

Call to Action for 2017:

Act and Protect

The significant number of unaccompanied children arriving to Europe in recent years has put enormous pressure on European states, despite strong standards.

Many of these children have experienced violence, sexual exploitation, rape, trafficking, forced marriage, and/or severe emotional and psychological pressure not only during their journey but also once in Europe.

Detention of children has increased, large scale institutional care is over-used, and family reunification opportunities have been limited. Actions are being implemented often without considering the best interests of the child and the impact on the child's wellbeing. Refugee and migrant children are a long way off from being treated the same as national children leading to further stigma and marginalisation.

Looking forward there are concrete actions which can be implemented to protect children from harm whilst at the same time managing their movements.

Europe can turn this challenging situation into an opportunity to move away from a fragmented and often harmful approach to the children's needs which will have severe long-term effects on both the children and European societies overall. Alternatively, Europe can establish stronger systems that will better protect all children and set a positive example for other countries.

What needs to be done? A joint way forward

Through a series of wide ranging consultations with practitioners (psychologists, social workers, teachers, guardians), governments, European Union (EU) actors, and unaccompanied children in Europe, UNHCR, UNICEF, and the IRC have produced a roadmap which encompasses a number of key recommendations.

1 Children need to be found and registered through child-friendly procedures.

Unaccompanied children are often scared and under pressure from smugglers, traffickers and sometimes even their families who are counting on their future prospects in Europe. Many have also experienced harm at the hands of border authorities and the police. These experiences have taught them not to trust anyone along the route and avoid any formal processing before reaching their desired destination. However, registration and age assessments are often the only opportunity to access child specific services and protection.

It is therefore of utmost importance that children are identified, fully registered, and their age determined by a panel of social, psychological, and medical experts with the child's consent, whenever there is doubt. In order for children to feel comfortable to come forward, they need to be provided with clear information materials in languages and formats that make it easy for them to understand their rights and the procedures; they need the support of cultural mediators from their same cultural backgrounds; and special border authorities trained in child-friendly procedures should receive them. It is critical at this early stage that they are separated from adults and registered and handled by child protection professionals, to assess their needs and initiate family tracing.



2

A well trained guardian needs to take immediate responsibility for the child.

Guardians are key to the children's protection. In the absence of parents or caregivers, the guardian needs to be a reliable, trustworthy person who supports the child in a foreign environment. Refugee and migrant children should always have the support of, and a close trusting relationship with, a guardian who will mitigate the smugglers' influence and ensure targeted and efficient assistance for the child in line with his/her best interests. Good practices in some European countries should be replicated in all European countries as they demonstrate their huge impact on the wellbeing of the children and on cost efficiency.

“YES, I HAVE A GUARDIAN HERE IN THE CAMP. SHE HELPS ME A LOT AND LEADS ME THROUGH THE PROCESS.”

Ayaan Chabat*, Male, 17, Algerian



3

Cultural mediators should be used to bridge cultural gaps and build trust.

The culture shock children experience cannot be underestimated. Well trained cultural mediators from the same cultural background, speaking the same language, can take children by the hand, explain, and help to build trust in the guardian, the system and the host society. Only building this trust can mitigate the influence of smugglers and traffickers.

“WE WERE FORCED TO TRUST THE SMUGGLERS.”

Mashal al-Amber*, Male, 17, Afghan

4

Children need to live in safety and receive assistance geared toward their needs.

Every child is different. Therefore, not all children need a full package of assistance. However, all of them need to be safe. Small, supervised group homes and foster families have worked well in providing this safety and are also more cost effective than large scale institutions. European states need to make legal commitments to minimum quality standards for accommodation and services, which must also be monitored on a regular basis. An assessment of each individual child can help decipher who needs what support. Last but not least, they should have access to services such as health and education, even after they turn 18.

“I WANT TO HAVE A NORMAL HOUSE.”

Yacoub Boudiaf*, Male, 17 Algerian

5

Refugee, migrant, diaspora and host communities need to be mobilised to help in protecting the children.

During the height of the crisis, European civil society was actively engaged in the response in their communities; however, refugee, migrant and diaspora communities have not yet been fully engaged. There are examples in Europe and other parts of the world of the huge potential that exists and should be further developed. Foster families from the same cultural background have, for example, been particularly successful, and have improved the children's integration prospects. There are examples in Europe and other parts of the world of the huge potential that exists and should be further developed.



