

“Essentials to Accompany and Protect Children on the Move”

Delivered at Session 1: Having the Essentials right from the Start and in an Uninterrupted Manner

Elizabeth Cossor

Fifty million children are believed to be currently on the move, more than half fleeing conflict and insecurity; others driven by persecution, poverty, disasters, resource scarcity and environmental crises. Children represent more than 50% of refugees globally, and around 1 in every 3 children living outside her or his country of birth is a refugee. Children in Asia and the Middle East are particularly impacted: in 2015, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and Yemen accounted for nearly one-third of the world’s total of conflict-induced internal displacements; and almost half of all child refugees have their origins in the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan.

Children may be compelled to move within or between countries, with or without their parents or other primary caregivers. Many of the challenges that children face when they are forced to leave their homes are the same, regardless of whether they cross borders. Their movement may lead them to places where they find safety and better access to rights but it may also place them at risk (or an increased risk) of exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence during their journey.

Today I would like to focus on children’s needs before, during and after undertaking this movement and consider what kind of programming can best respond to these needs in a sustained and continuous manner. In particular, I would like to focus on those children who – for various reasons - make the journey unaccompanied by parents or regular carers. As the number of children on the move is increasing, so too is the relative proportion of unaccompanied children who make some of the longest and most hazardous journeys. A total of 25,846 children braved the treacherous Mediterranean crossing from Northern Africa to Italy last year - double the number from the previous year. Nine out ten of those children were not accompanied by any adult carer. Arrivals from the Horn of Africa into Yemen (for onward movement) have tripled between 2015 and 2016, despite the conflict in Yemen; it is estimated that 20% of all of those arrivals are unaccompanied children. In 2015, nearly 100,000 unaccompanied or separated children (primarily composed of Afghan, Eritrean, Syrian and Somali children) sought asylum in 78 countries globally - a three-fold increase over the previous year.

What then should we consider as “the essentials” for this group of children?

There is no ‘one journey’ nor ‘one group’ of children on the move. The motivations and the aspirations of children forced or compelled to leave their homes are multiple – as they are for adults. The vulnerability to risks and threats may be different for girls as compared with boys, and for younger children as compared with adolescents. Their situation may change over the course of their journey, adapting or reacting to new opportunities, additional information or new threats. A child may also change ‘status’ while on the move – first becoming an ‘internally displaced person’ within their own country, before crossing one or more international borders and becoming an ‘asylum seeker’ and possibly a ‘refugee’, and possibly finding themselves for some period of time in a country of transit where they are treated - and potentially ill-treated - as an ‘illegal migrant’.

Mindful of the potential risks for irregular migrants, children travelling alone can also be very adept at avoiding detection by the authorities or even humanitarian organisations while en route. This can

make mobile children virtually invisible, particularly in urban settings, and increases the challenges of monitoring their needs and responding appropriately.

For the purposes of today's discussion I would like to highlight three groups of essentials which I have selected not only because they are key to children's protection and wellbeing, but also because they can and should 'accompany' the child during displacement and movement.

The first essential is that of **family unity and protective care**. Research has shown that keeping children with parents or caregivers during emergencies usually provides children with the emotional support they need and reduces the negative impacts and the risk of developing severe reactions of distress. Yet separation from family or carers may be a decision taken by children and/or their family before they flee from a crisis, or it may occur anywhere en route. Conditions of insecurity, chaotic movements across borders, or detention can generate family separation. In some situations of conflict and insecurity, parents may send children alone or with other family members in the belief that they will find a better life. In other cases, pre-existing family separation may be the driver for children to leave their home - in order to join parents, siblings or family members in camps or abroad. These children – unaccompanied or separated from families and other carers, or potentially lost and stranded - are among the most vulnerable groups on the move. They are at high risk of trafficking, violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, kidnapping, detention and forced abductions.

The second essential I wish to emphasise is a child's **access to basic services**. The rights of all children to a standard of living adequate for her or his physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, including education, health and adequate housing, is protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children who are displaced from their homes and social supports often experience significant psychological and social impacts, including exposure to traumatic events before or during flight, and are also more likely to face unhealthy and unsafe conditions during their movement. Extreme adversity without adequate adult support can put children at risk of toxic stress, which may contribute to developmental delays and health problems later in life. Yet access to basic services, including psychosocial support and legal assistance, is not generally designed to take account of children on the move. Lack of fixed residence or identity documents, language and cultural constraints, fear of authorities, restrictions on movement, and a shortage of trained service providers can all inhibit the chance of these children accessing services.

