

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN EAST AND THE HORN OF AFRICA



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN DISPLACEMENT AND MIXED MIGRATION

At the end of 2019 there were almost 79.5 million displaced people around the world, of whom 45.7 million are internally displaced and 26 million are refugees. **40% of those displaced, nearly 32 million were children.**

#### What are mixed migration flows?

Mixed migration flows comprise both displacement (forced or otherwise) and migration (both regular and irregular).

Typically, these movements follow fluid migratory paths and involve tens of thousands of people annually. The proportion of children in mixed and complex flows has risen significantly in recent years, with some regions seeing exceptionally rapid increases.

These numbers do not account for adults and children who do not appear on official records, who have been compelled or have chosen to move from their home and have joined migration flows to urban centres within their country or into neighbouring countries and onwards irregularly. The group of irregular and undocumented migrants is relatively small compared with the 272 million migrants officially living outside their country of birth but they represent the most vulnerable and at risk.

Children and youth represent a significant share of mixed flows but their number is uncertain – like the overall number of people migrating irregularly each year. Among them are children registered

as refugees who choose to undertake secondary movement, from camps to cities or across borders into further countries of transit and destination.

#### CONFLICT-RELATED DISPLACEMENT IN THE EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA REGION

In 2019, sub-Saharan Africa recorded around 8.1 million new displacements associated with conflict and disasters – more than any other region, and accounting for 24.1% of all new displacements worldwide. **Approximately 19.2 million people were living in internal displacement in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of conflict and disasters, with a majority of them being children.**

In the Horn of Africa, sub-regional and intra-state conflict continues to drive people from home towards safer environments. In this region, this can mean moving to and through regions affected by conflict (e.g. movement out of Somalia through Sudan towards Libya).

Conflicts in this region have had complex, cross-border impacts, and children are often the worst affected. Such conflicts also have multigenerational impacts, often leading to a continuous



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state of displacement for children and their families. This limits access to services such as education or health. It has also exposed children to risks of abuse and exploitation, including recruitment into armed forces and child marriage.

## A JOURNEY BESET WITH RISKS

The irregular, cross-border nature of mixed migration in the East and Horn of Africa makes for a perilous journey for children and young people.

- On their journey, migrants have to navigate harsh physical environments, cross heavily secured borders and traverse territories of oppressive regimes not dissimilar to the hostile circumstances they were seeking to escape in the first place.
- Because irregular migration is criminalised in several countries in the region, children and youth on the move are often exposed to criminal gangs, militias, smugglers and corrupt officials seeking to take advantage of their precarious legal status, which makes them vulnerable to predatory behaviour by the different people they interact with.
- Those facilitating irregular migration may see asylum-seekers and migrants as a source of income and even easy prey for financial or sexual exploitation, kidnapping and torture. Because migrants often have no legal status in countries of transit and destination, violations and crimes against them go unreported and unpunished.

As part of its commitment to the most marginalised and at-risk children, [Save the Children International has intensified its programming with children and youth on the move](#), including those at risk of undertaking unsafe migration.

## MIGRANTS AS COMMODITIES

Children and young people on the move are particularly vulnerable to widespread opportunistic commoditisation of migrant populations. This includes refugee children, whose needs can be extreme, are protected by their status in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and in national laws from the scale of exploitation and abuse that faces children on the move.

These children and young people represent an economic commodity for almost everybody. For some of them, this starts from their home, where they are seen as a source of future income for their family or community. Smugglers then fill the opportunistic space, often charging extortionate prices for each part of the journey, and sometimes introducing costs that had never been discussed and can be demanded only because of the dependence of the child or young person on the smuggler. Profits are then made by criminal gangs, which kidnap, traffic, extort and sell children and young people for as much as they can extract along the way, and reportedly in some instances by border officials, military personnel and police, who take advantage of the irregular status of migrants to extract kickbacks and bribes.

Despite migrants' vulnerability, their economic and political agency should not be under-estimated. It is important to recognise the decision-making and aspiration realisation of young people who leave home looking for a better life. Nevertheless, what happens on the road and in countries of transit and destination is mostly out of their control, and it is this lack of control that makes them so vulnerable to the political and economic interests of others.



# METHODOLOGY: POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS OF EAST AND THE HORN OF AFRICA

A political economy analysis brings together the areas of politics – power relations such as the organised control of a state, region or community – and the co-dependent interrelated factor of economics – the distribution of resources to address material needs/wants. A political economy lens is particularly useful when programming for migrants. Such an analysis can demonstrate how power and the economic incentives of those who interact with migrants can determine how the latter, especially children and young people with irregular status outside their own country, experience their journey.

