



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

**PROTECT
URBAN
REFUGEE
CHILDREN**



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INNOVATION CHALLENGE

The Need for Urban Innovation

Urbanization is a defining trend of our era. As of the end of 2016, 60% of the world's 17.2 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate live in urban areas, with that number expected to increase.¹ The increasing trend towards urbanization and the accompanying need to support refugees in urban environments is explicitly recognized in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (New York Declaration).² Many refugee children will live their entire childhoods in cities. With funding from the United States Government Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration, UNHCR is conducting research on the ways that city life affects the protection of refugee children and their families.³

¹ UNHCR Global Trends Report 2016, (UNHCR, Geneva) notes that there are a total of 22.5 million refugees globally – 17.2 million under UNHCR's mandate and 5.3 million under the mandate of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). There are 2.8 million asylum seekers. UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, 21 June 2017, pp. 2-3 and 55, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/594aa38e0.html>.

² UN General Assembly, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly*, 3 October 2016, A/RES/71/1, para. 73, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/57ceb74a4.html> (New York Declaration).

³ With funding from the United States Government Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) from 2015-2017, UNHCR has undertaken an initiative entitled "Risk & Resilience in the City" to better understand the urban protection risks and resilience factors for children, document promising programming practices, and develop programming guidance.

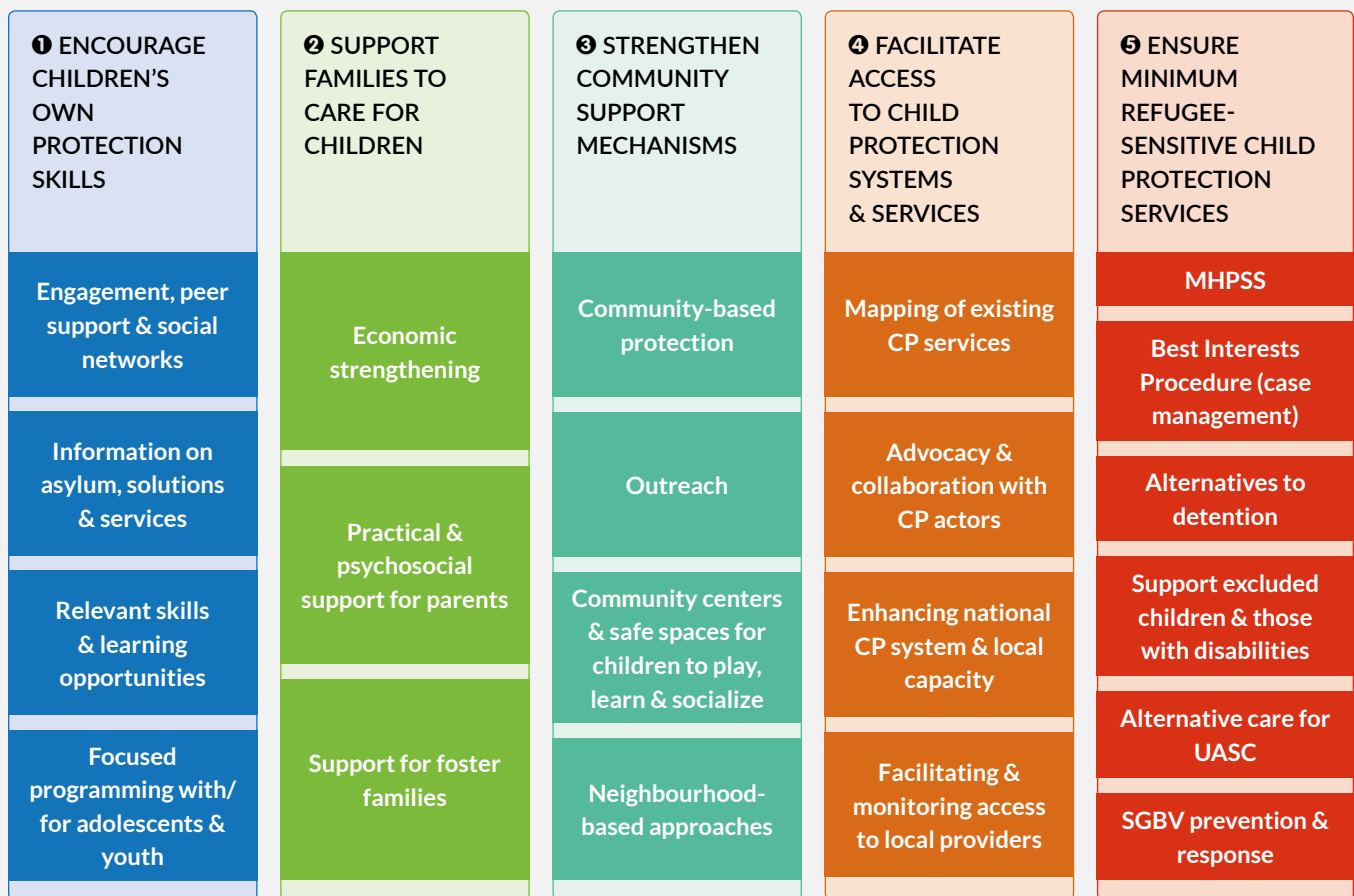


Figure 1: Five Key Investments to Protect Urban Refugee Children

Living in cities can potentially offer refugee children and their families opportunities and benefits that are unavailable in camps or rural areas, including greater possibilities for income generation or employment, better access to a fuller range of local education and health services, and more chances for integration in a diverse urban setting. Despite these opportunities, many urban refugee families share the difficulties of the urban poor and face an array of challenges related to their forced displacement and legal status. This makes it especially hard for them to earn a living and to access the services that cities offer – and that refugees need. This combination undermines the protective capacity of families and communities and compounds protection risks for refugee children in cities. In spite of these circumstances, refugee children and families show amazing resilience.

