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# LEAVING HOME

VOICES OF CHILDREN  
ON THE MOVE

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20 years  
Convention  
on the Rights  
of the Child

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I DIDN'T  
WANT  
TO COME  
BUT  
POVERTY  
FORCED  
ME OUT  
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# INTRODUCTION

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*Trafficked, unaccompanied, separated, autonomous, street, fostered, independent, kidnapped, forced, refugee, asylum seeker, nomadic...*

Across the world millions of children are on the move. Mass migration and displacement is on the increase driven by poverty, conflict, failing states, natural disasters and climate change. In 2005, 191 million people migrated from one country to another, an increase of 116 million since 1960, with the numbers of people migrating within countries estimated to be even higher.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these are children. Some move with their families, other move independently. Other children are trafficked for their labour or to be sexually exploited. It is estimated that 42% of people crossing the Cambodia-Thailand border are children, while 20% of the estimated 1.5 Burmese migrants in Thailand are under 18 years old. In some countries, patterns of child movement are well established and culturally accepted - in Tanzania 23% of households had male children and 17% female children who had migrated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

For many children and families movement promises jobs, schools and a better standard of living. The United Nations Human Development Report 2009 shows that most families, who migrate, both internally and internationally, reap significant gains by moving in income, access to education and health and improved prospects for their children.<sup>4</sup>

But for children, especially those who move independently from their families, movement can be a dangerous and risky experience, which can leave them vulnerable to exploitation, coercion, deception, violence and isolation at every stage of their journey.

Addressing the needs and problems faced by these children is a serious challenge.

In recent years, action on children's movement has mainly focussed on trafficked children. While extremely important, the exclusive focus on the crime of child trafficking has obscured the reality of why and how many children are moving across the world.

This report, based on recent research carried out by various international agencies and by academics, aims to give children a voice and allow them to describe in their own words their experiences of going on the move and analyse the range of positive as well as negative impacts that movement can have on children's lives.

"We want things and we hope for some things, so adults should understand that" said 17-year old girl in Southeast Europe. "And if we're stubborn enough we'll do what we want, even if everyone told us it was wrong..."<sup>5</sup>

*"You should really do something to help children here. I have already planned to leave for the Ivory Coast as things are very hard here. My dad is dead and my mother is old. I have to fend for myself..."<sup>1</sup>*



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## WHY CHILDREN LEAVE

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—  
**AT  
HOME**  
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*I saw back home  
that I was  
forever sitting.  
You get depressed  
from just sitting  
the whole day,  
doing nothing;  
seeing other people  
going to school,  
going to college.  
In South Africa  
maybe I will find a  
better life or even  
start college...”<sup>1</sup>*

There are a myriad of different reasons why children leave their homes and go on the move.

In countries across the world, migration is seen as a rite of passage for young people moving into adulthood and in some places like Ghana there are long-established and relatively safe migration paths where children travel regularly with family, friends or relatives.

In other cases children say they feel they have to move because of the lack of alternatives at home or will move with their families in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

One 18-year old boy in southern Ghana told interviewers that “*I did not want to come but poverty forced me out*”.<sup>2</sup> A lack of employment or education at home and the real or perceived economic opportunities in other cities, towns or countries is a major incentive for child movement both for children and their families.

Families who send their child away on their own will often pay to secure work and passage for their son or daughter with many poor families

falling into debt and bondage to pay for the expense of a child’s journey. In the Cote d’Ivoire, for example, some families get into huge debt to send their children abroad after being promised a future in the football industry.<sup>3</sup>

But many children are instrumental in their own movement. In interviews, they spoke of their desire to earn money and help support their family and siblings. “*When I left them I told them, ‘Whether I live or die it is up to me,’*” said one boy in Southern Africa. “*I want to look after my family because I’m the oldest boy...*”<sup>4</sup>

Some say the positive experiences of other migrant children strengthened their desire to leave – “*They have nice clothes, straightened hair and a lot of things like utensils and sewing machines*”<sup>5</sup>, said one 13-year Ghanaian child about other girls returning from Accra.

