

## CHILDREN AND THE GLOBAL MIGRATION CRISIS: AN INTERNATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

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### 1. Children Caught in the Crisis



Today, half of the 60 million people displaced worldwide are children—the greatest number of total displaced people since World War II and the greatest percentage who are children in over a decade.<sup>1</sup> Despite a harsh winter, the first months of 2016 have seen record number of refugees arriving in Europe. For the first time since European refugee crisis began, the number of women and children exceed males.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of terrorism in Paris and San Bernardino, this period has also been marked by tightened border control measures in many countries, limiting legal pathways to asylum and family reunification.<sup>3</sup>

Accompanied or alone, children face tremendous risks of abuse, neglect, exploitation, trafficking and forced military recruitment. Many have witnessed or experienced violence and trauma. As the director of a center for refugee children in Germany recently told the *New York Times*, some of the children “have never held a coloring pen in their hand, but they’ve seen their own father beheaded.”<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes displaced children’s survival itself is uncertain, as evidenced by the average of two children each day who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach Europe since 2015<sup>5</sup> and the 10,000 or more children who have gone missing over the past two years since arriving in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Even when survival is assured, children are often denied fundamental opportunities to grow, learn, and thrive. Very few children have access to education, and many are receiving very informal and inadequate educational supports.<sup>7</sup> Many experts warn that Europe’s refugee crisis is creating a “stateless generation,” with governments refusing to comply with the UN convention on the rights of the child by granting nationality to children born within their borders.<sup>8</sup>

*The combination of persistent, trauma, uncertainty, statelessness, lack of protection and educational disruption may lead to a new generation of disaffected, unfulfilled, ideologically vulnerable young adults.*

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR 2014 Global Trends Report, <http://www.unhcr.org/2014trends/>

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, 2 Feb 2016, “More children and women seek safety in Europe,” [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_90000.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_90000.html)

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, 12 Feb 2016, “Some 80,000 refugees arrive in Europe in first six weeks of 2016,” <http://www.unhcr.org/56bdf0f26.html>

<sup>4</sup> NY Times, 28 Oct 2015, “Migrant Children, Arriving Alone and Frightened,” <http://nyti.ms/1M2WTiD>

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, 19 Feb 2016, “Two children drown every day on average trying to reach safety in Europe,” [bit.ly/1WvGNBv](http://bit.ly/1WvGNBv)

<sup>6</sup> BBC, 31 Jan 2016, “Migrant crisis: More than 10,000 children ‘missing’,” [bbc.in/1JRBdbF](http://bbc.in/1JRBdbF)

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, 15 Oct 2014, “Investing in the Future,” <http://www.unhcr.org/543fce099.html>

<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, 27 Dec 2015, “Refugee crisis creates ‘stateless generation’ of children,” [bit.ly/1lwPDgS](http://bit.ly/1lwPDgS)

## CASE STUDY – UKRAINE

Nearly 600,000 children have had their lives up-ended due to the conflict in Ukraine, with one-third of children in psychosocial distress and more than 20 children killed, according to February 2016 updates from UNICEF. “Two years of violence, shelling and fear have left an indelible mark on thousands of children in eastern Ukraine,” said Giovanna Barberis, UNICEF Representative in Ukraine. “As the conflict continues, we need to reach these children urgently to meet their physical as well as psychological needs.” A humanitarian emergency is unfolding in the country, with 20 percent of schools damaged or destroyed, failing infrastructure and fuel shortages, and lack of access to healthcare, medicine, and safe drinking water.

Source: [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_90268.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_90268.html)

## 2. Drivers of Growth

What is driving this acceleration in the number of displaced people and its devastating impact on kids? New conflicts are emerging while others are persisting. While displacement can result from persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations, the level of instability is exacerbated by poverty. Nearly 90% of refugees are from economically less developed countries and regions.<sup>9</sup> During the past five years alone, there were 15 new or re-emerging conflicts that increased population displacement. Most of these crises remain unresolved. Consequently, fewer refugees or otherwise displaced persons can return to their home countries. Only 126,800 refugees did so in 2014, making it the lowest rate of return in 31 years.<sup>10</sup> A recent UNHCR study also warns that climate change will compound food and water insecurity and competition over resources, accelerating displacement.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. State of Response

Current levels of forced displacement require an unprecedented scale of global response. Many capable governmental organizations, United Nations (UN) entities, and NGOs are working in very challenging contests to care for vulnerable people. But the resources are inadequate. Beyond long-term funding needs are the acute realities of the coming months—as evidenced by the UN recently noting it is \$173 million short of what it needs just to help refugees survive a brutal winter in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

As UNHCR High Commissioner António Guterres said at the UN General Assembly on November 3, 2015: “The corresponding increase in humanitarian needs has overwhelmed the global response capacity. We need to face the truth: the international multilateral humanitarian community – UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and NGOs – even when combining all its resources, is no longer able to provide the core protection and the basic life-saving assistance which the people we care for need and are entitled to receive.”

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR 2014 Global Trends Report, <http://www.unhcr.org/2014trends/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, 15 Oct 2015, “UNHCR, the Environment & Climate Change,” <http://www.unhcr.org/540854f49.html>

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR Press Release, 5 Nov 2015, <http://bit.ly/1QuR00l>

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Even when funding is available, logistical and bureaucratic challenges can keep help out of reach. For example, in 2014 U.S. President Barack Obama committed to a new process whereby Central American children could apply for refugee status and avoid dangerous smugglers or self-guided treks. However, not a single child has come to the U.S. through the new program due to significant bureaucratic barriers.<sup>13</sup>

## 4. Solutions

*This crisis for children demands an urgent CALL TO ACTION for the international community*

**Protect children and make sure their basic needs are met.** If children lack proper supplies and services during the first years of life, they may suffer significant long-term physical, cognitive, and emotional consequences. We also must improve the speed and effectiveness of systems to ensure children's survival and security.

**Invest in children's educational, social, and emotional well-being.**

Failure to protect, educate, and socialize children will delay the recovery and development of entire societies. Expanding the service delivery capacity of host governments is the best way to ensure the long term welfare of children and families throughout this crisis and beyond. Models of combined safety-net services, such as education-linked primary care, can help maximize child well-being.

**Expand collaboration across sectors.** Non-profit, governmental, and public resources are inadequate to meet the massive needs at hand. From supply chain linkages and money to expertise and political influence, the private sector in particular can help provide critical skills and resources. Cross-sectoral contributions can increase the scale and speed of recovery to match that of humanitarian need affecting millions of vulnerable children.

For further information:

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“Not investing in young refugees is a huge missed opportunity...it will be them who hold the keys to the future of their countries.”  
- UNHCR High Commissioner  
António Guterres

<sup>13</sup> NY Times, 5 Nov 2015, “Red Tape Slows U.S. Help for Children Fleeing Central America” <http://nyti.ms/1M6COrD>