

**ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOs  
11 – 13 JUNE 2013 - International Conference Center Geneva**

***BACKGROUND PAPER***

**Advocating and action for the protection of children**

**Wednesday 12 June 2013, 14h30 – 18h30 - Room 2**

**Background text:**

“Almost half of all forcibly displaced persons globally are children – over 12 million girls and boys. Many refugee children spend their entire childhood in displacement, uncertain about their future. Children, whether refugees, internally displaced or stateless, are at greater risk than adults of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation.”<sup>1</sup> In humanitarian settings girls and boys are killed or injured, orphaned or separated from their families, recruited into armed forces or groups, exposed to dangers of smuggling and trafficking, detained or experience a combination of these and other abuses at the same time. Given the high proportion of children amongst displaced populations and the fact that girls and boys face unique protection risks, responding to their specific needs is a key priority for UNHCR and NGO partners. Children’s rights are at the heart of UNHCR’s protection mandate and the new UNHCR *Framework for the Protection of Children*, is an expression of a renewed commitment to the protection of children. A central tenant of the Framework is to embrace the Child Protection Systems approach with an emphasis on partnerships with Governments, NGOs, UN partners, and communities in coordinated responses to realize the rights of children.

**1) Strengthening child protection systems in emergencies**

The current conflict in Syria led to what some refer to as a “children’s emergency” with over half of the registered refugees who have fled to neighboring countries being children, and the majority of this group being children under 11 years<sup>2</sup>. Responding to child protection needs in this and the simultaneous emergencies of Mali, South Sudan, DRC and in the Central African Republic is testing the capacity of UNHCR and our partners. A particular challenge is that in emergency situations the people, processes, laws, institutions and behaviors that normally protect children – the child protection systems – may be weakened.

Child protection programming in emergencies aims to strengthen protective factors that reinforce children’s and family resilience, and to prevent and respond to children’s exposure to further risks. Two critical aspects of ensuring protective factors in contexts of displacement are to ensure procedures, structures and processes are child-friendly, including age- and gender sensitive, and that children are able to participate meaningfully according to their age and abilities, and that their participation is informed, voluntary and beneficial to them and facilitates broader realization of their rights.

Generally, the quality of programming in child protection in emergencies and accountability to affected children and their families has varied widely, due partly to child protection being an area

---

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *A Framework for the Protection of Children*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR web article, *Number of Syrian refugees reaches 1 million mark*, 6 March 2013 [online]

that is less understood and one of the least funded sectors in emergencies<sup>3</sup>. As a response to this, specific initiatives have been undertaken by the child protection community to improve the quality of interventions. A common definition of child protection in emergencies was adopted only in 2010 and the *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action* were launched in October 2012. With the help of these and other major developments, now is the time to put them into action to ensure displaced children are protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect wherever they may be.

## 2) Enhancing the protection of children in mixed migration contexts

The protection of children in mixed migration is another area that is receiving renewed attention. Mixed migration is defined as “a movement in which a number of persons are travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons. Persons travelling as part of mixed movements have varying needs and profiles and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, trafficked persons, unaccompanied/separated children, and migrants in an irregular situation.”<sup>4</sup>

Both boys and girls embarking on ‘irregular’ movement across borders or within countries are typically exposed to more risks than adults undergoing the same journey. It goes without saying that the risks are dramatically enhanced for children traveling unaccompanied by family or adult care givers.

The following are just a few of the situations of mixed migration routes that concern high numbers of unaccompanied children:

Latin American unaccompanied children transiting through Mexico, many of whom are attempting to enter the USA;

- Ethiopian and Somali unaccompanied children transiting through Djibouti and Yemen, some of whom are heading to Saudi Arabia and other Arab states;
- Other Ethiopian and Eritrean unaccompanied children who enter mixed migration streams into Sudan, Egypt and intend to travel onwards to Israel or European states;
- Afghan unaccompanied children travelling through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, many of whom are destined for European states;
- Numerous nationalities involved in mixed migration, including unaccompanied children, using Indonesia as a transit point towards Australia.

The above are well-known examples, perhaps because they involve multiple crossings of international borders and final destinations involving wealthier states (whereas the majority of children who move are doing so within and between countries of the global South).<sup>5</sup> However some of the above examples are also notorious due to the horrendous abuses suffered by victims of human traffickers.

In response to the many challenges inherent in identifying and protecting refugees travelling within broader movements of persons, UNHCR developed a 10-Point Plan on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration in 2006.<sup>6</sup> The Plan provides guidance on coordination, data collection, reception arrangements, addressing secondary movement as well as profiling for particular risk groups including asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied and separated children.

The protection of children in mixed migration poses numerous challenges for the international community to respond to, not the least of which are: how to reduce secondary movement of refugee or displaced children when they are pursuing the fulfillment of their rights; how can we explore safe alternatives to unauthorized travel; altering the trend towards criminalization and

---

<sup>3</sup> Child Protection Working Group, *Too Little, Too Late: Child Protection Funding in Emergencies*, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration: The 10-Point Plan in action*, February 2011

<sup>5</sup> IOM, *Children on the Move*, 19 April 2013

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration: The 10-Point Plan in action*, February 2011

avoiding the detention of children who are involved in mixed migration channels regardless of their status; ensuring access to age appropriate procedures and; above all, ensuring the best interests of the child as a primary consideration during all stages of the process.<sup>7</sup>

### **The way forward for child protection in emergencies and mixed migration**

The above two scenarios pose new and unprecedented challenges to governments, UN Organizations, and NGOs as we try collectively to address the protection risks facing children and adolescents. The two break-out sessions are an opportunity to take stock of current practices and to make recommendations for the way forward for children protection, specifically in emergency situations and in mixed migration.

Participants in this session will be asked to share their thoughts on the questions below in addition to issues raised in their respective groups:

- What good practices exist in relation to protection delivery for children in emergencies?
- What are the main challenges to effective protection programming for children and adolescents in refugee emergencies – and how could we address these?
- Are there concrete examples of instances where NGOs, civil society and the UN have successfully advocated for the protection of children in these situations?
- How can we improve the identification of children in mixed migratory flows who are in need of international protection or who are victims of trafficking?
- What good practices exist in relation to protection delivery for children in mixed migration?

---

<sup>7</sup> IOM, *Children on the Move*, 19 April 2013