

In Search of Opportunities

Voices of children on the move in West and Central Africa

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#ChildrenUprooted

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Borders and movement in the region

Migration is one of the most pressing issues of our time. The issue looms large in our global narrative because the world is experiencing an unprecedented surge in population movement as people seek shelter from conflict, leave everything behind to escape poverty or lose their livelihoods due to climate change. But the depiction of this movement as a migration 'crisis' pounding on the gates of Europe is only part of the story. What it fails to reflect is the more common experience of the vast majority of migrants from West and Central Africa who do not attempt the perilous journeys to Italy, Spain or Greece.

Migration is nothing new. The desire to be safe with our families, to see our children grow up healthy, strong and educated, and to afford the next generation more opportunities than we have are universal aspirations that bind us together as human beings.

In order to secure these fundamental ambitions, humans have moved and sought better conditions in far-away places from time immemorial. Our ancestors moved to survive and flourish, and so we also follow in their footsteps. It is through compassionate understanding that the so-called 'migration crisis' can most effectively be addressed. Migrants do not generally set out to live off public services elsewhere; they are men, women and children striving for what humans have always yearned for: safety and a better life.



Children are especially affected by migration. Sixty five million children are currently on the move worldwide and hundreds of thousands are estimated to be unaccompanied, traveling without their families, often to find work and support the family at home with remittances. But there are also instances where children are moving with their families in a way that is planned – to open up a business or trying to access better education in another country. In most cases, migration involves uprooting children from lives that are settled, which can be hugely disruptive, stressful or even dangerous. With the number of people on the move rising both in the region and around the world, it is critical that we better understand the multitude of reasons why children are moving and to keep their best interests at the centre of our response.

Within the West and Central Africa region, the movement of people precedes any current geopolitical structure such as nation states or free trade zones. It is marked by ancient trade routes stretching from Ndjamena to Timbuktu. These trade routes paved the way for the flow of ideas, goods, hopes and dreams. Migrants have crossed this region for centuries and movement continues to this day, facilitated by frameworks like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that allows legal regular migration within West Africa.

Each year, an estimated 12 million people cross borders in West and Central Africa. In fact, the vast majority of those people are not trying to get to Europe. More than 75 per

cent of them move *within* sub Saharan Africa, going from one country to another, either for economic opportunities or fleeing from conflict.

75% of migrants from the region are not bound for Europe.

It is African nations that are absorbing the majority of migrants and shouldering the burden of these millions of new arrivals. In countries where public services are sometimes stretched or inadequate, the predicted increase in migration will place these precarious systems under even greater strain, with potentially dire consequences for children. Demographic trends combined with displacement as a result of climate change could further amplify migration in the region and create greater stress on already overloaded systems.

This report aims to paint a more balanced picture of migration in West and Central Africa. By bringing out the voices of the children whose lives are shaped by migration, the report seeks to better understand the motivations for their movement, the methods they use and the challenges they face along the way. Ultimately, it asks the question: what can be done to provide children with care and protection before, during and after their move?



Drivers of migration

Poverty is often cited as a key driver of migration, but what does that mean? Not all migrants come out of poverty, and not all people living in poverty become migrants; this simplistic analysis is both inadequate and misleading. Countries like Burkina Faso and Niger have the highest percentage of people worldwide living on less than US\$2/day and yet, they are not the primary source countries in the region.

Poverty is fundamentally about the lack of economic opportunity, education, access to health care and access to information. These deprivations, when they are combined, create a deep sense of dissatisfaction, which can lead people to look for something better – elsewhere.

At the same time, poverty can create a vicious cycle where people are unable to move because they cannot access health care, education or information – the very things which they might be seeking in the first place. Undertaking any journey of migration, either to Europe or to another country, requires physical and mental strength to overcome the demands of travel. It also may require considerable financial resources and assets. This tends to favour the strong and healthy who are able to navigate the complex network of buses and transport, which is made easier by having the ability to read, write

and count. However, many migrants recount that they set out without enough funds, and tried to earn money as they travelled, while others described going into debt with the smugglers they had hired, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Yet, it is clear that poverty is a powerful driver of migration in West and Central Africa. Countries with high levels of poverty are more likely to be a source of migration as people look to improve their lot in life. In interviews, migrants describe the feeling of ‘having nothing to lose,’ aware that by migrating they are taking a risk, but it is a gamble that might pay off.

**More than 12 million people
cross borders in West and
Central Africa each year.**

Until we can start to deal with the multiple root causes of poverty, and provide solutions in the form of economic opportunities, access to health care and access to quality education, we will likely continue to see people living in poverty who will be willing to risk their lives for a better future.



For Awa in Mali, migration is not her priority. She struggles to feed her baby and endures precarious conditions where she lives in Sikasso.



European dream, desert nightmare

"I was beaten with sticks, with lead pipes and with a motorcycle chain. Every day they beat me and demanded money."

