

Resettlement as a protection tool for refugee children

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There is a need to ensure that new and existing initiatives to resettle refugee children at risk, including unaccompanied children, are better able to serve their unique protection needs in today's global context.

Today, more than half of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide are children under the age of 18. Displaced girls and boys leave behind not only homes and family members but also the safety and stability essential to their long-term development. In the face of forced displacement on a scale unseen in the recent past, resettlement is relevant not only for the protection of those in need but also as a mechanism for global responsibility sharing. A myriad of international agencies and the public at large have shown a surge of interest in resettlement, and resettlement of children in particular.

Prioritisation of children at risk as a category for resettlement dates back to the 1980s, when the United States (US) established its Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program to support children among the 'boat people' fleeing Vietnam. Since then, other high-profile displacements, including that of the Lost Boys of Sudan, have led to an increased focus on unaccompanied children for resettlement. Other traditional resettlement countries, including Norway and Sweden, have established programmes to resettle and support unaccompanied refugee children. The United Kingdom (UK) established a new initiative in 2016 to resettle vulnerable refugee children from the Middle East and North Africa, regardless of their family separation status.

Currently the number of resettlement places is dramatically less than the needs of children for whom resettlement would be the most appropriate solution. Globally, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, submitted nearly 4,500 children and adolescents for resettlement in 2015, representing 3.6% of global resettlement submissions. Significantly more of these children were

submitted for resettlement as part of family units and under other resettlement categories than under UNHCR's category of 'children and adolescents at risk'.

Current resettlement needs of children at risk

Globally, nearly 100,000 – or slightly less than 1% – of all refugee and asylum-seeking children are separated from their families. While these children are highly vulnerable without their usual parent or caregiver to support them, refugee children within family units can also face a variety of acute and sometimes life-threatening risks. As well



Where do you come from? Resettled refugee children in New Zealand share pictures of themselves and use a map of the world to show where they have come from. Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, Auckland, New Zealand.

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as unaccompanied and separated children, children at risk include survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, children who are recruited into armed groups, children who are exploited and forced to work in dangerous and harmful conditions, and other children facing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Estimates based upon prevalence rates of the main risks could put the number as high as 1.9 million refugee children at risk.

Focusing on specific displacement contexts reveals different patterns and prevalence of risks facing refugee children. Among Syrian refugees in the Middle East, for example, some 10,000 children – or less than 0.5% of all children among this refugee population – are separated from their family. Far more children face other equally harmful risks including hazardous child labour and child marriage, especially as families face dwindling resources. Among South Sudanese refugees, on the other hand, approximately 44,000 children – or 5% of child refugees – are separated or unaccompanied. South Sudanese refugee children also face significant risks of

sexual and gender-based violence, including child marriage and sexual exploitation as well as child labour. There have also been reported cases of recruitment of refugee children into armed groups, with 12,000 children within South Sudan estimated to have been recruited.

Resettlement may not be the solution in the best interests of all these children, however. In the majority of cases, refugee children receive support to address their protection issues locally, are reunified with family in refugee-hosting countries within the region and in some cases eventually return to their country of origin. The appropriateness of resettlement to resolve a child's protection situation would always be determined on an individual basis through resettlement screening and UNHCR's Best Interests Procedures.¹ However, the sheer number of girls and boys facing acute protection risks compared with the very limited number of places for resettlement reveals a wide gulf between the needs and the availability of solutions.

The recommended response

Any resettlement programme could usefully include a targeted focus on the category of children and adolescents at risk, including children within family groups and children separated from their parents or families. The UK's new initiative for children in the Middle East and North Africa is an important first step in this direction. Importantly, the children and adolescents at risk category avoids promoting negative coping mechanisms, as families have been known to separate on purpose in order to gain access to schemes which solely resettle unaccompanied and separated children.

Recognising that each child's needs, capacities and protection risks are different, an individual assessment or determination of their best interests must remain central to any resettlement decision and guide the resettlement process. Family unity, in particular, must continue to be prioritised in Best Interests Procedures and must also be recognised by receiving states as a primary consideration for the well-being of children, noting the pivotal



role that families play in children's protection and long-term development.

Prospects for family reunification should be a key factor in the decision whether to resettle a child, and steps should be taken to ensure that resettlement does not undermine or seriously hamper future reunion with their family. Following their arrival in a resettlement country, it is important for unaccompanied and separated children to be able to benefit from family reunification with both close and extended family members. Visa restrictions that prevent children from being reunited, after their arrival in the country of resettlement, with family members who are traceable present a significant obstacle to the resettlement of unaccompanied and separated children.

In addition, family reunification policies could do more to accommodate differing cultural family structures within law and policy. Most resettlement countries currently only allow for family reunification with the nuclear family. Such restrictions have posed challenges to finding solutions for children trying to reunite with family members in the context of the recent emergency in Europe. Furthermore, shortened waiting times and prioritisation of rapid processing of children at risk can help mitigate the long-term negative impacts of prolonged family separation on their development.

Finally, continued support upon arrival in the resettlement countries is crucial for children and their families. Children and adolescents at risk will require continued protection services and assistance to integrate safely in their new community. Psychosocial services, whether through counselling or local peer networks, will be essential to assist children at risk and their families to overcome past experiences and successfully embark upon their new life. Careful attention should also be placed on initiatives to encourage integration, especially those pairing refugee children and families with members of local communities and providing opportunities to form new support networks. Canada's current Settlement Workers in Schools scheme provides an excellent example of support provision for

children and families.² Resettlement workers are based in schools, assigned to work with individual children and their families, and provide ongoing counselling, home visits and educational advice and support.

The future

Our collective focus on addressing the needs of children at risk could be sharpened and new initiatives to respond to needs would be valuable. New programmes should consider all children at risk, avoiding the pitfalls of focusing solely on unaccompanied and separated children. At the same time, UNHCR could do more to ensure that children and adolescents at risk, for whom resettlement might be in their best interests, are identified proactively. In refugee operations where systems already exist for identifying refugee children facing risks and referring them for local protection services and support, these systems could be better linked with resettlement services.

UNHCR, its partners and states must continue to identify innovative approaches to protecting children on the move – whether through resettlement or other pathways to durable solutions.³ Importantly, any progress in keeping children on the move safe must include support to strengthen national child protection systems for the benefit of **all** children, as well as continued collaboration with states to ensure respect for existing principles and frameworks governing protection and assistance to children.

It is no surprise that countries of asylum struggle to meet the demand for good-quality child protection services in most refugee operations. However, resettlement will not be the solution in the best interests of the majority of the nearly 12.5 million refugee and asylum-seeking children globally. Most of these children and their families will remain in their countries of first asylum. To meet their protection needs, greater investment in long-term child protection and education programmes within refugee operations is sorely needed.

Resettlement has become an increasingly vital part of UNHCR's efforts to find solutions and advocate for more equitable

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responsibility sharing for refugees. Within this focus, resettlement processes could be strengthened to better meet the distinct protection needs of children and adolescents at risk. Increased investment in protection and social welfare services for children in countries of first asylum and in resettlement countries will help refugee children in the search for long-term solutions.

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1. (2008) *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child* www.refworld.org/docid/48480c342.html and (2011) *Field Handbook for the Implementation of UNHCR BID Guidelines* www.refworld.org/docid/4e4a57d02.html
2. See <http://swissask.ca/>
3. See Background Paper for the 2016 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Children on the Move: www.unhcr.org/583d8e597