For other children migration or movement is the only way to escape abuse or violence in the home. In China many street children said that violence and abuse in the home or at school was their main reason to migrate and seek safety elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

“*In Mozambique my family didn’t take care of me,*” says one 14-year old child in South Africa describing his reason to move from his home. “*They did not care if I had anything to eat or wear...so I thought I would come here to South Africa because maybe I would find someone who would take me as their own...*”<sup>7</sup>

Natural disasters and environmental change are also affecting migration patterns. By 2050 there will be an estimated 200 million ‘climate refugees’ with children forming part of an increasing tide of forced migration.



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# WHAT CHILDREN WANT

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Many children say they leave their homes and go on the move because they believe it is impossible to stay. “At the time I decided to leave home, I was just happy to do that,” says one Eastern European child. “I couldn’t think of anything else. Life at my home was impossible.”<sup>9</sup>

*“Whether it is the parents or the teachers, they must approach the children and ask them if there is anything is bothering them, because children often are reluctant to talk, they are afraid, they close up within themselves...”*

18-year old shelter child in Albania

“I would get children back to school. I would get jobs for their parents so they won’t have to make their children work or go out and beg,” says an 15-year-old street child. “I would take the kids back to school, that’s the most important thing... only with education can something good be achieved... otherwise the problems will only continue...”<sup>10</sup>

Children who are forced from their home communities because of extreme poverty, violence, neglect or conflict are some of the most vulnerable to danger and exploitation as they go on the move. In interviews, children asked for more support at home, better opportunities and education and protection from insecurity, abuse or poverty.

Some children said that they felt they had nobody to turn to when making a decision about leaving. “I was given no advice nor did I try to get any,” said one. “I knew I would be an illegal worker and I was counting on my girlfriend and her acquaintances to find work for a lot of money. But I did not have any information.”<sup>11</sup>

Successful initiatives to try and help children make an informed choice about moving abroad for work have included modules about the dangers of trafficking and “life skills” classes put into the school curriculum in Moldova.

In West Bengal, India, where children are routinely sent away from home to work as domestic workers and servants, Save the Children works with local government to run programmes where families are provided with financial incentives such as pensions and child grants to keep children at home and in school.<sup>12</sup>

In Burkina Faso a similar micro-credit scheme has been set up for young boy migrants by the NGO Terre des Hommes, which recognised that many boys aspired to financial independence and routinely leave their parents’ houses without their permission out of a desire to earn their own money.<sup>13</sup>





## THE RISKS

*The journey is often the most difficult or dangerous part of any child's movement away from their home.*

*We thought we were going to be killed. Because some people say when they find you without money, they kill you... I was the only guy, I thought, They will kill me? The girls they rape... We saw blood.”<sup>1</sup>*

*But to work out how to best help children as they journey across countries, borders and seas it is important to recognise that children rarely move alone.*

*There is an assumption that the adults who accompany or help children move are feeding the criminal trade in child trafficking, which is increasing alongside the rise in global migration. While true in some cases, many of the millions of children currently on the move across the world are travelling with their families or with relatives.*

*Children who move independently from their families often travel in groups with other children, with older siblings or other adults who are facilitating or assisting them in their journey.*

Whether travelling alone or accompanied, with family or strangers, the journey itself can be the most perilous and risky stage in a child's movement.

Those children travelling independently from their families are particularly at risk, especially at flash points such as border crossings where they can be vulnerable to physical violence, theft and sexual exploitation.

