

Advancing the Rights of Children in Migration

PRIORITIES FOR THE 2026 INTERNATIONAL
MIGRATION REVIEW FORUM

In an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, there are currently between 37 and 42 million children who are also migrants.¹ No matter where they are from and why they and their families move, children in migration contexts are children first and foremost, with the same human rights as all children – rights that do not cease at borders.² Every child has the right to protection, care and the support and services they need to thrive.

The **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)** recognizes children as a central consideration for migration governance and includes child sensitivity as a guiding principle. It reinforces existing international legal obligations in relation to the rights of the child and the principle of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all migration related decisions.

The **2026 International Migration Review Forum (IMRF)** – the second global review of GCM implementation – presents an opportunity for States to better protect and support children.

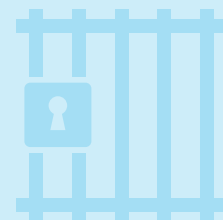
UNICEF urges States and other stakeholders to prioritize the following central concerns for children in the context of migration.



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- 1 [10 Facts about Children on the Move - UNICEF DATA](#)
- 2 [A/79/213: Children are children first and foremost: protecting child rights in migration contexts - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Gehad Madi | OHCHR](#)

Ending child immigration detention



13 ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION

GCM Objective 13

Immigration detention is never in a child's best interests and is a child rights violation. Evidence clearly shows that it harms children's physical, emotional and psychological health, as well as their overall wellbeing and development. There are safe, effective, rights-based and community-based alternatives available that support the wellbeing of children and families while adhering to immigration procedures.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Advancing alternatives to detention for children in Thailand

Thailand's adoption of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Determination of Measures and Approaches Alternative to Detention of Children in Immigration Detention Centers (MOU-ATD) in January 2019, followed by its association with Standard Operating Procedures in 2020, marked an important shift away from detention and towards child protection, family unity, and community-based care.

Before these reforms, children in the context of migration were frequently detained by the Immigration Bureau of the Royal Thai Police, often in harmful conditions. Since the implementation of the MOU-ATD, significant progress has been made with children and families benefiting from release from immigration detention and placement in alternative care arrangements, including in child and family shelters managed by the Department of Children and Youth, reunited with family members, or supported through community-based initiatives. This progress shows that with government leadership, case management, and partnership across agencies, safer and more humane alternatives are possible, but continued efforts are needed towards full and non-discriminatory application of the MOU-ATD.

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Governments to end the use of child immigration detention, and to invest in child rights-based, non-custodial, community- and family-based reception and care arrangements, for unaccompanied children and for accompanied children and their families.

Ensuring child sensitivity in return and reintegration processes



21 DIGNIFIED RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

GCM Objective 21

Migrant children experience unique vulnerabilities before, during, and after return. Their experiences of return are different to adults as they have specific needs. Unaccompanied and separated children have additional needs for family tracing, accompaniment and specialized, trauma-informed care. Children are often overlooked in return and reintegration processes resulting in mental health impacts, discrimination, social and economic exclusion, protection risks including exploitation, abuse, and forced recruitment, and repeated exposure to the dangers of irregular migration.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Child-sensitive reintegration for families in Albania

In Albania, a case management process was established for returnee families which is tailored to the needs of each member of the family and includes an age- and gender-specific response to needs. Social workers lead an initial needs assessment of the family and make referrals to the municipal social services or to its multifunctional community centres. These design a reintegration plan, assigning responsibilities to different public and private service providers on issues such as housing, economic empowerment, documentation and registration, educational support, social integration, and psychosocial support.

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Governments to invest in child-sensitive approaches to return and reintegration, including individual best interest processes that consider their safety, family ties, and potential regular pathways to identify sustainable solutions; strengthening cross-border cooperation between child protection authorities; and child-sensitive reintegration support. Children who return to their country of origin – whether voluntarily or based on a best interest determination – should be supported with access to case management, referral to appropriate services, and reintegration support, including specific measures to ensure their inclusion in national and local systems and services.

Ensuring inclusive access to basic services for migrant children



GCM Objective 15

Migrant children can face multiple barriers in accessing social services, including education and healthcare, with long-term impacts on their wellbeing and development. These barriers include language, socioeconomic factors, documentation requirements, and a lack of eligibility or structural exclusion.

PROMISING PRACTICE

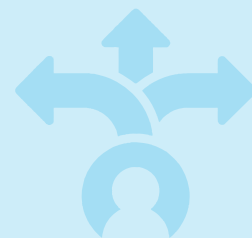
An inclusive child protection system for all children in Jordan

Over recent years, Jordan has made significant investments to strengthen its national child protection system. A defining feature of the government's approach is its commitment to nondiscrimination (as referred to in the 2022 Child Rights Law): children are not differentiated based on nationality, legal status, or identity. Instead, vulnerability is the primary criterion guiding prevention and response efforts. This principle that all children in Jordan are entitled to protection under the law, regardless of nationality, is consistently reflected across government institutions. For refugee and migrant children facing protection risks, such as lack of documentation or engagement in unauthorized work, the State prioritizes protective and welfare-oriented responses rather than detention or punitive measures.

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Governments to ensure that migrant children have access to social services, including education and physical and mental healthcare. A child's migration status should never be an obstacle to access vital services. "Firewalls" should be established between immigration enforcement and service provision so that children and families can access these without fear.