UNHCR has identified “**5 Key Investments to Protect Urban Refugee Children**”⁴ that strengthen the resilience of urban refugee children, families, and communities, as illustrated in Figure 1. The challenges of urban contexts demand a multi-stakeholder approach that engages national and local authorities and civil society partners, including faith-based organizations and academia, the private sector, media and refugees themselves, as well as international and regional organizations and financial institutions. This multi-stakeholder approach is in line with the “whole of society approach” recommended by the New York Declaration.⁵ There is a need for innovation in order to develop and refine programming approaches that involve these different actors and that incorporate the *Five Key Investments to Protect Urban Refugee Children* in an integrated and holistic manner.

⁴ Please note the meaning of the acronyms used in Figure 1.: unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), child protection (CP), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

⁵ New York Declaration, para 69.



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The Innovation Challenge

In order to encourage this spirit of innovation, the UNHCR Child Protection and Youth Unit (CPYU) and the Innovation Team worked together to sponsor “**Protecting Urban Refugee Children: An Innovation Challenge**”. The Challenge process inspired UNHCR staff, partners, refugees, and other actors from all over the world to share 125 fresh ideas and promising practices on how to work more effectively in cities to better protect urban refugee children. The public challenge page was viewed 13,366 times during the three weeks that it was open. Participants posted 971 comments on each other’s ideas, voted on ideas 847 times, and explored possibilities for collaboration.⁶

And the winners are...



The selection panel⁷ identified 56 strong ideas, solicited input on those ideas from experts with substantive or geographic expertise, and then made a final selection of three winners for each geographic region and from amongst the global promising practices. The winning ideas, like many of the new ideas or promising practices submitted to the Innovation Challenge, are practical examples of how to implement the **5 Key Investments to Protect Urban Refugee Children**. The winning ideas are described below and are also listed by geographic region in Annex 1.

⁶ Visit the UNHCR Protect Urban Refugee Children Challenge page at: <https://urbanrefugeechildren.unhcrideas.org/Page/Home>.

⁷ The selection panel consisted of UNHCR staff from the Child Protection and Youth Unit (CPYU), Headquarters Divisions, and Regional Bureaux as well as the Coordinator of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.