*“I was with my brother and three friends of his but we didn't have a passport. My brother paid some people to help cut the fence of the frontier. He paid 150 rands per person... The crossing takes a whole day. You need to have courage. After cutting the fence we have to cross the Incomati River and you also have to make sure the mabuno don't see you, otherwise you're in trouble. We enter the river with the water up to our necks, and then we continue in silence. You can't make a single noise. When we saw the patrol from far, we hid in the bush...”<sup>2</sup>*

One girl travelling across the border from Zimbabwe into South Africa told us that, *“after we had crossed the river and jumped the first fence we met other guys hiding in the bushes... They advanced on us with sharp knives and axes... They ordered us to lie down and they started beating us... They took our money...”<sup>3</sup>*

Girls migrating to South Africa have also reported being forced to have sex with border guards to secure their entry.<sup>4</sup> One child said to interviewers that girls travelling from Sierra Leone to Liberia become the “wives” of truck drivers who demand sex as payment for their journey.<sup>5</sup>



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**ON THE  
MOVE**  
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## HOW CAN CHILDREN STAY SAFE?

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It is difficult to reach children as they travel. Providing services like information and advice booths at bus stations, border crossings and transit depots and providing safe accommodation and food along popular migration routes can help children and their families as they continue their journey.

But reaching children before they start their journey is also important. In some cases, exploitation and trafficking can begin before the child has left home.

*“My cousin told me she could offer me a pleasant holiday... My parents were against the idea but later they accepted it... [when I got] There my cousin’s husband told me I was going to be a prostitute; he locked me up and took away my identity documents.”<sup>6</sup>*

In 2003 a group of NGOs in Latvia in 2003 surveyed more than 3,000 young people intending to leave their homes in search of work and found that many children did not take steps to prepare for going abroad to work and that their experience was not what they expected.

The group then produced a Safe Work Abroad guide focussing on the risks of unsafe migration and how to prevent it. The guide gave steps on how to check if a job offer is legitimate, advice on legal status and warnings about the risk of human trafficking.

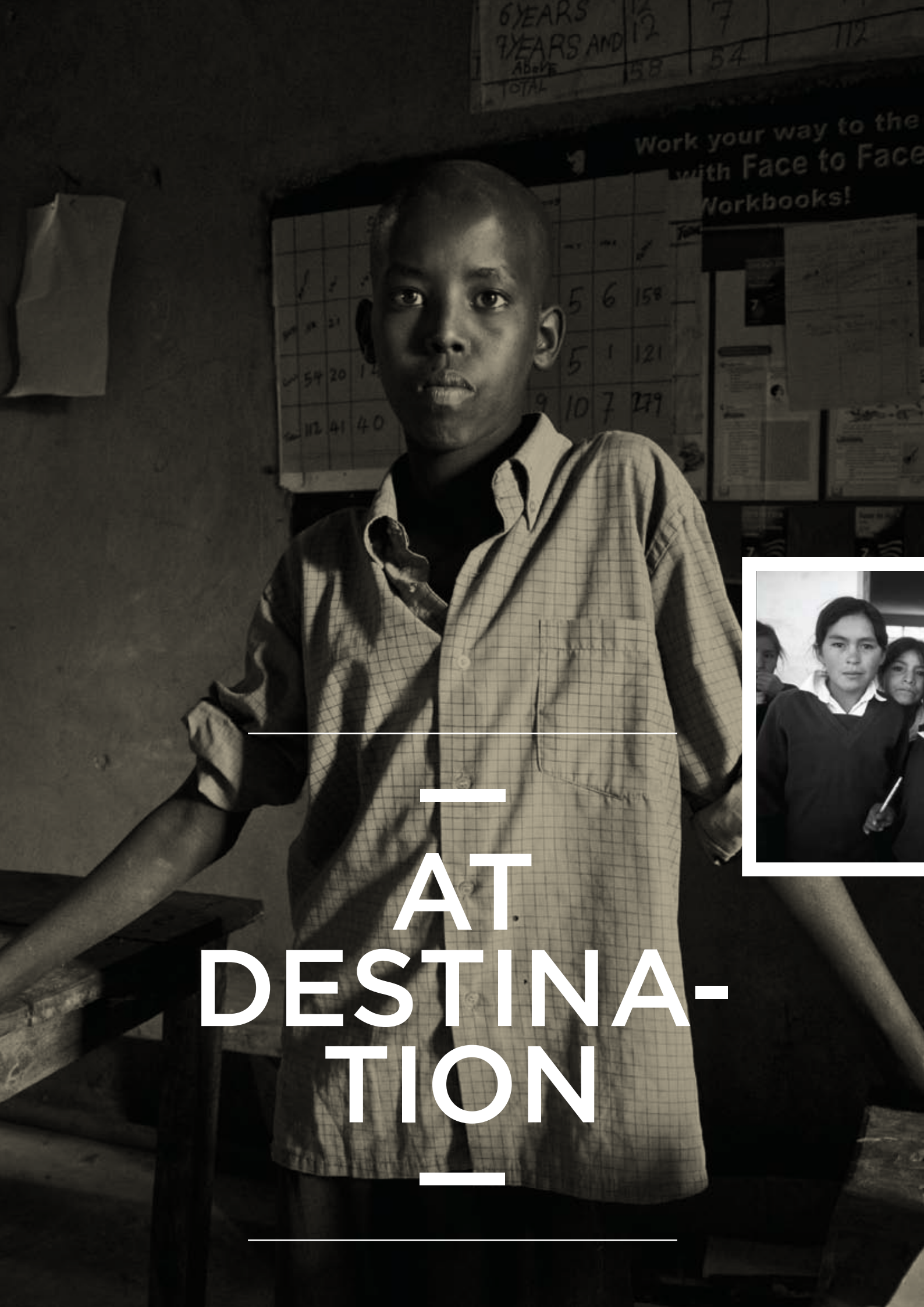
Follow-up research showed that children who had read the report were taking better precautions – while only 64% of children who hadn’t seen the guide asked for some sort of employment contract before they left for a promised job, 100% of those who had read the report did so afterwards.<sup>7</sup>