Malik remembers his ordeal of being tortured by kidnapers with a calmness and distance, but his voice suggests a very deep well of emotions. He has been back in the Gambia for a few months, and each day he struggles to forget what he has seen. His frame has a greater fragility than most 16-year-olds but his quiet presence indicates resilience and strength.

The humble compound where he now tells his story is part of the reason he left for Europe, left to go 'backway' to Italy through Libya. Chickens and goats pick through the garbage piles and dozens of family members live in crumbling houses that reflect a sense of resignation and hopelessness.

"I went to try to provide for my mother," said Malik. "I wanted to send her money and be a good son."

Boys like Malik can rapidly ascend a family hierarchy if they make it to Europe. The successful migrant commands the respect of the family, allowing young boys to surpass the influence of their older brothers and, in some cases, even their father.

Malik set out by bus at the age of 15. He had only a vague idea of where he was going and he slipped away without telling his family. Checkpoints, official and unofficial, chewed away at his funds as he made his way through Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger. By the time he reached Libya, he was out of money and out of luck. He was abducted by kidnapers who began regular beatings and ransom demands.

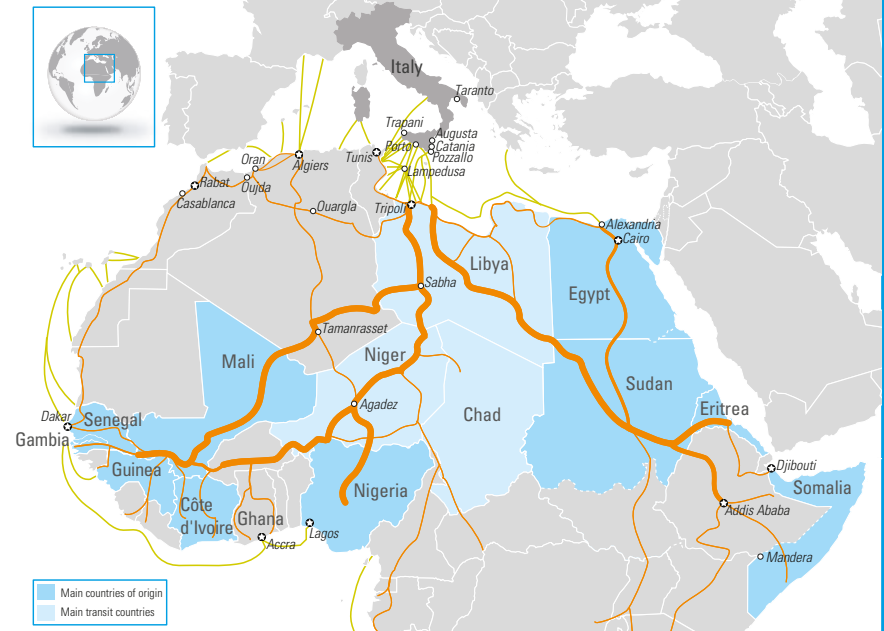
His family at home received the calls with panic and hopelessness. With no money to send, they could only listen to the cries of their boy and the angry shouts of his abductors. Months went by and Malik's health collapsed but the beatings did not relent. In the same desperate cell, a fellow Gambian migrant was in worse shape than Mohammed. He was dying but his ransom had just been paid and he was too weak to leave. In an act of kindness and humanity he pleaded with the guards to give Malik his freedom, he begged so that Malik could take could take his place.

Dazed and terrified, somehow Malik made his way home from Libya back to the Gambia. The generosity and kindness of his fellow migrant had saved his life. While his family was overjoyed to see him return, many boys like him face stigma and feel a sense of shame for not having made it to Europe. Malik's nightmare experience has discouraged him from ever trying to go 'backway' again.

"I tell boys about what I have seen," he says. "If I can stop one person from going then I will be doing something good."



Central Mediterranean migration routes



Source: Adapted from European Union, Emergency Response Coordination Centre (EERC), Refugee Crisis – Central Mediterranean Route: ECHO Daily Map, 4 November 2016, <http://erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/getdailymap/docId/1801>

Primary routes to Libya and Europe show focal points like Bamako in Mali. Dusty and battered buses come and go at all hours, taking migrants closer to their dream, or back home where they started.





Climate change

It is one of the most bitter ironies that the countries that have done the least to cause climate change are going to suffer the most. Countries that have minuscule carbon footprints are going to be the first to suffer the consequences of flooding, drought and displacement. In West and Central Africa, the impact of climate change will be especially severe, with the region set to experience a 3 to 4 degree rise in temperature this century – more than one and a half times higher than anywhere else on the planet.

Across the Sahel, communities have endured fluctuations in rainfall and weather patterns for centuries and have moved or adapted accordingly. As climate change begins to have greater impact in these areas, some forms of agriculture or pastoral lifestyle may become unpredictable and ultimately unsustainable. When these means of providing begin to falter, people are unable to feed their families, unable to make a living, and unable to give their children a better life. As a result, occupations like farming or herding may cease to be viable in some areas.

