://undocs.org/A/70/59>
- Report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants on the Global Compact: <https://undocs.org/en/A/71/285>
- Roadmap of the GCM Development Process: https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/work_plan_gcm.pdf
- Modalities Resolution for the GCM: <https://undocs.org/A/Res/71/280>
- Consultation Phase of the GCM: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/consultation-phase>
- Stocktaking Phase of the GCM: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/stocktaking-phase>
- Negotiation Phase of the GCM: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/intergovernmental-negotiations>
- Final Draft of the GCM: https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/07/180713_Agreed-Outcome_Global-Compact-for-Migration.pdf
- Thematic Discussions: <https://www.unhcr.org/events/thematic-discussions>
- Formal Consultations: <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/global-compact-refugees/background/formal-consultations>
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Endnotes

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A girl at a transit centre in Esquipulas, Guatemala, where migrant children and families, mainly of Venezuelan origin, pass through in search of safety and better opportunities.