Initiatives which target parents to help them increase their household income or access better health or education or which tries to tackle problems with violence or conflict in the home can help prevent or delay children embarking on dangerous journeys.





# THE RISKS



# — AT DESTINATION —



*“I am in a foreign country now, I don’t know anybody here, I don’t know where to go, who to turn to...”<sup>1</sup>*

*17 year old street child, Albania*

*When children reach their destination, many hope that they will be able to build a better life. Families who move with their children may hope that life in a new place will bring better health or education opportunities.*

*Every year millions of children also travel great distances to find paid work, usually in the informal sector - in farming or fishing, construction, restaurants or in domestic households - to support themselves and their families.*

Despite the opportunities a destination can offer a child on the move, it can also expose vulnerable children to the worst forms of exploitation and violence.

Those children who arrive at a new location with no legal status or who have been forced to move from their home communities because of violence, poverty or conflict are particularly at risk. Language barriers, discrimination and stigma mean that many children find it difficult to integrate and find a safe home. Some estimates on the numbers of street children with no safe home across the world are as high as 100 million.<sup>2</sup>

Despite being obliged under international law to protect vulnerable children, many governments see children on the move as criminals or “illegal migrants” leaving them open to prosecution, detention or unsafe repatriation.

In Guatemala the NGO Casa Alianza estimates there are 14,500 children living on the streets, viewed as a nuisance and in some cases targeted by death squads instead of being treated as vulnerable children.

The fear of arrest and retribution haunts the lives of many migrant children.<sup>3</sup>

One girl in South Africa said, “Boys come here but the problem is they don’t have a place to stay and people treat them as people who have come to steal so they get arrested... Us girls we are better off because sometimes the men took us as their wives... We don’t stay in the bush and suffer like the boys...”<sup>4</sup>





For some children, this leaves them exposed to sexual and physical violence:

*“I was raped by a Gomagoma from Zimbabwe,” says 16 year old Musina. “I don’t know why... He raped a girl from Zimbabwe before me and was not reported. I think he thinks girls from Zimbabwe don’t report...”*<sup>5</sup>

Many migrant children face exploitation, imprisonment and abuse by employers who prey on the fact that they are desperate for work or unable or unwilling to escape or report abuse to the authorities.