With drought and temperatures intensifying in West and Central Africa, tensions in accessing scarce resources for cattle are also increasing hostilities in many rural areas, pushing greater numbers of people towards cities. But with more than 100 million people living in coastal cities less than one metre above sea level, even conservative estimates of a sea-level rise could result in the forced displacement of millions of climate refugees.

Climate change has the potential to set off a chain reaction, with drought driving displacement to urban areas, often in precarious settlements or marginal neighbourhoods that are in swamps or low lying areas. These areas are more vulnerable to flooding, which could cause waves of displacement as people seek safety for their families and children. Unless the long-term planning of governments and civil society is equipped to anticipate these climate shocks and subsequent migration, the unmitigated impact of these forces will create detrimental outcomes for children across the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to experience a 3 to 4 degree rise in temperature during this century, more than 1.5 times greater than the rest of the planet.

Urbanization

In 2008, the world reached a tipping point: more people live in cities than in rural areas. This trend is set to continue – and intensify – and it is one of the main drivers for migration in West and Central Africa, with people crossing borders to get to urban centres.

Cities promise not only more jobs, but different jobs, more stable jobs – jobs that are not dependent on the amount of rainfall or the amount of crop yield. Urbanization is a big part of the story of migration, as people are crossing the borders of their own countries in order to seek the activities, economic opportunities and stability that comes from living in cities.

The arrival of people in cities can have mixed results for children, especially when there are breaks or gaps in the services for vulnerable children or when migrants are unable to access support because they are disorientated by their new environment and they are coping with the struggles of survival.

Despite the proximity of services, the risks and challenges for children in cities increase exponentially, as migrants arrive in new neighbourhoods, sometimes without friends or family, they can find it hard to access the support



systems that are offered. For migrants arriving in a new country where they do not speak the language, without systems in place to help them settle and assist them in coping with the bewildering challenges before them, children are at risk of missing out on crucial services like health care or education, even if the school or health centre is just around the corner.

The presence of good schools is no guarantee that migrant children will be enrolled. Migrants face a range of challenges as they settle in a new city, and the economic pressures of urban life can force children into work, sometimes in dangerous conditions, where they are more vulnerable to traffickers, smugglers and other criminals. In the cities, the erosion of the protective rural family unit can result in children falling through the cracks. Unknown and unnoticed, the vulnerable can become invisible in the cacophony of the modern city.

Yet urbanization can have multiple benefits for children, despite these serious risks. Going to school in a

neighbourhood with peers who have excelled in their studies can provide a glimpse of what is possible with education, in a way that would have been unlikely in the countryside. Interacting with people from different cultures and different countries can expand the horizons and curiosity of children with innumerable positive benefits.

Urbanization is not just the point-to-point process. Families that left rural areas 20 years ago now have children who have grown up in a city, who have been exposed to a range of ideas and opportunities. The rapid urbanization of the past 20 to 30 years is, in fact, amplifying the effect of migration as younger generations feel less connection to the rural life that their parents came from. In interviews, migrants described a sense of distance from their ancestral home. For these migrants, urbanization has untethered them and empowered them to explore other opportunities that might lie in a different or a bigger city, another country, or even another continent.



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In the swamps and on the margins

Sandrine and her nine-year-old son Chris form a vulnerable little family. Like many migrants, they left their home, yet have found it hard to get on their feet in their new city. The mother and son emigrated from Burkina Faso to Cote d'Ivoire in 2014 and they have struggled in a country where they face difficulties to access services and do not have a support network.

They live in a makeshift house under a tarp down by the swamp in San Pedro, in the south-west of the country. Their place floods when it rains and it is filled with mosquitos. Chris tries to stay away as much as possible.

“I do not like to come home because then I am not allowed to see my friends anymore,” he says. *“And my mom punishes me when I do something wrong.”*

Many migrants have succeeded in this community, but Chris and his mother are not so fortunate. For Sandrine, life is a constant struggle for survival and fear for her son.

“I’ve come to a point where I don’t know how to handle the situation or handle him,” she says. Sandrine admits that the stress she is under often makes her lose her temper and hit her son.

Even though they are living in an informal settlement, social services came with the police one day. Sandrine was told that she had to stop mistreating her son; otherwise he would be taken to a centre for his own protection.

The intervention of social services has allowed Sandrine to access some financial support, which helps her to cope better, and social workers visit regularly to follow up on Chris and help him adjust to life in Côte d'Ivoire.

Living on the margins of society, migrants like Sandrine sometimes find it daunting to access services that might help them to settle. Formalizing their status in a new country is crucial to access services like education and health care, especially when they are supported and welcomed. Without this support, they can remain in the shadows, and life soon becomes a daily battle for survival, bringing children into a world of suffering and vulnerability.

