

Protecting children on the move

UNICEF PARTNERSHIP WITH THE POLICE DURING COVID-19 MIGRATION CRISIS IN INDIA

COUNTRY/COUNTRIES:

India

PARTNERS:

National Police Academy (NPA), Railway Police Force (RPF) and UNICEF

THEMATIC AREAS:

Child Labour, Child Trafficking, Identification/Registration, Children on the Move/Migration

COVERAGE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Nationwide

KEY RESULTS:

UNICEF working in partnership with the police through the NPA and the RPF in India has led to two key results:

- 1) The initial attitudinal shift among RPF towards a child rights and child protection lens specifically in the context of migration crisis, prompted by the training of police first responders during the COVID-19 lockdown in India; and
- 2) Establishment of a pathway to set up a Child Protection Resource Centre with the NPA to standardise knowledge and skills within the Indian Police to manage child protection issues.

COVID-19 CONTEXT

On 22nd March 2020, a 14-hour voluntary public curfew was set nationally in India as a preventive containment measure against the spread of COVID-19. Two days later, a nationwide lockdown for 21 days for the country's 1.3 billion people was introduced. This lockdown was extended twice in May and on 30th May, the country entered 'unlock 1.0' with only containment zones in full lockdown until 30 June and the rest of the country slowly resuming services.

The extended lockdown resulted in a surge of Indian labourers working outside of their home states and outside of India returning to their home villages. The absence of public transport resulted in a large migration of women, children (including many who were unaccompanied) among others, attempting to return to different cities. Migrants walked for days without food or money to try and reach their homes. Children, particularly those unaccompanied, were especially vulnerable to child labour and trafficking.

UNICEF is part of the special groups created under the National Disaster Management Act 2005 and works in source states. This meant the organisation was well placed to immediately support vulnerable populations and support government and civil society organisations to establish camps and provide basic needs such as clean water.

The Railway Police Force (RPF) plays a critical role in protecting children from abuse in or around railway stations, including child trafficking through trains. National RPF data shows that the number of children rescued has been growing every year since 2015 when the Railway Ministry, the Women and Child Development Ministry and the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) issued a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the rescue and protection of children in contact with the railways. The scope of their work is expansive and before the pandemic in 2019 the RPF rescued 16,457 children across India. In the COVID-19 protection response, they have been providing medical care and supplying food and drinking water to migrant children.

DETAILS OF PROMISING PRACTICE/ CRITICAL POINT OF CHANGE

Given the role of police as a critical partner in the child protection system, there was a recognition that child protection training for the police needed to be institutionalised at the national level and standardised across states, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In early January 2020, UNICEF began discussing a partnership with the National Police Academy (NPA), which provides mandatory training for all police in India. Through this partnership, the police agreed to focus on a dedicated national child protection training within the police academy. As a result of these discussions, UNICEF set up a Child Protection Resource Centre with the NPA to standardise knowledge and skills within the Indian Police to manage child protection issues.

UNICEF also conducted five online trainings on child protection for the RPF for police working in several states covering Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh

among others. RPFs were trained on emerging child protection concerns due to COVID-19, specifically for children connected to train stations or travelling as part of the migration crisis. SOPs for RPF on dealing with children they come in contact with, and coordination with Railway CHILDLINE units for rescue operations was also covered. Skills training on health safeguards, risk communication and stigma and discrimination was also provided. UNICEF brought in other railway workers and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working on migration to provide training.

As of July 2020, this initiative helped train 270 RPF personnel including senior commandants, inspectors, and head constables and constables. An additional 30 participants came from local CSOs, CHILDLINE and UNICEF. Senior officers highlighted the need for sensitivity, awareness of laws and using a child rights perspective while dealing with children:



This training has brought about attitudinal change in the mindset of our RPF officials; now we can start looking at children from the perspective of the Juvenile Justice Act, this has helped to establish a connection with children.



DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE,
SAMASTIPUR DIVISION, BIHAR.

UNICEF has continued to work with the NPA to develop social media posts and information about links to services and reporting channels for violence against children, including helplines. Additionally, from 1st May 2020 onwards, the Indian Railways began operating 'Shramik' (meaning labour force in Hindi) special trains to transport stranded migrants back to their home states, which aligned with UNICEF's timely engagement with the RPF. More than 58 million migrants, including children, travelled to their native towns and villages using this service. In the state of Bihar, 800,000 of the 4 million people who returned to Bihar were under 18 years, with 5 per cent being unaccompanied children.

“We had kept a close watch on Shramik special trains, which brought back children working as child labourers in various parts of the country. Though we had been trying for such a collaboration with RPF for more than a year, COVID-19 challenges and migrants’ mass return gave us a sense of urgency to start the exercise.” said Gargi Saha, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Bihar.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

- **Partnerships at national level can help to institutionalise child protection responses.**
- **It is important to understand who the first responders might be in a pandemic (such as the RPF) and equip them** with child protection identification, referral and response skills training as early as possible.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR PARTNERSHIPS: COOPERATION, COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

- **Leveraging existing relationships with the police enabled a timely response in the first stage of COVID-19.** UNICEF was able to move the training very quickly to virtual platforms because of existing discussions with the NPA.
- **There was a need to shift RPF attitudes away from punitive actions to a more child-friendly and rights-based mind set.** The online training provided a mechanism through which to change attitudes and skills needed for child protection.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE ADAPTATION

- **Key challenges are sustainability and standardization across states.** Sustainability in terms of the improved RPF approach to child protection continuing after COVID-19 and standardization in terms of institutionalizing child protection training within the NPA and across all police forces within the country, not just the RPF, are issues for consideration.

KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER RESOURCES:

For more information visit:
UNICEF India Country Office website at
<https://www.unicef.org/india/>

REFERENCES:

Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Tracker. ‘Cumulative Cases by Days Since the 50th Confirmed Case’, Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre, 2020, <<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/cumulative-cases>>, 15 July 2020.

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