A study by the International Labour Organisation’s International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO IPEC) in Costa Rica surveyed a group of child domestic workers. The study showed that the children who were not Costa Rican - mostly Nicaraguan migrants - were more vulnerable to mistreatment because of their illegal status and often not allowed out of the house.<sup>6</sup>

In another case, a child from Niger tried to report his boss who was refusing to pay him a salary to the police in Burkina Faso, *“When we got there, the police told me that I was a foreigner and that in Burkina Faso, foreigners do not summon natives to the police,”* he says. *“That’s when they told me that I would never get my money.”*<sup>7</sup>

Recent research by Save the Children in India revealed that 68% of children employed as domestic workers had faced physical abuse, 86% emotional abuse and were working an average of 15 hours a day.<sup>8</sup>

One 15 year old boy in Cambodia said *“A woman asked me to go to Cambodia to make shoes for her company. She promised I would not have to work hard and would earn good money. When I arrived... She kept me in a room... there were about 10 children there... She forced us to work for long hours without allowing us to go out.”*<sup>9</sup>

Unsafe living conditions also expose children to danger and harm. *“My accommodation is not comfortable,”* says one 15 year old girl. *“I sleep with about 50 other girls in front of a chain of stores near the market... We are too many and we are exposed to... thieves and murderers...”*<sup>10</sup>

Many families and children also find they face significant barriers to accessing even basic services when they reach their destination. Despite the fact that many families and children go on the move to try and improve their chances of getting an education or getting basic healthcare services, a recent study found that less than a quarter of child migrant workers under the age of 15 in Thailand go to school.<sup>11</sup>

*“I don’t make enough to go to school,”* said one 16-year-old boy from Mozambique. *“When I got here I did not have anything or anyone, no mother and father and here you need money to attend school... And I don’t have that money.”*<sup>12</sup>

## WHAT CHILDREN WANT

Children say they want and must be protected against abuse and exploitation by employers and child traffickers.

*“Children should not be doing hard jobs, not to cut wood, not open trenches, not to mow because these are very difficult things to do,”* said one 17-year-old boy interviewed in Albania. *“I would hate it every time I had to do these things. They are very bad things.”*<sup>13</sup>

But they also want help in making something positive from the experience of moving away from home.

*“I would like to go back but not without any skills or a proper job here in Accra either in the computer business or sewing,”* said one 19-year old girl in Ghana. *“Even if I get money now, I will not return without any skills, I would have wasted my time here...”*<sup>14</sup>

Children, reaching a new destination also talk about the positive change to their lives that moving away can bring, including the chance of employment, education or an escape from violence, conflict or poverty.

And although the work might be tiring, repetitive and badly paid, not all children say they have a bad experience of work.

*“I sleep on the floor in my mistresses room. I have no problem with that, actually I am happy as I am able to sleep under an electric fan,”* said 13-year old migrant worker in Dhaka. *“There is no shortage of clothes... I am given sufficient food. I earn 600 taka per month. I send the money to my mother. My mistress takes care of me when I am ill.”*<sup>15</sup>

In some cases children talk about the feeling of empowerment and independence they get from being able to work and earn a livelihood.

*“I feel good because sometimes I sell 250 rand per day and on top of that I can manage to send some money and clothes to my relatives...”* said one child selling ice-cream in Southern Africa.<sup>16</sup>

Young migrants say they want help to learn new skills or a trade and to find schooling.

One 16-year old boy from Porto Novo in Benin spoke of the importance of child-led support groups like the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AWCY), which helped him to help him escape exploitation and abuse.

*“They are taking care of me and that is exactly what I was looking for... When I joined AWCY I began to learn a trade and now I feel much better... Than before. I invite other children living in the same difficult situations I was in to join the Association... Now my rights are respected.”*<sup>17</sup>

Safe spaces where they can meet other children, store their possessions, wash or escape from abuse or violence are considered important. Children said shelters and places of refuge were often the only places they could receive help and support.