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“THE COMMUNITY DOESN'T PROVIDE ANY HELP”

Murad Ullah*, Male, 16, Pakistani

6 Children need to be heard and empowered.

Children and youth are often faced with a stark choice - focussing on fulfilling their aspirations of a better life and better education or wasting months or even years waiting in reception centres for a decision on their future. Education, peer group activities, sport clubs, skills training and the provision of resources to start their own projects are some of the ways in which they can positively channel their efforts, not only for their own benefit, but also for that of their host and new communities. Too many programmes and initiatives have failed because they were planned with a top-down approach while missing the needs of the children. If children and youth are systematically and appropriately consulted, for example through youth advisory groups or complaint mechanisms, a lot of money can be saved and children are better protected.

“INCLUDE THE OPINION AND DESIRE OF THE CHILD IN THE PREPARATION OF THE PLAN FOR HIM...TO FOLLOW HIS INTERESTS AND DESIRES”.

Asif Mathour*, Male, 16, Pakistani



7 The child's long-term future needs to be defined as early as possible.

Uncertainty about their future while being stuck in limbo for months or even years not only has severe psychological effects on children, but also causes disruptions to the systems and thus costs

money. As early as possible and building on the trusting relationship, child protection experts have to identify, together with the child and their guardian, the best long term solution – be it in the country where they are, where their family is, or in another country. This should always include the tracing of their family, and the wellbeing and best interests of the child should always be the determining factor.

8 Every decision on behalf of the child needs to serve his or her wellbeing and best interests.

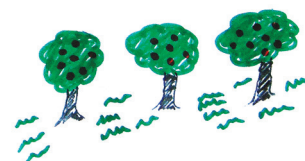
Dealing with children requires specific expertise. Europe has an abundance of this expertise when dealing with national children. However, too often asylum experts, rather than child protection experts, are the actors forced to take decisions on behalf of children. It is therefore necessary to clearly define and plan the procedures as well as the roles and responsibilities of the different experts. Every decision with a longer-term impact on the child's wellbeing needs to be taken by a child protection specialist, so that their wellbeing and best interests are at the core of the decision. Clear procedures will lead to better use of resources as they will help streamline the different actions, ensure proper coordination among those involved in the decision-making process and prevent duplication.

“AN ORGANIZED PROCEDURE IS NEEDED THAT FIRST TELLS US OUR RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES. CURRENTLY WE ARE AFRAID TO ASK FOR ACCOMMODATION.”

Farid Akbar*, Male, 16, Afghan

*The names were changed to protect the individuals.

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on page 2-4: ©METADRASI / Archive
„Drawings of Unaccompanied Minors”



Response so far

• UNHCR

To date UNHCR has worked across Europe to increase the capacity of all actors working with refugee and migrant children and supported the establishment of much needed identification and referral mechanisms. In addition, UNHCR has supported authorities as well as NGOs of numerous countries in establishing procedures, providing alternatives to detention as well as care arrangements for UASC which serve the best interests and wellbeing of children. UNHCR has consistently engaged with refugee youth and children to include their views and opinions in all programmes.

• UNICEF

UNICEF has helped refugee and migrant children on the ground in Europe with a wide range of services from psychosocial, formal and non-formal education, child feeding, protection and health. UNICEF works with European governments to strengthen social welfare services, national guardianship, enhance foster care and other family-like alternatives for unaccompanied children as well as train frontline workers. UNICEF actively advocates for children on the move to be treated as national children with full access to services such as education and health; to keep families together; and not to detain children.

• The IRC

The IRC has directly implemented and also supported partners' efforts to meet the needs of refugee and migrant children in Greece, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Hungary. This response has focused on creating alternatives to detention, including support for and establishment of new shelters, foster care and guardianship programmes and provision of holistic care, such as psychosocial support, legal assistance, and access to other critical protection services.

The IRC also works to support and build the capacity of frontline service providers, and develop national guidelines for diverse areas of child welfare and protection. Finally, the IRC advocates for the rights of children on the move to be protected in the current response and in all relevant legislation impacting future arrivals and responses.