Policy and practice on mixed migration, which occupies a space at the heart of the humanitarian–development nexus, are more susceptible to politics than is the case in many other sectoral areas because success or failure here has such an important impact on donor countries and the Global North in general. Many countries of origin and transit in the Global South now pay significantly more attention to migrant populations due to Western Countries’ concern over migrant influx and their prioritisation of migration in their foreign policy engagements.

Meanwhile, in order to enable countries through which migrants pass to cooperate with this agenda, considerable economic incentives are now being provided, in the form of bilateral grants, loans and political support. This means migration management is now a very important revenue area. As a result, it is of great importance to understand the political and economic interests both of countries of origin and transit and of donors, regional bodies, policy-makers and voters in countries where migrants, including children and young people, often wish to end their journey.

Using a political economy lens here provides a shared understanding of the political and economic processes shaping migration and migration response, across several countries and two regions, and thus can contribute to realistic, feasible and coherent programming. It is also hoped that using this approach will broaden the scope for dialogue and advocacy with donors, governments, regional bodies and partners. The identification of the critical factors that are likely to drive or impede change in the future can contribute to the strengthening of risk management.

Primary data collection for this study was conducted in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, but Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan were also covered through secondary data collection.

For the primary data collection, key informant interviews were carried out in the three countries of focus with government departments, UN agencies, international and local non-governmental organisations, civil society, the media and

independent experts. The study also conducted 23 focus group discussions (FGDs) in Addis Ababa, Cairo and Khartoum and an additional FGD in the transit town of Metema, Ethiopia. FGDs were held in child-friendly spaces and used a ‘do no harm’ approach. They comprised child and young migrants, female and male, from Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, and internal migrants and returnees in Ethiopia. Respondents were asked about their experiences on the road and in the city in which they were residing. Given the scope and focus on qualitative data, this research is not representative, but aims to produce insight into the experiences of migrant children who participated.

The research also used primary data collected through the Mixed Migration Centre’s Mechanism for Monitoring Mixed Migration Initiative.<sup>1</sup> This approach made it possible to develop bespoke data analysis to suit the targeted reference group and the countries under analysis in this study. This gave access to information on an additional 607 young migrants and asylum-seekers from Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Puntland, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan and Sudan.

The study encountered a number of limitations:

