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# Protecting Children Migrating Alone

## Challenges and Advances in Mexico

## Issue

The presence of children and especially unaccompanied children in international migratory flows and the need to provide adequate protection of their rights and physical integrity is only gradually reaching public attention. Migrating alone exposes children to risks to their health, physical integrity, dignity and even lives. Children and adolescents migrate alone for economic reasons, to join their families or to escape violence and exploitation. As they travel across countries and frontiers they are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous persons, to trafficking for labor or sexual purposes, to physical and sexual abuse, and are regularly exposed to humiliating and confusing situations that leave deep scars. Whilst children and adolescents need protection of their rights in all stages of the migratory process, the specific process of repatriation is a moment of extreme trauma and vulnerability, in which children can be re-victimized if specific measures are not taken for their protection and safe return. In 2008, 32,075 children and adolescents were repatriated from the United States to Mexico on the northern border, of these 18,129 were unaccompanied. Mexico, in turn, repatriated 4,314 unaccompanied children and adolescents to their countries of origin via the southern border.

## Action

Several institutions are grappling with this issue in Mexico. This has resulted in the development of a new model to protect unaccompanied migrant children on the northern border, and steps towards developing such a model on the southern border. The component parts of this new model of protection are still being consolidated, but offer innovative approaches which may be of interest to other countries.

### Direct Care Response

- To ensure immediate and appropriate care for repatriated children, 4 special care units for children have been set up next to Migration Units in northern border areas, where medical attention is offered, and basic needs for food, water, rest and communication with their families are met, before they are interviewed, their situation evaluated and responses given. These care units are run jointly by the National Family Development System (DIF) and the National Migration Institute (INM).
- A network of 27 transitory shelters, is run directly or in conjunction with non-governmental organizations, by the National Family Development System, to protect children detected migrating alone. Contact is made from these with families and arrangements made for their safe return home.
- A special corps of 172 Child Protection Officers was created within the National Migration Institute in 2008. These Officers, or "OPI's", have been trained in child rights and in sensitive interviewing techniques, to better detect the situation and special risks of each child passing through immigration services.
- Mexican Consulates in the United States of America give priority attention to cases of unaccompanied children communicated to them by the local or federal authorities.

### Communication with and safe return to Families

- Telephone lines have been installed in migration units and special care units in 21 states by the communications corporation Nextel, so that migrant children, especially those from other countries, can contact their families free of charge, reducing the considerable anxiety caused by separation.
- Negotiations are in course with airline companies for air-flights offered free of charge, to be activated by child protection services for the quickest return of unaccompanied children to their families and states of origin, reducing the risks of cross-country travel.

### Securing a new model for the Protection of Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Inter-sectoral cooperation has been vital to this effort and is secured through an the Inter-Institutional Panel on Unaccompanied Child and Adolescent Migrants and Migrant Women, set up in March 2007. The panel brings together some 17 institutions ranging from public authorities such as the National Family Development System, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Migration Institute among others, to United Nations agencies (UNICEF, IOM, UNHCR, UNIFEM). It secured an increased national budget allocation in Congress in 2009 for the new protection model for unaccompanied children, and is developing an operational manual for better inter-agency implementation.



## Making the issue visible

- The situation and voice of children – those “left behind”, those trying to reunite with their parents, and those who have been repatriated to Mexico or Central America, have been brought to public attention through drawings, photographs and radio spots prepared by children to feed into a National Week of Debate on Migration.
- The National Family Development System (DIF) has developed and aired a campaign to raise awareness among children and their families in states of origin of the risks and dangers of international migration.



## Knowledge generation

- In order to better inform policy development, disaggregated data on the profile and situation of children is now being collected as part of the regular Northern Frontier Migration Survey, and special analysis has also been undertaken of the profile of over 92,000 repatriated children passing through temporary shelters operated by child protection services from 2002-2007.

## International debate and norms

- The Mexican government has made considerable efforts to ensure that the rights of children in migration processes are highly visible in international fora, and has therefore convoked a series of international meetings to bring the protection of children to the agenda in such discussions, and promote the exchange of good practices.



## Impact

- Over 25,000 children a year in situations of repatriation to or from Mexico, now count on a system for their protection, including immediate care, specialized attention and separate accommodation from adults, communication with and safe return to their families and communities of origin.
- A notable result of the setting up of a special corps of Child Protection Officers in the National Migration Institute is the reported increase in detection of and response to cases of trafficking, sexual exploitation and violence affecting children migrating alone as well as in the cases of asylum petitions of children.
- Mexico is coordinating negotiations for the approval of Special Guidelines for the Protection of Unaccompanied Migrant Children, within the Regional Conference on Migration in the first semester of 2009, which comprises 11 countries from the Region, including the United States of America. It will be crucial to secure a strong commitment from each participating country to ensure a comprehensive protection system for non-accompanied migrant children beyond borders.

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