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Education

There is no doubt that education is one of the forces behind migration. It drives families to seek better opportunities for their children as a fundamental aspiration of migrants is to see their children learn and master skills that they never had themselves.

For some migrants who dream of getting to Europe, education was cited as the primary motivation for their journey. In interviews, young people described their plan to get to Europe, get a university degree then return home to share their skills. While other migrants are more motivated by the idea of earning money, the majority of migrants who travel to Europe have been through years of schooling and are capable of excelling in secondary schools if they are given the chance.

Migrants who attempt the desert and sea crossing to Europe are more likely to have some educational background; indeed the skills of math, reading and writing are valuable assets that improve their chances of success in navigating the dangerous journey.

Beyond the basic education skills that migrants employ on the journey, many migrants are determined to get to Europe to pursue higher education. In interviews, migrants often expressed a desire to learn at European universities that provide quality education that is less vulnerable to the strikes, overcrowding and lack of resources sometimes found in African institutions.



For decades, education has been one of the cornerstones of development. At the same time, in the context of migration, it provides skills to facilitate movement; and for some, it has become the main motivation for getting to Europe. Education without pathways to keep learning will inevitably cause young people to seek opportunities elsewhere, even through irregular migration. It is important to recognize the centrality of education in the migration story, and to see the way it plays multiple roles: as a driver of migration, as a facilitator of the journey and, in the long term, an essential tool to creating equitable prosperity in the region.

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Away from conflict, safe in school

In the village of Abou Boutila in eastern Cameroon, 13-year-old Elizabeth is getting ready for school. She is at the top of her class and dreams of becoming a doctor to help other children. A stable education and a promising future would not be possible if Elizabeth had stayed in her home country of Central African Republic, which has endured years of conflict from armed groups.

When her village was attacked she was separated from her father and her mother was killed. Alone and terrified, she fled for her life and found refuge in neighbouring Cameroon. She was adopted by a host family who cared for her, but it came at a price: she was promised in marriage to a man she does not know. The support of her teacher helped her to stay in school, but she still faces the prospect of a forced marriage once her schooling stops.

Elizabeth dreams of marrying a man whom she loves, and who loves her in return. *“I know that education is the only way for me to achieve my dreams,”* said Elizabeth.

In communities recovering from conflict and struggling with displacement, young girls can be vulnerable to assault so early marriage is sometimes considered a coveted protection. In Cameroon, a rooster is a fair dowry for a young girl and some parents are relieved to have one less mouth to feed.

“If I get married, I won’t be able to stay in school,” said Elizabeth. *“I don’t want to be a burden for my new parents, I just want to keep learning.”*

Like thousands of refugees and migrants, Elizabeth fled conflict at home and went looking for a better life. She has been able to lay the foundation of a brighter future through education, but she has a long way to go to overcome the economic and social pressures driving her towards early marriage.



Conflict

There is no greater motivation to move than conflict. Caught in the middle of armed groups destroying each other and everything around them, families naturally do everything imaginable to keep their children safe.

Over the past 20 years, there have been 25 major conflicts in the region. This violence has forced millions of people to seek safety in different parts of their own country, and often across borders in neighbouring countries. This movement of people continues to present enormous challenges for the host countries and, of course, for the refugee families who often deal with loss, displacement and a struggle for basic survival in a new land.

Millions of stories of children on the move in the region are shaped by conflict; from the refugee families in Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo who have been there for more than 20 years, to the more recently displaced refugees from Nigeria who have escaped the terror of Boko Haram. Countries in the region have accepted these guests, but the needs of these new arrivals can present major challenges.

The United Kingdom plans to welcome 20,000 refugees from Syria before 2020, and government services are providing some resettlement support to the refugees who have already arrived. But in Niger, Chad and Cameroon, more than one million refugees are living in camps and host communities and are struggling to rebuild their lives. Three of the poorest countries in the world have taken responsibility for these refugees because of international obligations, but more profoundly out of a sense of shared humanity.



The needs of families who cross borders because of conflict are complex and immediate. Arriving with little or nothing, they need help to find basics like shelter, clean water and food. The challenges of good schools for their children, in a language their children can understand, and the psychosocial needs of children who have experienced violence can create additional burdens on already overstretched public services.

Organizations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF and other non-governmental organizations work with governments in host countries to bolster the systems that will provide essential support for families who have fled conflict. But the lack of funding for humanitarian responses can create troublesome gaps for children. Without enough clean water or health services, children are more likely to get sick and create a cycle of stress for families that have already endured so much grief and loss. In the longer term, the lack of adequate education for children who have experienced conflict could create conditions for continued violence if children feel alienated from society, disturbed by their own memories and if they are unable to access the positive benefits of learning and professional success.