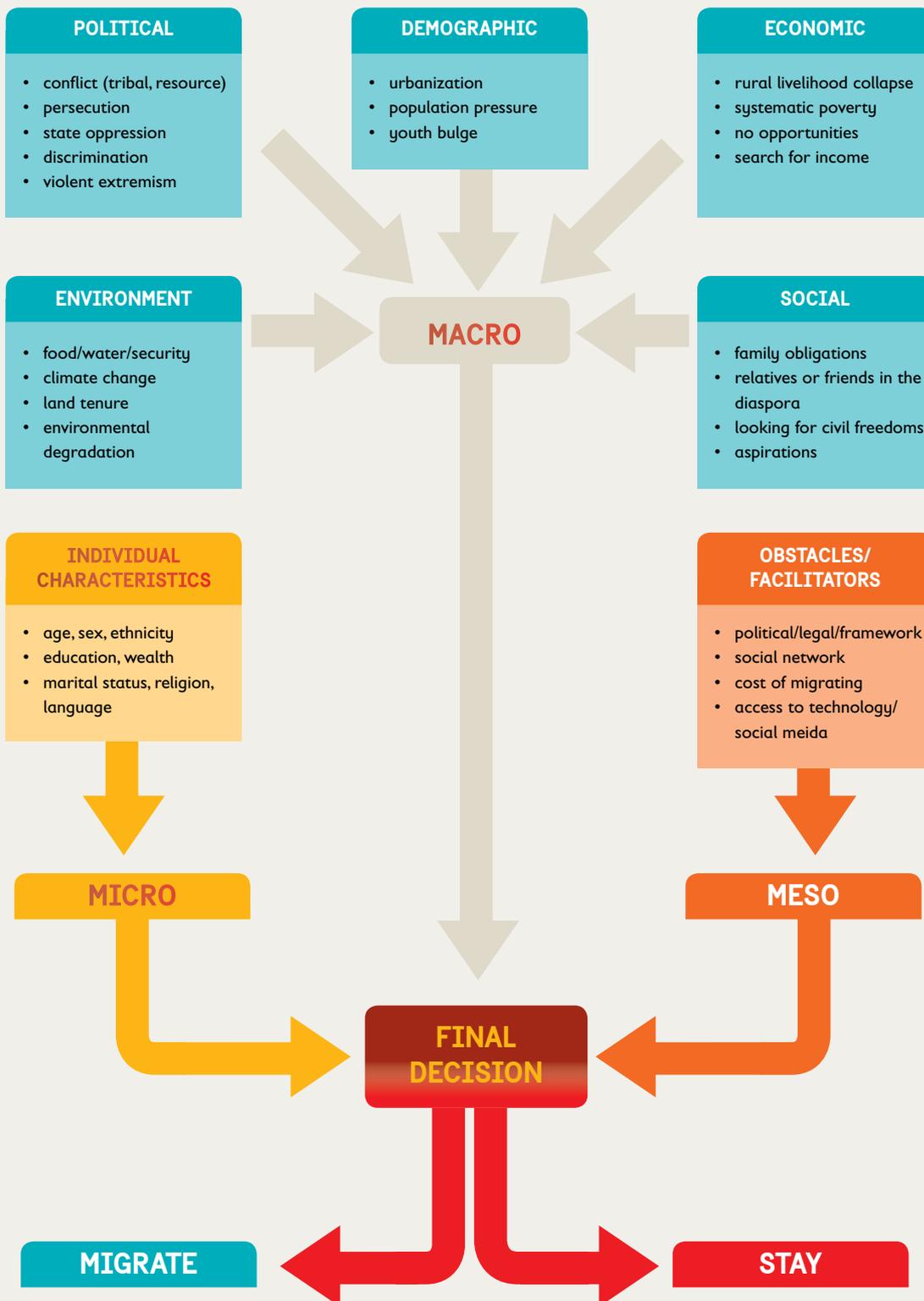
- The time available to carry out the research, as well as a validation process involving numerous stakeholders, was limited.
- Some FGDs were carried out in languages other than the national language. This meant the research had to rely to a certain degree on local researchers and on (time-consuming) transcriptions.
- Given the need to interview child and young migrants from a range of backgrounds, FGDs were composed of female and male participants. This may have put restrictions on the potential to discuss sensitive topics such as (sexual) violence.
- Some targeted research participants were hesitant to take part in the study.
- Some topics were sensitive, and this represented a major barrier to both the quality and the scope of data collection. Engaging children and young adults who are potentially illegal in the country, in particular unaccompanied minors, also presented significant difficulties.
- Given the particular sensitivity involved, only four FGDs with children were conducted in Sudan. This inevitably affected the Sudan analysis.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi/>

# FINDINGS

## DRIVERS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR CHILD

### MULTI-TIERED NATURE OF MIGRATION DRIVERS



The reasons for mixed migration are often complex and multi-layered. They comprise very personal motivations and aspirations as well as wider structural challenges that are often very close to grounds for asylum. Drivers and root causes range from the widest, socio-political structural realities (macro-level factors), through meso-level elements of more immediate identity (such as community, ethnicity, access to information, etc.), to the very personal (micro-level) ingredients that go into private decision-making, such as the influence of friends and family, gender norms, experience of violence in the home, etc. The figure above represents these factors graphically.d.

Some programming responses with young would-be migrants and asylum-seekers are built on the idea that they are unaware of the risks they face on the journey before starting. Information from migrant interviews and FGDs suggest the reality is more nuanced. Approximately 40% of young interviewees from the Horn reported that they were 'fully aware' of the risks before starting. When compared with migrants moving through other regions (West or Southern Africa, Asia), those leaving from the Horn appear to have a higher sense of the risk before they start their journey. Of those interviewed, despite what they had experienced and witnessed, and knowing what they knew at the time of interview, over 42% of males and over 57% of females said they would still have decided to migrate.

Despite this, not all research confirms that young people really do have sufficient information (or trust the information they do have) before they set off. Migrant monitoring data add weight to this: 15–45% said they were aware but it was 'worse than expected'. Only a minority (5–15%) said they were aware of the risks but found them 'not as bad as expected'. By the time migrants arrived in Libya, only around 5% said things were 'not as bad as expected'.

Young people identify friends and family as an important source of influence and diaspora networks as an important source of funding and information, and consider themselves relatively informed on risks.

