**CHILDREN ON THE MOVE**

Unaccompanied migrant children in South Africa

South Africa, as the economic powerhouse of a region characterized by high levels of poverty and inequality, has long been a magnet for migrants. Many of them are children who cross borders unaccompanied by families or other adult caregivers. Numbers are difficult to estimate, as almost all enter the country in an irregular fashion, and are not registered at border crossings.

**CHALLENGES IN RESPONDING**

The South African Government has a legislative responsibility to extend any contact with authorities or not try to access existing services – complicating the task of the State in guaranteeing their care and protection. The capacity of social workers able to do statutory work is already overstretched, as the burden of dealing with the consequences of HIV/AIDS and the high demand for foster care amongst South African children has already created huge strains on the system.

- Due to fear of arrest and mistrust, many migrant children tend to avoid any contact with authorities or not try to access existing services – complicating the task of the State in guaranteeing their care and protection.
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**REASONS FOR MIGRATION**

As the crisis in neighboring Zimbabwe has deepened, the influx of unaccompanied children has reached proportions that resemble a humanitarian emergency. In the border town of Musina, for example, the Save the Children/UNICEF programme has assisted over 700 new arrivals in the first quarter of this year with an additional 800 plus children from Zimbabwe assisted through drop-in centres. In the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, there are approximately 150 unaccompanied Zimbabwean children who have sought shelter. There are probably hundreds or thousands in other locations across the country that we do not know about.

- Many children come to South Africa to continue with their studies or if that is not possible, with their community in South Africa.
- As “push” factors children cite poverty, hunger, lack of access to schooling at home, and are attracted by stronger currencies, employment opportunities and possibility of education and adventure in South Africa.

**DANGERS OF CROSSING**

Risks involved in migrating to South Africa include:

- Perils of drowning in the Limpopo River.
- Targeting by criminal gangs who, in the guise of “facilitating” the crossing, often to strip children of their money and possessions.
- Upon arrival in South Africa, many lead precarious lives, characterized by:
  - Sleeping rough in taxi ranks or in the bush.
  - Illness and fear of seeking medical care.
  - Doing odd jobs in the informal sector, where they are often subject to violence, abuse and exploitation.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

- Interventions have a higher chance of success if they are consistent with the child’s own survival strategy and informal safety networks of the Zimbabwean community are explored and strengthened.
- Existing national care and protection systems need to be scaled up and streamlined to deal with caseloads of emergency proportions.
- Community-based approach to care of unaccompanied migrant children needs to be pursued and dignified integration of children in the larger society be facilitated – for those for whom family reunification options have been exhausted.
- Continued monitoring and advocacy is required to prevent discrimination on the part of professionals, denial of access to public services, and illegal detention and deportation.
- Strategies that allow unaccompanied migrant children to access some form of education are urgently needed. While the children seek to obtain school, interventions that accommodate their primary need to earn money must be developed.

**Services provided at Musina Transit Centre January – March 2009**

- 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800
- 0 50 100 150 200 250 300
- 450 500
- 150 200
- 250 300
- 350 400

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