Conflict is a significant driver of cross-border movement in the region, and families who have fled Boko Haram, for example, describe a sense of gratitude being safe in their host country; yet they often express a desire to return to their home countries when the conflict is over. While most refugees dream of returning home, they could eventually look to a future away from the camps and the humiliations of being displaced as conflicts endure and hopes fade. Without support to help them live with dignity, families who have fled conflict might consider a secondary wave of migration to settle in nearby cities or countries, and some may consider the dangerous journey to Europe if they feel they have nothing to lose.

Nigerian refugee Hafsa Oumar, 16, stands outside a classroom at the Dar Naim school, in Daresalam refugee camp. Before coming to Chad, Hafsa never had a chance to attend school and enrolled the first time when she arrived in 2015 but stopped attending when she was married earlier this year.

Population growth

Africa's population is projected to double by 2050. This demographic boom will continue to increase competition for scarce environmental resources and limited health and education services, fuelling larger movements of population across West and Central Africa – and beyond.

For example, Niger's population has increased from 3.3 million in 1960 to almost 20 million today – and is projected to reach nearly 60 million people by 2050. More and more people trying to survive with fewer and fewer resources is likely to create fertile ground for new waves of migration.

The demographic dividend has not yet materialised in the region. The predicted boom in growth that would accompany this population explosion as young people enter the workforce is still a potentiality rather than an economic reality. Governments and economists are working to put in place the conditions where education, infrastructure, technology and healthy population can begin to have an exponential benefit to countries with large numbers of young people.

Until those conditions are achieved, we can expect a continued surge in migration from countries with unrestrained population growth as the struggle for resources makes opportunities elsewhere more appealing. Whether these migrants of tomorrow decide to try for Europe or even just a neighbouring country, without better systems in place to cope with the expected increase, future migration could dramatically expand the risks and challenges faced by host countries and stretch to breaking point the capacity to protect children on the move.

By the end of the century, Africa's population is predicted to grow from 4.2 billion up from 1.1 billion today.



Access to information

As more people in the region, especially young people, become exposed to global trends, ideas and cultures through the Internet and social media, they speak of a desire to take part in it. The allure of the Western lifestyle as it is portrayed in the mass media often entices many to take on the migration journey in pursuit of wealth, status and easy riches.

Young migrants describe a sense of envy as they see photos of friends in Europe on social media, often posing with expensive vehicles or other signs of wealth. This window into the possibility of prosperity cannot be overstated as a key motivation for migration, both to Europe but also to neighbouring African countries.

Despite the potency of technology and information as a driver of migration, overall connectivity rates in source countries remains relatively low. Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea are all countries where less than 25 per cent of the population is online, yet this is where a disproportionately high number of migrants are coming from. The figures on Internet access do not reflect the high numbers of young people who do have social media and the perpetual visual reminder of what is possible outside the borders of their country.

Many migrants described how access to information was a critical part of their decision to leave and an essential component in planning their journey. Some proudly showed WhatsApp groups where they get updates on changes in the route and advice for reliable places to stay

or buses to take. Connecting to the Internet is allowing young migrants to share experiences about the journey as never before, and with that also comes the cautionary tales of dangers faced along the route. Despite seeing these often graphic images of the risks of the desert or sea crossing, in interviews, some migrants said they were undeterred in their decision to try, and that they would use social media to help guide them to safety.

Access to information, like education, presents another paradox in the migration discussion. Increasing connectivity in developing economies is expected to drive economic growth and education, yet in many cases this access to information is fuelling migration by presenting the riches of European success and equipping young people with the tools to get there.

Smuggling

Not all smugglers are malicious or criminal; but they are facilitators of dangerous, risky journeys. Migrant returnees in the Gambia even likened their smugglers to informal travel agents, or advisers who help people get from point A to point B. Providing information such as which bus to take, which house to stay at, how to get a job when you get to Gao or Niamey is part of the services offered by smugglers. They facilitate the movement of people across the region, especially along the central Mediterranean route into Libya through to Italy and the rest of Europe.

Smuggling is a lucrative trade, and many smugglers will manipulate, extort and take advantage of the gullibility and vulnerability of the migrants under their care, often leaving them at the mercy of kidnappers. Collusion between dishonest smugglers and kidnappers is rife along the migration routes, with unscrupulous smugglers selling the people that they are purporting to help by facilitating their capture by criminal groups into a form of modern day slavery.

Kidnappers roam the various migration routes to extort money from migrants. Operating mainly in Libya, they attempt to capture as many migrants as they can, including children, and lock them into informal prisons that are often just houses that they have set up themselves. They then extort money by calling the migrants' families to demand a ransom. This practice goes on for as long as the migrant survives or until they pay up. Many migrants die in captivity, but because of the impunity with which this happens, there is no accurate estimation of how many have endured this fate.

Sierra Leone to Libya and back again

"We leave because of poverty," said Ali. "We leave because there is nothing here for us."

Ali describes his decision to go on the 'Temple Run' to Europe via Libya. For him and his friends, it felt as if they were trying to access the 'temple' of European prosperity. Facing a bleak future in his native Sierra Leone with no prospects, no family and a father who had passed away, Ali saw a life in Europe as his only alternative. He took buses, depleted his savings by paying all the fees at checkpoints along the route and believed in his own good fortune to guide him to the shores of Italy.

