



SEEFAR

Counseling to Protect Supporting the choices of irregular child migrants

April 2019

SEEFAR

OUR VISION

is for a world in which vulnerable people have more opportunities to advance themselves.

THE PURPOSE

of our social enterprise is to work with those people to build a better future.

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Summary



Intervention before children leave home has the potential to drastically reduce the vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of children migrating irregularly each year.



As well as migration information, children thinking about irregular migration need specialist support in processing information and making decisions.



Children react to their environment, process information, and weigh risks and rewards differently to adults.



Communications specialists, child psychologists and child protection experts can develop a child-friendly and strategic approach to communications with children on the move.



Introduction

Policymakers are often at a loss when considering how to respond to irregular child migration. European Union (EU) cooperation with Turkey and Libya and the family separation crisis in the United States show global failures in reconciling ‘tough’ border policies with every child’s right to live free from violence and exploitation.

Many child protection measures in Western destination countries (expedited asylum processes, guardianship, and legal aid) do not address children’s needs before or during difficult journeys. Effective and responsible early intervention can reduce the number in need of emergency protection, with better outcomes for children and a cost-conscious international humanitarian community.

This Seefar issue brief examines the following question: how can better support for children’s decisions around migration help them achieve better outcomes? With good data that recognizes their unique profile and needs, children’s own agency can be a powerful tool for change.

Children on the Move

Today, children are migrating irregularly to destination countries in Europe and North America in large numbers. Between January and August 2018, over 16,000 children crossed the Mediterranean sea to Italy, Spain, and Greece, the majority unaccompanied.¹ At the US-Mexico border, 119,149 unaccompanied children and families were apprehended between October 2017 and July 2018.² Their journeys are characterized by acute vulnerabilities and a pervasive sense of powerlessness.³

Before departure irregular migration can appear to be the obvious choice for children. Other potentially safer options may seem inadequate or unobtainable, even where they exist and might be considered in the best interests of the child. Poor knowledge and understanding about how to navigate alternatives means irregular migration is perceived to be the only way to take control of what feels like an otherwise hopeless situation.

In transit many child migrants experience physical and sexual violence or become victims of trafficking and forced work. These experiences often have stark psychological impacts on child victims. By itself, the disruptive experience of leaving home can bring psychological challenges including trauma, anxiety, and stress. When children fail to reach their hoped-for destination, many do not understand why or blame themselves.

“The road to Sudan is the toughest. If you are arrested in [Eritrea], you know you will be imprisoned. But in Sudan they can kidnap you, people with knives steal from you and they rape women.”

Eritrean minor, interviewed in Rome, Italy, January 2017.

“I don’t know what to think, I’m in prison [in Libya]. When I get out, I will try to go to Europe.”

Ethiopian minor, interviewed in Zuwara, Libya, March 2017.

“I think everybody should know the risks of the [Sahara] desert: where the road robbers and militia are.”

Sudanese minor, interviewed in Sebha, Libya, March 2017.

¹ UNHCR. “Situation Mediterranean Situation,” August 16, 2018. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

² U.S. Customs and Border Protection. “Southwest Border Migration FY2018 | U.S. Customs and Border Protection,” July 2018. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration>.

³ Save the Children, “Protecting Syrian Children En Route to Europe”, January 2017, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12177/pdf/protecting_syrian_children_en_route_to_europe_feb_2017.pdf

Migrant Decision-making

Seefar's experience in research and migration communications shows that adults interested in irregular migration do not always analyze all of the information at hand before making decisions. For example, they may trust anecdotal information from friends and family instead of seeking information from official sources such as governments or NGOs.

Yet adult migrants generally take the decision to migrate seriously and - at least to some degree - weigh anticipated payoffs against expected costs, even if this calculation is not fully informed. In Afghanistan, Seefar's research highlights how security risks and individual economic well-being influence irregular migration decisions.⁴ In West Africa, Seefar interviewed thousands of potential migrants balancing perceived better employment opportunities with the known risks of irregular migration.⁵

For adults considering migration, the key gap is in the quality and trustworthiness of information during the decision-making process. Like any major purchase, market asymmetries (usually the buyer understanding less about the product than the seller) leads to unfair deals for the party with less information. Irregular migration follows a similar pattern - with much higher stakes.

Seefar delivers strategic counselling services to women and men considering irregular migration in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria and elsewhere. Potential migrants seek these services because they offer trusted information on migration and support in relating it to their own circumstances. This information often leads beneficiaries to recalibrate their plans, whether delaying or abandoning them or exploring alternatives. Some still choose to migrate but do so better informed of the risks and how to get help. In all cases, counselling empowers adult migrants to achieve better outcomes for themselves and their families.

⁴ Seefar, "Reluctant Journeys: Why Afghans migrate irregularly to Europe", May 2018. <https://seefar.org/research/reluctant-journeys-afghans-migrate-europe/>

⁵ Seefar, and Optimity Advisors. "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information En-Route to Europe : Studies on Communication Channels Used by Migrants and Asylum Seekers to Obtain Information in Countries of Origin and Transit, with Particular Focus on Online and Social Media." Website, April 2017. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/85a216f9-42bb-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>.