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## THE RISKS

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*Integrating into a new community when they have reached their destination or returning home after time spent away can be a complicated process for many children on the move especially when they have been forced to leave to escape from abuse, conflict, violence or environmental disasters or when they have gone through traumatic experiences during their journey.*

***“Once the return is forced, the child has only one aim, to get back...”***

It is often assumed that children on the move are either victims of trafficking or illegal migrants with few or no rights to remain in their destinations. Because of this responses can often focus on children being returned home.

But sending children back to their homes without considering the reasons why they left in the first place can force them back into a situation where they are once again facing violence, abuse, extreme poverty or conflict.

Return to their areas of origin should only take place if in the individual child’s best interests and after a thorough assessment process – considerations currently ignored by many responses by governments or other agencies in their dealings with children on the move. In many cases, integration in the areas where children have moved to would be the best course of action.

While the reference to ‘best interests of the child’ can be found in much of the legislation on children, in practice, most policies reflect a conflict between the child’s interests and those of the host authorities. The ‘vulnerability’ of many children on the move and their ‘childhood’ become obscured by their ‘immigration’ status.

Policies aimed at children on the move should firstly provide them with appropriate interim care and assistance and then ensure that they receive the guidance and support they need to find the best long-term solution to their individual situations, whether that be reuniting with their family or integrating into another community or country.

Even when return is an appropriate course of action, the repatriation process itself can be dangerous and terrifying for those being sent home.

One child from Southern Africa told interviewers: *“There will be some policemen who will be searching for the Zimbabweans and Mozambicans who will be not having IDs. That’s when they catch us. Then they take us to a place called Lindela. This place is very dangerous...there is a lot of diseases there. Even if you die in Lindela, they can’t make an effort to tell your parents that you are dead. Then they take us with buses to the border... There is no warning to your parents about this.”*<sup>2</sup>




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# RETURNING HOME?

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In many cases, so-called ‘returns’ amount to deportation. Migrant children who are forcibly repatriated can end up in dangerous transit centers or spend extended periods in detention.

*“We returned because we didn’t have a passport. We were jailed by the police. We stayed one week at the police station... Treatment over there is very bad... Then they put us on the train and we went to Ressano. There they left us at the train station and you fork out your money to go home...”*

The same child describes the vicious cycle of migration and repatriation that many forcibly repatriated children can fall into if the root causes of movement are not addressed.

*“After this month I want to go back, I don’t do anything [at home]... Just strolling around. There is no work here, that’s why I go to look for work there in South Africa, to have money to buy many things.”<sup>3</sup>*

Whether they have been forcibly repatriated or returned home of their own free will, reintegration back into their home communities can also be very traumatising for children. For example, girls who have been victims of trafficking for sexual purposes say they can face discrimination and stigma at home after their experiences become public knowledge.

*“My mother, when she’s drunk, she flaps her mouth and spreads the rumour in the entire village that they kidnapped me and they raped me and ever since, both the old ones and the young ones behave like I was eating people. At the disco, they all shun me, our neighbours don’t even drink water in our house because they say it turns their stomach. The boys laugh at me.”<sup>4</sup>*

Another said: *“When I came back home I had two marriage offers but after they found out [about] my past they never came again.”<sup>5</sup>*

## WHAT CHILDREN WANT

## WHAT CHILDREN DON’T WANT

Children told us that they needed interventions to help them cope with integrating in the new destination or back home if they return to their areas of origin.

*“During my period at home, I had support from social services and [an organization]. They helped us with two beds and the generator necessary for my father’s work. I had regular visits from the social worker and from one psychiatrist.”* said one child from South Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Initiatives like shelters and safe spaces providing specialised support, advice and assistance to returning children can also provide a lifeline to children who are struggling to reintegrate.

*“It is fine that I can call the shelter anytime I need support and they do not refuse me,”* said one girl who had returned home. *“When my fiancé beat me up, the police here [in her home city] again didn’t do anything. I talked to the shelter coordinator who called [the regional administration] and with a simple telephone call, the police came to help me. Without the ladies from the shelter it would be much more difficult.”<sup>7</sup>*

Shelters and repatriation support programmes can also provide those children who are planning to go on the move again with information to ensure their journeys are safer and they can escape exploitation and danger.

