

DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

Press Release

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Experts Deliberate on institutionalising a Continental Approach and programmatic response to protect and assist Children on the Move within Africa

Technical experts met Wednesday, 26th August to chart pathways for addressing the challenges faced by children on the move within the African continent. These are children who have left their places of habitual residence to other places within or outside their countries, or have been entrusted by their parents or guardians, voluntarily or involuntarily, accompanied or unaccompanied by their parents, caregivers or families either as internally displaced persons, refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants or trafficked persons and who may suffer or may be at risk of suffering exploitation, abuse, neglect or violence.

The online consultative meeting, was jointly convened by the Department of Social Affairs (DSA) of the African Union Commission (AUC), IOM and UNICEF, in close collaboration with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) and its Secretariat, and brought together migration and child protection experts from various sectors, including academia, civil society, international organisations and NGOs to share ideas and coalesce efforts.

The current deliberations follow publication of the *Mapping on Children on the Move within Africa* study by ACERWC in 2018. This report cast light on the alarming, complex and multi-dimensional problem of children on the move and formulated a set of recommendations to address the challenges facing children on the move. To give concrete expression to these recommendations and galvanize collective action to address the challenges, a joint initiative involving the AUC, IOM, UNICEF and ACERWC was established. The initiative's activities and this meeting are funded by the US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM).

Children on the move are a significant part of migrant populations in Africa due to several push and pull factors. For example, between 2015 and 2017, an estimated 18.2 million children were on the move across the continent and officially registered with UN agencies as refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) or asylum seekers, or in need of some form of protection.

The 2018 study established that Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region bore the brunt of such movements, followed by the East Africa region. It also found that despite these numbers, the trend of child migration, and especially unaccompanied and separated migrant children (UASC), often remains under-reported and, in some cases, is left unaddressed.

Yet, children face even tougher dangers on the traditional migratory routes, as age and gender vulnerabilities increase susceptibility to violence, abuse and exploitation, regardless of existing legal frameworks at international and regional level that protect them.

Sabelo Mbokazi, Head of Labour, Employment and Migration division at the African Union Commission, said AU Member States have the mandate to protect UMC on the move and must work with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and other partners, such as this joint AUC-IOM-UNICEF collaboration on Children on the Move, to consider best practices from countries of origin, transit and destination.

In their joint presentation, Heba Latif, African Regional Migration Program coordinator for the East and Horn of Africa region and Dr. Edward Addai, UNICEF Representative to the AU and UNECA emphasized that despite children being an essential part of migration trends in Africa, and elsewhere, they deserved to survive, develop and achieve their full potential in a safe environment. Interventions, therefore, had to look at the care and protection that children on the move need, such as access to education and long-term opportunities, in order to avoid the problem of cohorts of children that cannot make a substantial contribution to society. In that respect, the joint AUC-IOM-UNICEF initiative aims at institutionalising a continental approach and programmatic response to protect and assist children on the move in Africa.

To be in the lead in developing concrete responses to these challenges, the experts discussed measures taken by Member States to mitigate the push and pull factors that cause children to move within the continent, with a focus on addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration..

Participants shared their experience on how the current COVID-19 pandemic has exasperated the issue and the criticality of addressing the challenges faced by children on the move through the lens of the best of interest of the child.

The meeting also looked at best practices and challenges in legislative and policy measures that transit, and destination countries put in place to protect the rights of children on the move, including provision of essential child protection services.

Finally, participants reflected on the role of Member States and other stakeholders such as civil society organisations and UN agencies in protecting the rights of returnee children, particularly with respect to family tracing and reunification, family mediation, resettling grants, and skills development. The importance of effective social protection schemes in integration interventions with layered levels and dimensions of support were also discussed in depth with field practitioners.

As one participant observed when underlining the importance of owning the process, “every child deserves protection, care and all the support and services needed to thrive. Migrant and displaced children are children first, and they are our children.”

A follow up meeting will bring together representatives of Member States to further discourse on these issues, including policies and legal frameworks and improved coordination between security services, child protection services, and other Government bodies, and the consistent application of principles to ensure protection of the rights of children on the move.

About ACERWC

The ACERWC draws its mandate from the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which was adopted by the Heads of State and Government of the OAU on 11th July 1990 and came into force on 29th November 1999. The Charter provides for the establishment of the Committee to promote and protect the rights enshrined in the Charter, and to monitor implementation. For more information: visit www.acerwc.africa

About IOM

IOM is the lead intergovernmental organization in the field of migration and is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. IOM acts with its partners in the international community to assist in meeting the growing challenges of migration management, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants. For more information: visit <https://www.iom.int/>

About UNICEF

UNICEF is the United Nations Children's Fund, working in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents – and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. UNICEF works in over 190 countries and territories to save children's lives, to defend their rights, and to help them fulfil their potential. For more information: visit <https://www.unicef.org/>

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