"Getting through the desert was hard, but it was nothing compared with Libya," he says. "I was sold to the kidnappers, I was betrayed and I ended up in a place worse than hell."

He made his way to the beach and even boarded the boat to Europe only to have his hopes dashed when an armed group intercepted them and locked them in a makeshift prison.

He described being cramped with 30–40 people in a room and being kept in darkness all day until they

were dragged into the courtyard for the daily calls to demand ransom. With no toilet facilities or medical care for the injured, Ali described horrific conditions that were both inhuman and highly unsanitary.

"I saw hundreds of children in these conditions in Libya," he says. "They are scared, but we are all scared. You get beaten if you show any kindness so everyone just keeps their head down."

After months of captivity, Ali decided to try to escape. When the guards were not looking, he ran out into the courtyard and jumped the wall. His plan was foiled when he landed beside two guards having tea. Without hesitation, they smashed his head with a sword and left him bleeding until he became unconscious. He woke up three days later and with the help of the International Organization for Migration, he managed to find his way back home to Sierra Leone.

He has now set up a small business and is hopeful about his future in his home country.

"What I saw was worse than slavery," he says. "They have no interest if you live or die."

Trafficking

Trafficking is different to smuggling and kidnapping. Trafficking involves the forced movement of migrants from one country to another, without their knowledge or consent. This is generally for the purposes of exploitation, either for child labour or sexual exploitation.

People living in poverty are more likely to fall victim to trafficking due to the lack of education or access to information, making them more vulnerable to the promises of traffickers. Traffickers deceive them, saying they can facilitate jobs in a foreign city – work in a hotel or as a maid or nanny in Europe.

Vulnerable people are often so desperate for a better life that they at times pay for the journey themselves, or go into debt to undertake that journey and end up beholden to the traffickers. This practice is driving sexual slavery in Europe and also in the region. Children from West and Central Africa are particularly at risk, and are the most powerless when it comes to getting the right resources or taking action to get out of it.

Trafficked to Gabon

Hélène is just 14 years but she has lived through horror no child should ever know. Growing up in a remote community in Benin, she dropped out of school and did daily chores around the house. But her family was eager to help her find a better future, so they were vulnerable to the lies they were told by traffickers.

“My parents were told that I am going to study in Gabon,” she said.

Hélène fell into the hands of the shadowy world of human trafficking in the region. Instead of being taken to Gabon to study, she endured a full month in captivity while travelling to Gabon and was placed with a family where she was expected to cook and clean.

“I never went to school in Gabon,” said Hélène. “I was beaten and sick and I never got medical help or enough food to eat.”

Despite these horrific abuses, Hélène was lucky in a way. She was rescued by the police and taken to a centre where she got support, including psychosocial care and help getting home to Benin. Authorities in the region recognize that trafficking is a major problem and that children and families continue to get tricked by the false promises made by human traffickers. But the underground nature of trafficking makes it very challenging to trace and protect children like Hélène.

After a short time in the centre in Gabon, Hélène was given a ticket back to Benin. Sadly, when she returns home, the conditions of poverty remain, and thousands of girls and boys like Hélène end up as tragic casualties in the story of African migration.

Children's experiences


This report aims to recount the experiences of children and their families as they seek a better future for themselves through migration. While it is impossible to paint a comprehensive picture of children on the move in West and Central Africa, it is clear that migration involves balancing the promise of better opportunities with the exposure to greater vulnerabilities. When children are taken away from their family environment and known circumstances, however precarious they may be, it can create tremendous instability in their lives.

Migrant children run the risk of being smuggled, kidnapped or trafficked, especially if they fall through the cracks in legislation and are no longer protected by the state that they have left behind or the state to which they have moved.

In their newly-found homes, the mechanisms in place to protect their rights are often inadequate. Migrants report that when children and families are on the move, they often do not access available services or charitable organisations. This is partly because some of these services are designed to limit or discourage illegal migration, so people on the move avoid them for fear of being returned to their countries of origin or placed in detention.

In interviews, migrants from Sierra Leone and Guinea spoke about how they would deliberately avoid services and officials because they didn't want to put their journey at risk and possibly be sent home. As a result, their experience is unfolding in the shadows where authorities cannot reach them, which makes it harder for social services to reach those children at risk.

The mass movement of children in the region has created grey areas that enable the activities of unscrupulous – even criminal – forces, subjecting children to horrific human rights violations, such as sexual and physical abuse, exploitation or forced labour. Without a robust international child protection network, providing a continuum of care and protection for children on the move, within and across borders and regions, their fundamental rights will continue to be violated and their voices will remain unheard.