Clearly, not all smuggling results in violent and damaging outcomes, and smugglers may even make positive life choices possible for children. However, even then, there is a high risk of consensual smuggling shifting to coercive trafficking somewhere along the road.

Even when a young person sets off believing that s/he has enough information about the journey, and even that s/he is making a choice to improve her/his life, smuggling often involves violence, coercion, extortion of funds and deception about how long the journey will take, how much it will cost and the abuse to which migrants will be exposed.

All Yemeni participants in Cairo said friends and family had informed them before leaving but all the information they had received about Egypt was wrong. A Somali in Cairo said:

*If I advise others to stay because of the danger of the way, they will not believe my words, as I did not listen to what I heard. If I tell them now to stay they think that I do not tell them the truth.*

Mandates and definitions can reduce the focus on individual decision-making and on the agency of young and child people in decisions to leave, even when those decisions are driven by negative factors; agency can build resilience.

The role of agency in children and young people in making the decision to migrate should be accorded more importance than is often the case. The decision-making processes of children who decide *not* to move, or who move under their own volition, have only recently begun to be researched.<sup>2</sup> 'Invisible' though the process is, many young people find good reasons to decide for or against migration. Often, the particular experience of children is simply wrapped into the larger experience of adults. A child or young person demonstrates agency in taking decisions they hope may improve their lives. This is of importance to this research because human agency may play a strong role in the development of resilience. For these reasons, while researching the motivations of children, and while designing programmes for young people, decision-makers should see the young people themselves as their own agents of change and development, strongly connected with key players in their environment such as family and peers.<sup>3</sup>

However, understanding the motivations of child migrants, or would-be child migrants, through research is difficult. Even when asked, children and young people may well find it impossible to explain the multi-faceted nature of their own motivation, choosing to veil sensitive, personal reasons and focus on the more obvious economic drivers. Equally, the question of agency does not apply to all children. Meanwhile, when states and other stakeholders cannot assure safe passage for those who choose to move, should young people, particularly children, be expected to weigh the balance of their own best interests? A young person may claim at the end of their journey that s/he has made it to where s/he was intending to go, but from a child rights perspective it is questionable whether the result was worth the price paid – and certainly whether any child should be asked to pay such a price.

Migration outcomes for young people are unpredictable. When duty-bearers like governments cannot assure safe passage, it is arguable whether would-be migrants should be expected to assess the risks themselves.

<sup>2</sup> See Van Zyl, M. and Tschudin, A. (2018) *Why Children Stay*. Research Report. London: Save the Children International.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

- Seek to work in communities of origin, identifying protective mechanisms and options for education or employment that may give young people the chance to stay. This should be done in a context-specific way, understanding that motivations for movement vary dramatically, from place to place and from child to child.
- Build relationships with churches, community leaders and communities themselves in countries of origin to bridge gaps in health, social well-being and education, especially for minors. This could involve the establishment of youth forums within communities or churches, where children can feel heard and have their needs met.
- Build community-based programmes to address drivers of migration in communities of origin that affect young women and girls, including harmful traditional practices, sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. Work with family members, especially female family members, to build on coping and protective mechanisms that strengthen the element of choice for young people, with regard to whether to stay or to migrate.
- Emphasise resilience-building and self-reliance, in recognition of the agency of each young person, particularly at the stage where children shift into early adulthood. This means a focus on livelihoods, education, skills-building and integration (in urban programming).

### Institutions and influence: the political, policy and legal situation

The international, regional and national policy and legal frameworks have impacts on the response to children and young people on the move. In some cases, national and regional efforts have been influenced by international pressure, for example the partnership with the EU on efforts to curb migration out of the region.

### The new global direction in refugee and migration policy

At the international level, there are some important new platforms for advocacy and policy for young people and children on the move. Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan have all signed the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which covers access to services, inclusion and social cohesion but also allows states to distinguish between regular and irregular migrants and respects their sovereignty to determine their own laws and policies with regard to migration management.

The GCM speaks repeatedly of the best interests of the child, affirms the need to protect the human rights of migrant children and champions better access to basic health, education and psychosocial services for children and young people involved in migration. It is not binding, however, and has not, so far,

represented a platform for significant leverage or advocacy. The GCM is not yet a year old, though, and a variety of monitoring mechanisms are being developed to push for implementation and compliance by signatory member states that will likely impact the operating context, even those projects that are not directly involved in the implementation of the GCM.

At the international level, important new platforms for advocacy and policy for young people and children on the move, include the Global Compact for Migration, which is explicit on the special rights and needs of children.