Expanding regular pathways to include children and youth and supporting family unity



GCM Objectives 5 and 7

Millions of children remain behind when one or both parents migrate, and policies concerning whether and how children remain behind – including migration governance and labour migration policies – often fail to consider their impact. Migrating together with family members, or being reunited after migration, remains out of reach for many children due to legal, administrative and practical barriers. Best interests, and family tracing and reunification procedures are often inadequate or missing.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Upholding family unity for children on the move in Mexico

Mexico's General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (LGDNNA) establishes family reunification as a right and core principle regarding children on the move who may experience family separation, making it possible to reunite them with their loved ones either in Mexico or in a third country, if their best interests and the effective protection of their rights so dictate. The law also obliges the Attorneys General (*Procuradurías*) for the Protection of Children and Adolescents to activate special protection procedures to determine the best interests of each child on the move and to dictate the measures that must be complied with by the various authorities of the country, including the National Institute of Migration (INM), to guarantee their well-being and comprehensive restitution of rights.³

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Policies that prevent children from being separated from their parents and caregivers – enabling families to remain together or to reunite in a safe and regular manner. States should establish and strengthen accessible family-centred migration pathways for family accompaniment and reunification, as well as regularization mechanisms that recognize family ties, and adopt and invest in more flexible and effective procedures to reunite families if separation has occurred. Child protection authorities should strengthen cross-border cooperation and case management to ensure that family tracing and reunification for unaccompanied children is carried out swiftly in line with the child's best interests.

3 Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) and Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN), Mapping of good practices in family reunification for unaccompanied and separated children and adolescents, May 2026 (forthcoming).

Increase learning-to-earning opportunities for migrant children and youth



GCM Objective 18

Migration often disrupts education for children, and that disruption can limit future opportunities, and increase protection risks. Supporting children's learning, skills development, and transition to earning helps prevent long-term vulnerability and promotes safe, sustainable futures. Children and youth-on-the-move remain overlooked in policy discussions and programming efforts related to the green transition, whilst climate change exacerbates barriers to education and workforce development experienced by this growing population.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Expanding learning-to-earning pathways in Eastern and Southern Africa

The Digital Learning-to-Earning (L2E) pathway in Eastern and Southern Africa stands out as a best practice for linking skills development directly to employment, particularly for migrant youth. Launched in 2022 through a multi-stakeholder partnership led by UNICEF and supported by PROSPECTS Partnership, the programme delivers flexible, fully remote training in market-relevant digital skills alongside personalized support. Its inclusive design intentionally prioritizes marginalized groups – especially displaced youth, young women, and persons with disabilities – while combining technical training, soft skills development, industry-recognized certifications, and real-world work experience through internships. This holistic approach ensures that learning is not isolated, but directly connected to tangible earning opportunities.

The programme's pilot success in Uganda demonstrates its scalability and impact, with strong demand, high female participation, and targeted support enabling displaced youth to access training and employment pathways. Its outcomes have already informed national policy, contributing to Uganda's Digital Agenda Strategy and the development of a Digital Competency Framework and Toolkit now reaching thousands of learners. As it expands to other countries, this model offers a replicable, system-level solution for bridging the gap between education and employment – making it a compelling example of an effective, inclusive, and future-oriented learning-to-earning initiative.

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Governments to commit to inclusive Learning-to-Earning pathways that equip migrant children and youth with market-relevant skills and clear routes into decent work. This means integrating digital, technical, and soft skills into national systems, ensuring access for all regardless of status, and investing in flexible learning, connectivity, and safe environments. Governments should also strengthen partnerships with the private sector and other actors to align training with labour market needs and expand pathways to employment. With targeted support and sustainable policies, Governments can ensure migrant youth successfully transition from learning to earning and contribute to their communities and economies.

Investment in data and evidence to improve outcomes for migrant children



GCM Objective 1

Reliable, timely and accessible data are essential to understand how migration affects children and their families, and to inform child-sensitive policies and programmes. Significant data gaps remain on this population, and it is therefore critical that the global community take action to strengthen child-specific data and data capacities.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Strengthening data about migrant children and youth in Italy

The Italian National Institute of Statistics has conducted surveys specifically focusing on the integration experiences of first- and second-generation immigrant children and youth, comparing their experiences to those of non-immigrant Italian national children and youth.⁴

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Governments to commit to disaggregate data by age, sex and migratory status; collect and analyse data on key issues related to children on the move (without jeopardizing their access to social services); and make systematic financial and technical investments to transform data and statistical systems to better address child-specific needs.



⁴ International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, *Data and Statistics for Children on the Move: Essential sources and good practices*, United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2023

Route-based protection for children on the move



The Global Compact "...offers a 360-degree vision of international migration and recognizes that a comprehensive approach is needed to optimize the overall benefits of migration, while addressing risks and challenges for individuals and communities in countries of origin, transit and destination."

The 2026 IMRF Policy Debate will focus on the route-based approach and the importance of strengthening cross-border cooperation, including responsible data sharing, to ensure continuous protection and care for migrant children across borders along key migration routes. This includes case management, best interest procedures, non-custodial reception systems, and access to legal identity and essential services.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Cross-border child protection through Zambia's National Referral Mechanism

Zambia has established a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for cross-border cooperation on individual cases of child migrants from neighbouring countries. Zambia's border districts have established Best Interests Determination (BID) and multisectoral Child Protection Committees, with law enforcement and social welfare authorities from at least two countries. These committees undertake screening and identification of children on the move, facilitate referrals and service provision, and enable local integration or placement in alternative care, or – where in the child's best interests – cross-border family tracing and reunification, repatriation, reception and reintegration of returnees.

UNICEF CALLS FOR

Strengthening national systems and operational capacity to prioritise children's best interests and ensure access to services throughout their journeys, and sustainably address migration management challenges by ensuring policies, procedures and practices work across borders while upholding children's rights.

for every child, **every right**