*“I’ve learned a lot of things. Had I only known all of these things before,”* said one girl from Eastern Europe about a programme helping children move safely and avoid trafficking. *“Now I know how to protect myself. I have agreed with my family on certain passwords in case of emergency. I have realized that the trafficker can be nice too, not necessarily fierce, he can be kind. Both my mother and me understand things better.”<sup>8</sup>*

But children also told us of the problems they had when programmes didn’t meet their expectations or match their needs. Promises of education and support that are not honoured, or schemes that don’t match the needs or desires of the returning children can do more harm than good in the long run.

One 17-year old boy from Vietnam said, *“When I was 12 years old, my parents sent me to an informal class (Grade 4) supported by the local CPFC – an organisation for poor and migrant children who could not go to school or dropped out of school. There were only seven or eight children in the class and most of them did not enjoy studying. When I started Grade 5, the class was closed after a few months as most of the students dropped out. I was disappointed because I was the best student in the class. But I could not do anything about it.”*

Children in Internally Displaced People’s camps (IDP) are among the most vulnerable of all children on the move, often being forced from their homes by conflict or disaster and left without basic services and access to education and health facilities. One 14-year old in an IDP camp in Eastern Europe said that broken promises of help by NGOs had a devastating effect on the morale of children in the camp.

*‘I think it all depends on these foreigners. Why would those people come here and say “In two months’ time you will have a house and a job in Kosovo, like you used to have it’s not your fault that you lost everything and you house was torn down and there was a war”. Some people came to ask us who wanted to return, and we said we did, and then what...? They have waited for years, and so have we.’<sup>9</sup>*



# FINDING HELP

Across West Africa, Latin America and Asia there are a growing number of organisations and networks supporting children on the move.

These include children's own organisations and associations. As well as providing information, shelter and material assistance, they are also a source of much-needed peer-to-peer psychological and emotional support.

Children say that having moral support from other children who have gone through the same experiences is incredibly important in helping them deal with their problems.

*“These children trust us, they open their hearts to us as we open ours to them”<sup>1</sup>*

*Seynabou,  
MAEJT*

Children say that having moral support from other children who have gone through the same experiences is incredibly important in helping them deal with their problems.

“The reason I joined the Association? They are taking care of me and that's exactly what I was looking for. If I see a child with wounds on [their] body, with uncombed hair I take [them] to... Be taken care of...”<sup>2</sup> 16 year-old boy, from Porto Novo in Benin.

Children's associations also try and protect other young migrants by spreading messages about how to protect against danger whilst on the move such as encouraging children to know their rights, to question any promises of work or to postpone or cancel their trip.

“I was invited by child peer educators to join in a child rights education session. I got some leaflets, posters and T-shirts with simple messages about informed migration. Through this, I learnt how to protect myself and my friends from abuse and trafficking,” said one 15 year old girl in the Mekong. “Most importantly, I know where to get help if anything bad happens to me.”<sup>3</sup>

In Dakar, Senegal, the African Movement of Child and Youth Workers (MAEJT) is building a network of child and youth associations stretching across West African countries such as Senegal, Mali and Togo.

In Oufouanou, a village in Niger, a local MAEJT association started holding meetings to raise awareness among other children about the dangers of migration and trafficking. Then the children in the association started working together to create alternative sources of employment so they wouldn't have to leave in search of work, such as growing vegetables or collecting firewood. As a result they reported a significant drop in the number of children leaving to find work.<sup>4</sup>

Children say that they wanted more access to this kind of support.

“I would like Save the Children to create more chances for our group to meet and to exchange our experiences with other children's group from other communities in order to strengthen our understanding of our rights and how to protect ourselves,” said one 17 year old boy from Vietnam. “I would like other poor and migrant children to be supported by Save the Children to go to school.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this and the clear and obvious benefits of helping grow networks of child-led networks and associations, there is little support from local authorities, national governments and civil society for these associations.















Global Movement  
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