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A GROWING CRISIS FOR CHILDREN

WHY THE PLIGHT OF CHILDREN SHOULD BE CENTRAL TO THE SEPTEMBER SUMMITS ON MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Around the world, nearly 50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced – and this is a conservative estimate. More than half of these girls and boys fled violence and insecurity – 28 million in total.

These children may be refugees, internally displaced or migrants, but first and foremost, they are children: no matter where they come from, whoever they are, and without exception.

Children do not bear any responsibility for the bombs and bullets, the gang violence, persecution, the shriveled crops and low family wages driving them from their homes. They are, however, always the first to be affected by war, conflict, climate change and poverty.

Children in these contexts are among the most vulnerable people on earth and this vulnerability is only getting worse. The number of child refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate has more than doubled in just 10 years – this shocking statistic is simply unacceptable.

Their world is no place for a child.

Migrating and displaced children are at risk of some of the worst forms of abuse and harm. Often dependent on human smuggling, they can easily fall victim to traffickers and other criminals. Many are subjected to extreme forms of abuse and deprivation during their journeys.

The violations have to stop.

When, and if, these children reach destination countries, the threats they face do not disappear. Despite extraordinary and generous actions to help them in many places and by many people and organizations, children and their families struggle to gain a foothold. Refugee and migrant children disproportionately face poverty and exclusion at a time when they are in desperate need of essential services and protection.

Supporting displaced and migrant children at home and globally is a shared responsibility – shared because no one is untouched by the impacts of the multiple crises in the world.

Children's voices, their plight and the issues they face must become the focus of international debates on migration and displacement.

UNICEF asks governments and other critical actors attending the two refugee and migrant Summits on September 19th and 20th to give special attention to the plight of child refugees and migrants and to consider these six goals and practical suggestions:

1. **Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence**

Introduce measures to strengthen child protection systems, including the training of social and child workers and working with NGOs and professional groups. Clamp down on trafficking, not only through enhanced law enforcement, but also by providing better support to migrant children through the systematic appointment of qualified guardians; better access to information regarding their own situation and the management of their cases; and access to legal assistance. Governments should also develop clearer guidance for case officers when determining the migration status of children, to prevent the return of children and families to persecution, dangerous or life-threatening situations, using the 'best interest of the child' principle to guide legal decision-making in all cases.

2. **End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating**

Introduce practical alternatives to detention wherever children (or their families) are involved, given the negative impact of detention on a child's development. Children are particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological violence. Examples of alternatives to detention include: the surrender of passport and regular reporting requirements; guarantors or bailees who may be family members or community supporters; foster care and supervised independent living for unaccompanied and separated children; and compulsory registration with authorities.

3. **Keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status**

Develop clear policy guidance to keep children from being separated from their parents during border control processing and any migrant legal processes. States should speed-up procedures and make it easier for children to reunite with their families, including with their extended families in destination countries. States should pursue all practical measures to reunify children with their families. Children born to migrant parents need legal identity for their future wellbeing. Governments should provide birth registration and/or other identity documents to enable children to access services and avoid statelessness.

4. **Keep all refugee and migrant children learning and give them access to health and other quality services**

An increased collective effort by governments, communities and the private sector is needed to provide education, health, shelter, nutrition, water and sanitation, and access to legal and psychosocial support to these children. This is not only a collective responsibility, it is in all societies' common interests. A child's migration status should never represent a barrier to accessing essential services.

5. **Press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants**

Address the root causes of conflict, violence and extreme poverty in countries of origin. This should include increasing access to education and social protection; expanding opportunities for family income and youth employment; and fostering more accountable and transparent governance. Governments should facilitate community dialogue and engagement towards peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance and a more inclusive society; and should take measures against gang violence.

6. **Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination**

Coalitions of NGOs, communities, the private sector, religious groups and political leaders should take responsibility for influencing public opinion, to prevent the rise of xenophobia and discrimination toward refugees.

Learn more about UNICEF's response to the situation of refugees and migrants at www.unicef.org/uprooted