Six-year-old Mahazouna in the village of Kadazaki, Niger. Mahazouna's father left more than five years ago to find work in Libya and her mother made a dangerous desert crossing to try to earn money in Algeria. Mahazouna was looked after by family while her mum was away but financial pressure has led her older sisters to leave school and marry early.

Benefits of migration

In the current global narrative, the benefits that come from migration are sometimes overlooked. The fraught political dialogue on the subject continues to focus on negative aspects, such as the stress and strain on the host economies. Yet it is important to recognize the multiple benefits of migration and include this positive dimension in the discussion about regional migration.

For all the hardship experienced by many migrant families and their children, there are countless examples of success stories of migration in which host communities and communities of origin have benefited from the exchange of ideas, expertise and cultures. In these successful experiences, children of migrant families typically see their lives improved as their parents are able to work and secure access to food and basic services like education.

At the same time, intra-regional or international migration helps migrants to look after the families they have left behind. It is estimated that US\$33 billion is sent back into sub-Saharan African economies from migrants transferring money to families in their home country through remittances.

And when migrants return home, they sometimes return to an elevated position of power and prestige, having 'succeeded' in the eyes of their community. Migrants make significant contributions both in their new homes and in the communities they left behind. The financial support they provide is critically important, but the benefits of cultural exchange and expanding links between countries, these intangible consequences can sometimes have profound and positive long term impacts.



**US\$33 billion money sent to
sub-Saharan Africa from migrants
transferring money to families
in their home country.**



Left behind in Mali

Cira was only 14 years when she was married. She quickly became pregnant and only a month into her pregnancy, her husband left their village without any notice, leaving his young wife to face life without him.

Cira's husband, Doundou, is an economic migrant. He left Mali for Equatorial Guinea where he found work. He sends money back to his father Ousmane, who in turn helps to look after Cira and the new baby.

"I was overcome with joy when he sent the money," remembers Ousmane. "It's rare here in the village."

But having a husband in another country sending money back for the family does not mean that Cira has an easy time. Rather than studying at school, she takes care of the baby on her own and spends the rest of her time doing housework for her in-laws and working at a nearby gold field.

Cira hasn't had any contact with her husband since he left nearly two years ago. She has no idea what kind of work he does in Equatorial Guinea. For Ousmane, beyond the money transfer, he knows nothing about what has happened to his son.

"I worry at night," said Ousmane. "At night I can't sleep thinking about my son who's abroad. I don't know in what conditions he lives in there."

With the money from abroad, Ousmane's other son built a house for the family. In a village where everyone lives in a simple round hut with a straw roof, the long house with solid walls and a tin roof has become the envy of neighbours.

"I prefer Doundou to stay there," he said. "My other son who stayed here in the village earns nothing."

While Cira is also proud to live in the new house, she and her child are feeling the impact of migration and the absence that comes when husbands and fathers go abroad to seek their fortune.



Challenges

The challenges for families who cross borders because of conflict and forced displacement are complex but somehow definable. The displaced population tends to be concentrated in certain locations, either in camps or host communities and can, resources permitting, be supported with clean water, health services, shelter, protection and education. But the challenges for the more than 12 million migrants who cross borders in the region every year are harder to define and harder still to address.

Children who migrate are more likely to be vulnerable in a number of ways. In many cases they have left poverty conditions where they did not have adequate nutrition, health care or education. With these pre-existing disadvantages, these children are forced to cope with the changes that come from moving to a new country, learning a new language, a new culture and trying to make friends.

Some migrants described moving into conditions that were worse than the conditions they left. Dealing with the transition from rural life to city life, especially one in a new country where parents are also overwhelmed, can be a difficult and stressful process for some children. At a critical time when they need additional support, sometimes that support is harder to access.

Social services in the new country might not be equipped to handle the specific needs of migrant children, and the migrants themselves might not know how to access what support is available. In the wider community, migrants can face discrimination and xenophobia that make a difficult transition even more challenging. Some migrants describe trying to 'blend in' and avoid talking about their status as new arrivals, and this can make them less likely to access what support is available.



Even in the best conditions, children who move to another country face a daunting array of challenges trying to adjust to normal life in a new home. Given the extreme circumstances that are driving migration – climate change, poverty, conflict – and the extreme conditions they face in the new country, extra support is needed to help children cope with this very difficult process. Existing social services need to be supported to include a clear and specific focus on migrant children and their families to help these children stay in school, stay healthy and help them become positive contributors to their new home and community. If these services are not expanded and adjusted, and the wave of migration continues, these communities may face tensions as new migrants fall behind and do not feel welcomed into the peace and prosperity they initially sought.

For the unaccompanied children who are crossing borders on their way to Libya and Italy, the dangers and challenges multiply considerably. Highly mobile groups of young people are passing through communities as they earn money and plan their next step towards Europe. They are often at the mercy of smugglers and they describe moving constantly, sleeping outside or in garages while they wait to carry on with the journey. If they fall victim to kidnappers who

torture them to extort ransom, the challenges these children face multiply to daunting proportions. A journey that was intended to lead to economic empowerment can lead to increased poverty, debt and even death.