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1 Ideas that encourage children's own protection skills

A child's personal resilience and capacity to protect themselves and their peers is based on their knowledge and skills, their social networks, and their ability to access technology and information. Many ideas focus on strengthening children's resilience by fostering engagement and peer support, actively engaging children in understanding their rights, and empowering them to express and protect themselves and their peers. UNHCR staff in **Iraq** are working with partners to develop a "[Peer Counsellors](#)" programme. The approach seeks to identify children who are natural "counsellors", those to whom other children turn as a source of emotional or social support within their peer networks. These natural peer counsellors will be provided with training to equip them with basic counselling, conflict resolution, referral, and relationship-building skills so that they can strengthen the support that they provide their peers. "[Peer up!](#)" is a new idea from **South Africa** that aims to facilitate local peer support, make refugee children feel included, and boost their confidence by helping them to build a network of local and refugee friends that they can connect with online and in person.

In order to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them,⁸ urban refugee children need accurate and accessible information about protection issues and services in the city where they live. A community-based organization in **Colombia** has developed the promising practice "[Radio Kids Reporters Club](#)", which involves displaced children in

⁸ The UNHCR Framework for the Protection of Children acknowledges that children's participation in the decisions that affect their lives is integral to their protection. It is also important to consult with children to learn about how they perceive the protection environment and to get their ideas about how they can be engaged in protecting themselves and their peers. UNHCR's Age Gender and Diversity Policy emphasizes consultation with refugees of all ages on their protection needs, and "Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents" provides practical tools on running consultations with children of different ages about the protection risks they face, what information they have and need, and their ideas for how to protect children. UNHCR, *Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents*, July 2012, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fffe4af2.html>.



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producing and airing radio programming in their community. *Radio Kids* empowers young people to learn about their rights, strengthen their self-respect, and develop their leadership and communication skills while communicating messages about local services and peaceful coexistence.

Many urban refugees are not able to access formal education, but desperately need to develop literacy, numeracy, vocational, entrepreneurial, and life skills to help them succeed in the city. Several ideas focus on facilitating young refugees' access to informal learning opportunities that promote literacy and skill building. "[We Love Reading](#)" is a promising community-based practice that started in **Jordan** and has spread to 30 countries. The programme aims to foster a lifelong love of reading among refugee children by establishing neighbourhood-based reading groups. Adult and youth men and women learn to become reading ambassadors. They are trained on how to effectively read aloud to children and then host weekly reading sessions in public spaces (We Love Reading Libraries) for children between 4-10 years old in their neighbourhood.

"[Write Our World - Multicultural ebooks by Kids for Kids](#)" is a non-profit organization based in the **United States of America** that has developed an innovative educational resource to help urban refugee children create bilingual ebooks about their lives and cultures to be published in the *Write Our World* digital library. Telling their stories and creating these books in their native language empowers children to express themselves and affirm their identities. Because the books are published online and publicly available, anyone can read them and learn about the refugee experience in different locations. In this way, children themselves create an authentic educational resource that they can share with each other globally.

Urban refugee, internally displaced persons (IDP), and returnee children in **Afghanistan** have few opportunities to come together in a safe space or to develop vocational skills. "[Code4Fun](#)" is a new idea being implemented by the UNHCR operation in Afghanistan. It aims to teach children how to write and develop code for fun, but also as a potentially profitable skill.



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2 Ideas that support families to care for children

Family support and nurturing relationships are key resilience factors in urban areas. It is essential to support parents and the other adults who care for children and to mitigate their stress, which is often at least partly due to economic and logistical pressures. In urban areas of **Kenya**, most refugee parents are self-employed. They sell products on the street or work in other people's homes, and it is difficult and/or unsafe for them to take their children to work with them. "[Women Support Groups to Protect Refugee Children](#)" is a new idea focused on working with refugee women and community-based child care providers in an effort to integrate refugee children into local community-based child care facilities, thus making safe and protective child care more accessible to urban refugee families.

