



## *Migrant and Refugee Children as Protagonists of Development and Peace*

Across the globe, nearly 50 million children have been uprooted – 28 million driven from their homes by conflict and millions more migrating in the hope of finding a better, safer life<sup>1</sup>. Growing numbers of refugees, internally displaced and migrant children are at the center of the world's population movements, yet their needs have been severely neglected. The serious data gap regarding childhood migration and displacement is further complicated by the fact that many children, especially those born in exile, do not have birth certificates or any other documents. This lack of reliable data seriously impedes evidence-based policy-making and program planning efforts.

In the countries of origin and/or transit, as well as in the host countries, these children encounter numerous and varied traumatic circumstances. Their lives and those of their families are totally disrupted. Unaccompanied or separated children are at particular risk of abuse and exploitation, gender-based violence, discrimination, psychosocial stress and trauma. They are deprived of basic needs; they are poor even though they are often missing from the poverty data<sup>2</sup>. Even as their legal status is being assessed<sup>3</sup> in a transit or host country, children are frequently forced to endure administrative detention, very often in inhumane conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Millions of migrant and refugee children are denied the possibility to lead safe, decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to access lifelong opportunities that enable them to participate fully in society. They are denied the most basic rights guaranteed to them in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as well as the promises made to them in the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>5</sup>.

Without appropriate interventions displaced children experience high levels of toxic stress, almost always leading to short-term and/or long-term impairments in health, development and capacities to contribute to their host societies or their countries of origin as they grow up. Particularly at risk are children during pregnancy and during the first three years of life.<sup>6</sup>

There is a well-documented connection between adverse early experiences and a wide range of costly community problems.<sup>7</sup>

Scientific evidence highlights the importance of early childhood intervention for the youngest children living under highly adverse conditions<sup>8</sup>. In fact, when they receive appropriate interventions during early childhood, significant numbers of these children exhibit remarkable resilience and the ability to navigate complex, difficult situations. These positive characteristics result from the interaction among multiple

<sup>1</sup> Uprooted. *The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children*, UNICEF, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrant populations are often not covered by national poverty statistics or by World Bank poverty calculations based on household surveys that can leave such population groups excluded. At least 76% of people living in extreme poverty – around 677 million people – are estimated to live in countries that are either politically fragile, environmentally vulnerable or both.

<sup>3</sup> Age assessment procedure can differ widely from state to state. If identification documents are not available, the use of medical examination purely for migration control purposes is far from rare, with negative consequences for the physical and mental health of the child.

<sup>4</sup> More than 100 countries are estimated to detain children for migration-related reasons, *End Immigration Detention of Children*, <http://endchildrendetention.org>

<sup>5</sup> Declaration of the 68<sup>th</sup> OMEP World Assembly and Conference, Seoul, Korea, 2016

<sup>6</sup> *Investing in the foundation of sustainable development: pathways to scale up for early childhood development*, Lancet, October 2016, [www.thelancet.com](http://www.thelancet.com)

<sup>7</sup> Mental/psychological problems, lower school achievement, higher rates of criminal behavior, substance abuse, and chronic diseases Laura Pacione, Toby Measham, and Cecile Rousseau, "Refugee Children: Mental Health and Effective Interventions", *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 15 (2013): 341-344.

<sup>8</sup> International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "World Bank support to early childhood development; an independent evaluation", 2015

protective factors<sup>9</sup>, including Early Childhood Development (ECD)<sup>10</sup>, stable and committed relationships with supportive parents, skill-building opportunities, and a community-based child protection mechanism to support parents and caregivers<sup>11</sup>.

Children's risks and adverse experiences cannot be assessed or addressed in isolation from those of their parents/caregivers. Refugee parents and many non-refugee parents from the host communities are living in very difficult conditions. They desperately need resources to strengthen their abilities to care for their very young children. They need safe, secure, nurturing, intercultural spaces and experiences in order to cope with the traumas they have undergone and to adapt to life in new, difficult situations.

By targeting the most disadvantaged children and bringing communities together, Early Childhood Development (ECD) provides a platform through which people manage disputes and prevent conflict from escalating into violence<sup>12</sup>. Case studies from conflict and post-conflict environments (Chad, Northern Ireland, the State of Palestine)<sup>13</sup> indicate that interventions during early childhood can make significant contributions to social cohesion and peace building<sup>14</sup>.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for equitable opportunities for people everywhere to achieve their full potential and for all countries to prioritize their most vulnerable populations, including migrant and refugee children. Without tailored, sustainable, inclusive development and education programs for children and their caregivers in humanitarian and other crisis situations, the SDG targets will not met.