Designing programmes that respond to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of these problems is itself a challenge for the international community to address. With children crossing borders, deliberately staying in the shadows and moving constantly, it becomes extremely difficult and implement programmes that could protect and educate these children on the move. Migrant children in Mali described taking more than a year to get to Libya, and on the journey they could access neither education nor health services. While the ultimate goal may be to create better conditions in source countries and reduce the drivers of migration by addressing the root causes, all solutions should fundamentally uphold children's rights and ensure their protection, especially if they are on the move.

Gaps in systems

There is already a well-established network of support for migrants and refugees in the region, led by UNHCR and IOM with the support of NGO partners. However, current systems only cover a fraction of the children moving in West and Central Africa. The free movement of people in the region is inarguably beneficial to economic activity, but it needs to be accompanied by measures that will assure children's care and protection before, during and after they move.

There is an urgent need to look at the ways in which current systems are protecting children who are moving across borders in order to design and implement programmes that can better protect them. Most children who are on the move do not interact with existing formal social services, which leaves official mechanisms in the dark about where children are going and what they are going through as they migrate.

Recognizing that there are blind spots, for both national authorities and the networks of UN, civil society and community actors supporting them, is a daunting but a necessary starting point. It is crucial to strengthen the chain of protection between countries of origin, transit and destination to better understand the scale of the population of children on the move and their particular needs, and to address their rights to access education, health care and child protection in collaboration with governments and other partners, so that children do not slip through the cracks.

“We are creating an organization to help migrants who have returned to build a future, and help people here who cannot find work. Our goal is to help each other build a better future”.

Mustapha, a Gambian migrant who was abducted by kidnapers in Libya but has returned home and works to discourage would-be migrants considering the desert journey.



Agenda for Action

Dealing with the root causes of migration and expanding systems to protect children on the move will require a sustained and coordinated international effort to align priorities, funding and services across the region. This report introduces the overlapping and complex reasons why migrants leave home looking for a better life, and argues that the process of addressing the intricate challenges linked to migration should be guided by a core set of principles that focuses on the rights and needs of children.

This agenda for action presents a basic roadmap for governments and partners to develop more robust measures that respond to the realities of migration and provide services that protect children on the move before, during and after their migration journey.

PROTECT UPROOTED CHILDREN FROM EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

Refugee and migrant children are extremely vulnerable to violence and abuse, and to being preyed upon by smugglers and even enslaved by traffickers. UNICEF calls for increasing safe and legal channels for children to migrate and to seek refuge. Cracking down on trafficking, strengthening child protection systems and expanding access to information and assistance can help keep children safe. Children and families should never be returned to face persecution or life-threatening danger in their countries of origin.

END THE DETENTION OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN BY CREATING PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVES

Detention is harmful to children's health and well-being – and can undermine their development. UNICEF calls for practical alternatives to detention for all children. Unaccompanied and separated children should be placed in foster care, supervised independent living, or other family- or community-based living arrangements. Children should not be detained in adult facilities.

KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER AND GIVE CHILDREN LEGAL STATUS

Children who are travelling alone or who have been separated from their families are more easily preyed upon and more vulnerable to violence and abuse. UNICEF calls for stronger policies to prevent children from being separated from their parents and other family members in transit; and faster procedures to reunite children with their families, including in destination countries. All children need a legal identity and should be registered at birth.

HELP UPROOTED CHILDREN TO STAY IN SCHOOL AND STAY HEALTHY

Many refugee and migrant children miss out on an education – and many lack access to health care and other essential services. UNICEF calls for increased collective effort by governments, communities and the private sector to provide uprooted children with access to an education and health services, and to shelter, nutrition, water and sanitation. A child's migration status should never be a barrier to accessing basic services.

PRESS FOR ACTION ON THE CAUSES THAT UPROOT CHILDREN FROM THEIR HOMES

Protracted conflicts, persistent violence and extreme poverty and disadvantage drive millions of children from their homes. UNICEF calls for greater effort to protect children from conflict and to address the root causes of violence and poverty, including by increasing access to education, strengthening health and child protection systems and social safety nets, expanding opportunities for family income and youth employment, and facilitating peaceful conflict resolution and tolerance.

COMBAT XENOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION

Uprooted children are often victimized by discrimination, xenophobia and stigma – both on their journeys and in their final destinations. Everyone has a part to play in welcoming uprooted children into our cities and communities. UNICEF calls on local leaders, religious groups, NGOs, the media and the private sector to help combat xenophobia and facilitate greater understanding between uprooted children and families with host communities. Governments should also set up stronger measures to combat discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination.



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NOTE: Some of the names and details of children's stories have been changed to protect their identities.



*“All God’s children need
travelling shoes.”*

-Maya Angelou

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<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/childrenonthemove/uprooted/>

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