Child labour, including in its worst forms, is common amongst refugees in urban areas due to economic pressures. Several ideas seek to address child labour by finding ways to reach out to and support working children and their families. "[Walking Bags with Headphones! No they're not!](#)" is a winning idea from a UNHCR staff member in the **Islamic Republic of Iran** that proposes to work with a local NGO to identify refugee working children and provide them with warm meals and case management, but also audio-book learning materials on MP3 players. The learning materials would include information on health, safety, and prevention of abuse, and would also promote literacy and numeracy through stories, learning materials, and music for the children to listen to while they work.



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3 Ideas that strengthen community support mechanisms

Community connections with refugees from the same country of origin, other refugees, and the host community in the local neighbourhood can provide children with a sense of belonging, connectedness, inclusion, shared values, and identity. These community connections are a key source of protection and resilience.

Urban refugee children and families often share the neighbourhoods and therefore the difficulties of the urban poor, such as poor quality housing, limited access to services, lack of safe spaces for play, and poor transportation connections. Despite common challenges, urban refugees often experience tension with their local neighbours or even xenophobia.

Several ideas focus on neighbourhood-based activities that bring refugees and members of the host community together to address their joint challenges and to improve their shared physical and social space. MakeSpace4Play, a nonprofit organization based in the **Netherlands**, submitted the idea "[Co-designed safe play spaces](#)". This promising practice has been used in **Egypt** and **Tunisia**. It is a participatory and consultative process that could be used anywhere and that involves refugee and host communities in co-designing and co-building community play spaces that work for children and adults from all communities. In **Honduras**, young people are exposed to a high risk of gang violence. The idea "[Youth committees fight stigmatization of young displaced people](#)" focuses on strengthening urban youth committees that bring together displaced and local youth in high risk neighbourhoods, promote conflict resolution and youth leadership skills, and support recreational activities to give youth creative outlets. In **India**, UNHCR is working with partners to establish "[Community Libraries for Refugee Children](#)". These are community-supported libraries and play spaces that bring together refugee children and children from urban host communities.

Many ideas propose involving children in local sports group to increase teamwork skills, language abilities, and self confidence. Integration through sports can build a sense of belonging and team spirit and reduce social tensions in the urban refugee context. "[Integration Through Sport](#)" is an idea that outlines how to support refugee children's



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integration into local communities in **Turkey** through playing sports with their host country peers. Similarly, Scouting, Girl Guides, Red Cross movements, and Rotary are global organizations that have youth groups in many locations. With the idea “[Scouting!](#)”, a UNHCR staff member suggested that UNHCR could build local and global partnerships with these organizations in order to engage urban refugee children and adolescents in their local chapters.

4 Ideas that facilitate access to child protection systems and services

An important role for UNHCR in urban areas is to facilitate access for refugee children and families to urban child protection systems and services. However, many of the local and national governmental and non-governmental actors that have a role to play in supporting protection of urban children and families are not attuned to the needs of refugees. “[Integrating Social Work degree placements with UNHCR](#)” is an idea suggested by a UNHCR staff member that could be used in many different locations to strengthen the locally available urban child protection systems and services. UNHCR could partner with schools of social work to develop a module on refugee protection issues within the curriculum and facilitate internship and practicum placements with UNHCR or partners in urban refugee settings so that social work students can gain experience working with refugee children and families.

Many urban refugee children have had their education interrupted and experience difficulties accessing and integrating into local schools. Attending local schools can be protective for refugee girls and boys in many ways, and several ideas focus on improving refugees’ safe integration into local state-run schools. “[We breathe inclusion](#)” is a structured process developed in **Ecuador** and implemented in coordination with the Ministry of Education. This process engages students, teachers, parents, and school authorities to identify and assess problems, challenges, and opportunities related to discrimination and inclusion at the school level through a participatory process. It also involves them in developing and implementing solutions that make the school more inclusive for everyone.



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Children's language skills, cultural awareness, literacy, numeracy, vocational skills, and life skills underpin their ability to protect themselves and their peers. "[Bridge to Formal Schooling for Refugee Children](#)" is a holistic, accelerated learning programme developed by a local, refugee-led non-governmental organization (NGO) in **Uganda** to help refugee children aged 9-13 to integrate into local schools. The programme employs refugee and local teachers who work in teams to help refugee children integrate into local schools. The programme also includes an outreach component that engages refugee parents and involves them in income generation activities.