And the third essential that I would like to highlight today is **children's own agency and resilience**. Children are naturally active participants in their families and communities. Before a crisis, children have family responsibilities, leadership roles in schools or amongst peers, and take their own decisions on many matters. During crises, it may be children themselves who take the decision to flee in order to better protect themselves. How successful children on the move are in addressing and coping with their situation depends on their protective environment, but also on their internal strengths and capabilities. The characteristics of individual children may influence their vulnerability or resilience (for example their age, sex, ethnic group, or any disabilities) and should be taken into account. Gender-related discrimination and inequality for example may be present in the child's place of origin, transit and destination, and negatively inhibit the capacity of girls in particular to access their rights.

How then can these essentials - family unity and protective care, access to services, and children's own agency and resilience - be supported in an 'uninterrupted manner' right from the start?

Programmatic response for children on the move calls for a complex, multi-levelled and geographically diverse approach involving multiple actors. Many actors may be present in only one location or at one stage of the movement, or be mandated to work with one particular group. These challenges are compounded by the invisibility of children on the move, particularly when they move out of the 'emergency affected' areas where humanitarian organisations operate into more urbanised or developed settings.

Drawing from my research of children on the move in the Horn of Africa, I would like to propose ten programmatic recommendations for us to consider:

1. **Expand coordination and partnerships** that enable a continuum of protection and care of children across all phases of movement and connect responses between areas of origin, transit, destination and return. Seek out the linkage points between humanitarian and development programming, including poverty reduction strategies, education and employment schemes, social protection systems, environment and climate change programmes, elimination of gender discrimination and conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.
2. **Integrate sex and age disaggregated data in displacement monitoring** in order to understand and identify patterns, trends and impacts of movement and support evidence-based programming and advocacy.
3. **Support local and national child protection systems, services and capacities** in countries of origin, transit and destination as a prevention and response to protection risks. As part of this support, advocate for laws and policies that integrate displaced children into public services and prohibit detention of children, map services that are available within and across borders, and monitor the bottlenecks in implementation.
4. **Strengthen mechanisms to keep families together**, and to identify and reunify children with parents and caregivers or ensure alternative care is provided. In connection with this, ensure that capacities and procedures to determine the best interests of the child are also in place.
5. **Provide birth registration** for all children – regardless of the conditions or place of their birth. This is an essential step in establishing age and authenticating family links and helping to address multiple child protection issues such as child labour, child recruitment, child marriage, detention of children, human trafficking and child prostitution. Birth registration can facilitate access to education and other social services.
6. **Strengthen community-based systems, including protective companion and peer-support** programmes, for the identification, monitoring, early warning and response to child protection risks. Community-based structures are particularly essential in the absence or deterioration of formal child protection systems.
7. **Ensure continual access to health, education and other social services** for the immediate and long-term well-being of children on the move. This may call for innovative and flexible approaches to facilitate access to education and other services, including in off-camp settings. Children themselves emphasise the importance of continued learning, even in temporary settings and for short periods. Education provides a source of safety, stability and normal childhood development. In the area of health promotion and assistance, some organisations have identified 'spaces of vulnerabilities'

along movement routes, at border crossings and ports, and in urban centres with displaced populations.

8. **Commit to support children's mental health and psychosocial support** as a core component of emergency programming is needed. Importantly, supporting children's parents and carers' mental health also contributes positively to the care and wellbeing of children.
9. **Listen to girls and boys** from different groups and in different emergency and displacement settings **and ensure their views are incorporated** into programmatic development in a way that supports rather than hinders their opportunities and well-being. Self-confidence and belief in themselves can also help children cope with stress and we need to learn more about which strategies children themselves find most effective in promoting survival, resilience and safety. Children's voices need to be at the centre of our discussions.
10. **Innovate with child friendly information technology** that enables children to access information about risks, how to obtain their rights and how to access services.

In conclusion, when violence and insecurity force families from their homes, it is often children who suffer the most and suffer the longest. The dangers they face once they leave home *can* be mitigated by well-coordinated, comprehensive strategies that begin from the time they flee their homes - or even beforehand – and are sustained throughout their journey.

Thank you.