### Regional initiatives

In 2012, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) created a policy framework for the management of migration. It has since been involved in various migration management/governance efforts, and now has a Migration Action Plan to operationalise its Regional Migration Policy Framework 2015–2020. IGAD has also taken the lead in coordinating efforts to manage the regional Somali refugee situation under the 2017 Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees.

International legislative frameworks exist and the countries of focus have acceded to most of these. However, implementation on trafficking, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants is largely child-blind, particularly where those without refugee status are legally invisible.

IGAD's position acknowledges the complexity of mixed migration, which provides an important policy backdrop in the region for programming and advocacy. However, it is currently difficult to identify the practical differences that these have made in the life of migrants.

None of the countries of this study has a bilateral treaty/agreement in place with any of its neighbours to address the needs of children on the move – although positive steps have been taken in terms of identifying next steps on a country-by-country basis. Sudan, for example, has committed to making children on the move a priority group in the existing planning of the National Council for Child Welfare. Ethiopia has recognised the need for strengthened cross-border coordination and information management with Sudan on cases of child trafficking and children on the move more generally.

In terms of continental law and policy, the African Union (AU) African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has been ratified or acceded to by 48 African states, including Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. This builds on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but with an additional focus on the protection of internally displaced children, as well as protection from harmful social and cultural customs.

In November 2019, the AU's Specialised Technical Committee on Migration, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons announced plans to set up a platform for cooperation and sharing of information on human trafficking and migrant smuggling among law enforcement agencies of AU member states, to be based in Khartoum. The AU has also announced (in early 2019) that in 2020 it will release an 'African passport', allowing holders to travel visa-free and uncontested between member states. This could have an extremely significant impact on the labour migration situation for children and young people, and on migration through countries of the region as part of a Europe-facing mobility.

In Egypt and Sudan, a policy focus on trafficking overlooks that many children and young people have chosen to move (with smugglers). Recognising these children first and foremost as trafficking victims creates the false assumption that they seek to return home.

The Ethiopian government has been progressive in its revision of its National Refugee Proclamation allowing for greater freedoms and local integration for refugees in line with the CRRF, although work remains with regard to implementation and had no measurable impact yet for refugee children and youth.

Migration has polarised politics in several European countries and remains a core EU foreign policy priority. The EU has entered individual agreements with Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan focused on migration governance, including containment. The EU has been criticised for ignoring the possible impact of these agreements on, for example, trafficking. As a general rule, the emphasis on border management and containment has lacked child-sensitivity, although programmes it has funded commonly deliver impacts for children in health, education, nutrition and protection.

## Recommendations on international, regional and national institutions

- Advocate with IGAD and the AU to stem the securitisation of borders and of human mobility and to allow the free movement of children and young people and their families among countries of the IGAD bloc.
- Work with the IGAD–EAC regional cross-border initiative to build on existing momentum around strengthened cross-border protection, case management and referral mechanisms for children and young people involved in migration. Use this forum for regular progress monitoring and accountability from both the Ethiopian and the Sudanese governments.
- Champion the rights of children via 'horizontal advocacy' towards EUTF and EU diplomatic counterparts, to exempt children and young people from the strictures of anti-migration law and policies and to provide a wider set of options for those who have settled, or become stranded, in terms of integration or safe onward movement.

- Advocate for strengthened security and humanitarian access to border areas that host refugees, and the communities around them.
- In Egypt, support and advocate the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood to ensure children and young people are included in Standard Operating Procedures, case management and referral, strengthening the legal protections of undocumented children and young people.
- In Ethiopia, promote a child focus in the discussion of solutions for undocumented children, alongside those with refugee status. Advocate with relevant mechanisms in Ethiopia to allow children and young adults who do not have out-of-camp documentation to secure the necessary documentation and to access basic services, and for the refugee youth to work legally in Addis Ababa and other cities in Ethiopia, as provided in the revised refugee proclamation.
- In Sudan, support legal reform affecting women with the government and partners. Implementing new legislation that protects women, girls and more generally children is in line with the transition's aspirations. Encourage accelerated implementation around the Standard Operating Procedures for child victims of trafficking. Support the government to carry out comprehensive best interests assessments in decisions affecting children and young people involved in migration, giving them the opportunity to participate in these sessions.