5 Ideas that ensure minimum child protection services

Another important role for UNHCR in urban areas is to ensure a minimum of refugee-specific child protection that is not otherwise provided by the national child protection system or by community-based protection mechanisms. Ensuring this minimum level of protective services is important because there are some categories of individuals, such as unaccompanied children (UAC), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) children, ethnic or religious minorities, and children with disabilities, who may not be able to access adequate protective services through the national child protection systems and services, or via the refugee community.

Care for UAC: In most urban operations, there are limited options to provide accommodation and care for UAC. Shelters may provide a safe place and basic assistance through social workers and legal support, but often lack love, care, and guidance. Many participants submitted ideas about how to address additional challenges that UAC face in urban areas. The UNHCR operation in **Greece** submitted one of the winning ideas, "[Mentorship for unaccompanied children](#)". This idea proposes to link refugee UAC with volunteer mentors from the host community, or with refugees and migrants who are already well established in the country and are in a position to provide guidance and emotional support.



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Children with disabilities: Around the world, refugee children with disabilities face compounded risks, especially in urban areas. Globally, there are limited examples of programming to support these children. This Innovation Challenge only generated two ideas that addressed the needs of children with disabilities. The UNHCR operation in **Greece** proposed the idea “[Integrating children with disabilities](#)”. This idea involves working with the Greek National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) to: (i) provide training to frontline staff on the identification of disabilities; (ii) develop a national consultation with refugees with disabilities and integrate them in the Greek organization; and (iii) support the NGOs providing accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees with more efficient referral pathways to national services for persons with disabilities.

Prevention of and response to sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV): Prevention of and response to SGBV in urban areas requires a holistic approach and a broad network of partners. Access to accurate information about sexual and reproductive health and services can help to prevent SGBV and support young people to access available services. “[Let’s talk about us’ – Youth-led sexual and reproductive health \(SRH\) project](#)”, an idea from **Lebanon** aims to provide refugee adolescents and youth with access to accurate SRH information and increase their level of awareness about available services in a confidential and safe manner via a youth-led online platform. Trained youth, supported by health professionals, will be responsible to manage the platform and respond to anonymous questions or queries on SRH.

Prizes!! Support for winning projects

As part of the Protecting Urban Refugee Children Innovation Challenge, with support from PRM, the Child Protection and Youth Unit at UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva provided a short-term package of funding and technical assistance to assist a small number of operations to take forward the innovation process and implement their winning ideas.⁹ This support package was intended to enable operations to test an aspect of the idea and to learn from the process.

And the winners are...

AFRICA

- 1 [Women Support Groups to Protect Refugee Children](#)
- 2 [“Peer up!”](#)
- 3 [Bridge to Formal Schooling for Refugee Children](#)

AMERICAS

- 1 [Radio Kids Reporters Club](#)
- 2 [Youth committees fight stigmatization of young displaced people.](#)
- 3 [We breathe inclusion](#)

ASIA

- 1 [Community Libraries for Refugee Children](#)
- 2 [Code4Fun](#)
- 3 [“Walking Bags with Headphones!” No they’re not!](#)

EUROPE

- 1 [Integrating children with disabilities](#)
- 2 [Mentorship for unaccompanied children](#)
- 3 [Integration Through Sport](#)

MENA

- 1 [Peer Counsellors](#)
- 2 [“Let’s talk about us” – Youth-led sexual and reproductive health \(SRH\) project](#)
- 3 [We Love Reading](#)

GLOBAL IDEAS

- 1 [Integrating Social Work degree placements with UNHCR](#)
- 2 [Write Our World – Multicultural eBooks by Kids for Kids](#)
- 3 [Co-designed safe play spaces](#)
- 4 [Scouting!](#)

⁹ In 2017, four operations received funding from a PRM grant to implement their projects: (i) Afghanistan “Code4Fun”; (ii) Colombia “Radio Kids Reporters Club”; (iii) India “Community Libraries for Refugee Children”; and (iv) Iraq “Peer Counsellors”.