Recognizing the interconnectedness of social development and peace as articulated in the SDGs, member States must invest in children as a key component in developing lasting peace, promoting equity and reducing the inter-generational transmission of poverty. As detailed in numerous studies from many fields, including education, psychology, sociology and economics, Early Childhood Development strategies also convey considerable economic benefits for individuals and the societies in which they live. Long-term economic benefits of ECD programs and services far surpass the required financial investments, making the rationale for investing in children even stronger.

A 20-year follow-up study of children in Jamaica by Nobel laureate James Heckman, Paul Gertler and others has shown that combining health and education interventions in early childhood increases children's future earnings by 25 percent<sup>15</sup>. This finding has profound significance for refugee/migrant children living in extreme poverty.

SDGs hold countries accountable for measuring and reporting the percentage of children under 5 years of age, including refugee and migrant children who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing (Indicator 4.2.1). In paragraph 32 of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants<sup>16</sup> Member States affirm that they will protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all refugee and migrant children, regardless of their status, giving primary consideration at all time to the best interest of the child. In paragraph 82 the Member States declare their commitment to support Early

<sup>9</sup> Jack P. Shonkoff et al., "Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience", Working Paper 13, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> ECD incorporates all aspects of human development, including physical, language, cognitive, intellectual, social, emotional, moral and ethical domains. High quality ECD is culturally sensitive and includes parents and families as significant players in children's overall wellbeing.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wessel, "Strengths-Based Community Action as a Source of Resilience for Children Affected by Armed Conflict", Columbia University, January 2016

<sup>12</sup> McCandless, Erin, Flora Smith and Beth Prosnitz, "Peace Dividends and Beyond: Contributions of Administrative and Social Services to Peace Building", United Nations Support Office, New York, 2012, p.96 available at [www.betterpeace.org](http://www.betterpeace.org)

<sup>13</sup> Ang L. and Oliver S. (2015), "A Systematic Policy Review of Early Childhood Development and Peacebuilding in Fourteen Conflict-affected and Post-conflict Countries". UNICEF and UCL Institute of Education: University College London

<sup>14</sup> "Pathways to Peace. The Transformative Power of Children and Families", edited by James F. Leckman, Catherine Panter-Brick, Rima Salah, Strüngman Forum Reports, 2014

<sup>15</sup> Paul Gertler, James Heckman, Rodrigo Pinto, Arianna Zanolini, Christel Vermeersch, Susan Walker, Susan M. Chang, Sally Grantham-McGregor, "Labor Market Returns to an Early Childhood Stimulation Intervention in Jamaica", *Science*, 344, 2014

<sup>16</sup> New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, General Assembly, Seventy-first session, A/71/L.1, 13 September 2016

Childhood Education for refugee children.

Investing in migrant and refugee children is critical for progress in improving growth rates, reducing poverty, increasing access to quality education and achieving greater equity and social stability. If Governments are serious about the SDGs in general and about these goals in particular, they must invest in early childhood programs and services for migrants and refugee children.

It is the responsibility of Member States, with the support of the international community as a whole, to:

- Collect, analyze and share disaggregated data about displaced and refugee children by age, gender, country of origin, education, citizenship status, ability/disability and other relevant factors;
- Ensure that the best interests of the child, including unaccompanied and separated children, is a primary consideration in all actions of States or private institutions;
- Accelerate assistance and protection by recognizing the particular vulnerabilities of migrant and refugee children, during the preflight, flight and resettlement phases;
- Ensure that age estimation procedures are completed by psychologists, social workers and other qualified persons and that all assessments are child-friendly, gender-friendly and multidisciplinary;
- End the detention of all children in migration, whether seeking refugee status or migrating;
- Raise awareness of refugee children's rights, listen to their needs and requests, and consider them not as a costly expense, but as a necessary and wise investment;
- Protect the youngest children (birth to five) at high risk of trauma-related disruptions and promote Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a powerful tool for the development of resilience, coping and adjustment (Par. 82 New York Declaration)
- Acknowledge that the cost of not expanding ECD programs and services is high for individuals and their families as well as for societies and, conversely, that the cost of such expansion is far outweighed by benefits, including long-term financial yield on investment
- Recognize that migrant and refugee children play an invaluable role in linking their older family members to new societies and accelerating their engagement and inclusion, thereby building more peaceful societies;
- Empower refugee and migrant parents, involving them in childcare initiatives and psychosocial counseling, consistently using culturally relevant approaches and focusing on family integrity to promote social cohesion and improved intercommunity relations;
- Recognize that meeting the particular needs of women, children and adolescents in crises and fragile settings is the most fundamental step on the pathway to achieve the SDGs;
- Sustain promising good practices and expand effective interventions.
- Incorporate these recommendations in the two Annexes to the New York Declaration.