## Vested interests, economic pressures and the incentives of others

A number of influences shape the decisions of children and young people to migrate and as they make their journeys. Various informal actors have interests vested in their movement – whether the relationship is based on the well-being of the child and their family or a more exploitative one, actively presenting risks or disregarding the potentially risky consequences for the child or young person. Either way, these influences are examined through the lenses of the migrant as an economic agent and the opportunity for financial gain (for the migrant, for the family, for the community or for vested interests) of one sort or another.

## The family and pressure to leave

Many children feel family expectation that they will make a journey, at the appropriate age, to find work. This expectation is reinforced if peers are migrating, or have done so successfully. The pressure to become a source of remittances is even greater if a bread-winner dies or is incapacitated, or in the event of domestic violence. The irony is that young people and children who migrate to find work and to send funds home over the longer term need to finance the journey upfront, often at great expense.

Children and young people are economic agents in their own right but are subject to many other influences and interests. Primary among these is family, where a significant proportion of decision-making takes place. Family can be a significant reason to stay but supporting family members can also be an incentive to leave.

## The role of the diaspora

Governments and development agencies in countries of origin and of residence have been endeavouring to enlist support through diaspora transfers of financial, social and human capital to their own planned development ends of peace-building, livelihoods, self-reliance and rights protection.<sup>4</sup> However, the diaspora plays an arguably more significant role in enabling the movement of young irregular migrants, through finance, sharing of information and contacts and influencing the choice of destination and therefore route. This speaks to the need for a more complex understanding of how diasporas may perceive development – as a process of social change that does not necessarily apply to a geographical place but rather to the people in question.

According to the data, 50% of young respondents in the countries in this study were most influenced by their friends and family and community living abroad; 44% also received financial assistance from those friends and family and community abroad.

## Vested interests along the way

Children and young people involved in migration are often forced to rely on smugglers, which exposes them to criminal gangs, militias and corrupt officials and makes them vulnerable to predatory behaviour. Because they often have no legal status in countries of transit and destination, crimes against them go unreported and unpunished.

Smugglers are deeply entrenched in migrants' social networks and local communities, and normally operate in loose association with each other. There are leaders operating out of cities, but smugglers can also be found in refugee camps and border crossing areas and their reach extends (through agents or partners) into rural areas and small towns. From their perspective, there is a seemingly unending and increasing stream of young people involved in migration and refugees who are willing to pay smugglers, however badly they are treated.

Meanwhile, government and border security agents may vilify smugglers as unscrupulous and exploitative, taking advantage of the desperation of children and young people involved in irregular migration. However, certain officials are also closely implicated.<sup>5</sup> The high profits they can extract from the migrant economy cement the relationship, making it particularly resistant to national and international efforts to implement the law and improve protection for children and young people.

## The private sector, aid agencies and service providers

Many aspects of the private sector are inaccessible, in particular to children and young people involved in migration. Employment can be an important part of the journey but usually involves work in the informal sector, sometimes in exploitative conditions. Meanwhile, programming for children is ethically complicated because of the unpredictability of outcomes, but the child rights imperative is paramount.

## Recommendations on vested interests

- Using strategic learning from Southern Africa on protection of children on the move, develop a cross-border component that is 'route-based', in alignment with other programmes. This means engaging in advocacy and capacity-building with local government; referral and coordination; and service delivery. In particular, bring a child focus to bear on the contact child victims of trafficking have with the law (e.g. child-sensitive conditions in detention, at police desks, in courts, etc.).
- Work with the anti-trafficking taskforce infrastructure and other state actors, such as officials and police at the Ethiopia–Sudan border, and national oversight mechanisms such as the National Council for Child Welfare in Sudan, to ensure prioritisation of the needs of children and young people on the move, especially young women and girls.
- Maintain a strong profile in capital cities and bring coherence to city-/area-based interventions for children on the move, such as urban hubs and drop-in centres, and host community vulnerable child populations alike. Expand relationships with community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations providing protection services in cities.
- Design interventions to tackle the short- or long-term context-specific challenges faced. These could involve safeguarding for children and young people through case management support in coordination with officials and UN agencies offering services or via implementing partners, or identification of immediate needs among newly arrived children and young people via youth ambassadors chosen by the community.

4 Sinatti, G. and Horst, C. (2015) 'Migrants as Agents of Development: Diaspora Engagement Discourse and Practice in Europe'. *Ethnicities* 15(1): 134–152..

5 Tubiana, J., Warin, C. and Saeneen, G.M. (2018) *Multilateral Damage: The Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes*. The Hague: Clingendael.





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This study was led by **Ravenstone Consult** and edited by **Ruth Griffiths**.



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