How Children are Different

Most efforts to address child migration today view children as subjects rather than as agents of their own destiny. In other words, they either react to child migration or portray people smugglers as the principal actors of importance. While many of these responses will continue to be necessary, an increased focus on interventions that influence child decision-making prior to and during migrant journeys may be more powerful in changing outcomes.

Effective intervention requires an understanding of **who child migrants are, what motivates them, how they make decisions, and who influences them**. Since 2016, Seefar has conducted over 3,000 consultations and interviews with children aged 15-18 considering irregular migration or on the move.⁶

Who are child migrants?

Child migrants differ from adults. In addition to differences in age and family responsibilities, children interested in migration are nearly all single and unemployed. On average, they will have less education than adult migrants. They have had less opportunity to absorb information, form assumptions, and sink costs into their lives at home. This means that **children considering migration have different aspirations and influences than adult migrants**.

Seefar's research also indicates that children generally have similar destination preferences to adult migrants. However, many adults attempt to migrate multiple times or have previously lived abroad; children are almost always first-time migrants. Less familiar with travel options and hazards, children pursuing irregular migration are at far greater risk of exploitation and harm. At the same time, without a strong understanding of alternatives to irregular migration, children are often more interested in - and willing to pursue - regular migration options, if such channels are available.

What motivates child migration?

Children share many of the push and pull factors influencing adult migratory decisions but their relative importance varies. Understanding what children expect to get out of their migration is central to designing effective interventions. Frequent reasons children cite for wanting to migrate include:

- **Family reunion:** Many children have told Seefar researchers that if they were reunited with family members who had migrated ahead of them, they would no longer be interested in migration. Meanwhile, children in transit often long to return home to family members.

⁶ While this data has informed a confident analysis below, we are under no illusions that more research is sorely needed.



- **Safety:** Children considering migration are extremely sensitive to their security environment and often move in search of safety. Many are concerned with fighting and armed conflict (by some estimates, more than 50% of refugees and IDPs in the Horn of Africa are children). However, migration is often an escape from abuse at home, petty crime, and targeted threats to their safety.⁷
- **Jobs:** In conflict and displacement contexts, child work is often used as a short-term coping mechanism to support families lacking economic support. In contexts of poverty, living abroad holds the (often unfulfilled) promise of long-term economic well-being.
- **Family expectations:** in some cases, children may be pressured directly by families to seek work abroad to help the family.
- **Education:** After family reunification, improved safety, and livelihood prospects, children mentioned educational aspirations, suggesting this is a secondary motivation.
- **Other factors:** Like adults, there are many other factors that can motivate child migratory decisions. Many Eritrean children pointed to their desire to avoid compulsory national or military service, while children from across Africa and Asia were swayed by the positive voices of their friends living abroad.

How do children make decisions?

Efforts to support children on the move should be based on a strong understanding of how children make decisions. Unlike adults, who generally have more advanced cognitive development, a child's ability to think, reason, and problem-solve varies tremendously. These differences broadly suggest that adults are more able to make informed migration decisions in their own interest than children.

Specifically, child decision-making is often influenced by **developmental age**: Children move through different stages of development over time.⁸ As children engage with their surroundings, they gain knowledge and adjust to new information. Children of around 6-8 years tend to focus more heavily on short-term rewards and penalties rather than long-term consequences. They also tend to think from their own perspective rather than adopting the perspective of others.

Slightly older children (age 12-14) generally have a stronger grasp of long-term consequences and rewards. They are better-able to think and problem-solve abstractly, using information to inform decision-making. However, traumatic stress can impair this reasoning ability.

⁷ Save the Children and Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, "Young and on the move: Children and youth in mixed migration flows within and from the Horn of Africa", 2016. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/10080/pdf/young_and_on_the_move_sep_2016.pdf

⁸ See, for example, Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Cherry, Kendra, "Piaget's Theory: The 4 Stages of Cognitive Development", March 2018. <https://www.verywellmind.com/piagets-stages-of-cognitive-development-2795457>



The development process is complicated, not always linear, and may be influenced by other factors:

- **Experiences of trauma:** Trauma can delay a child's cognitive and emotional development. This can lead children to focus on reacting and surviving in the moment rather than planning long-term. Departing home to escape threats to safety can itself be traumatic. Experiences such as abuse or violence may instill a degree of resilience for some; while others may be less able to make emotional or relationship-based decisions. Exposure to trauma while in transit and separation from parents, who act as emotional regulators, may influence decision-making related to return or onward movement.⁹
- **Situational needs:** Children are sensitive to their immediate needs (e.g. fatigue, hunger, pain), which influence decisions to leave in times of crisis, with lesser ability to factor longer term risks or 'unknowns' into the decision-making process.
- **Culture and relationships:** Many child migrants come from cultures with strict age-based customs, such as child obedience. These dynamics are harmful when adults close to children do not have their best interests in mind.

⁹ Trauma is particularly widespread among displaced children. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Refugee Trauma", <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/refugee-trauma>

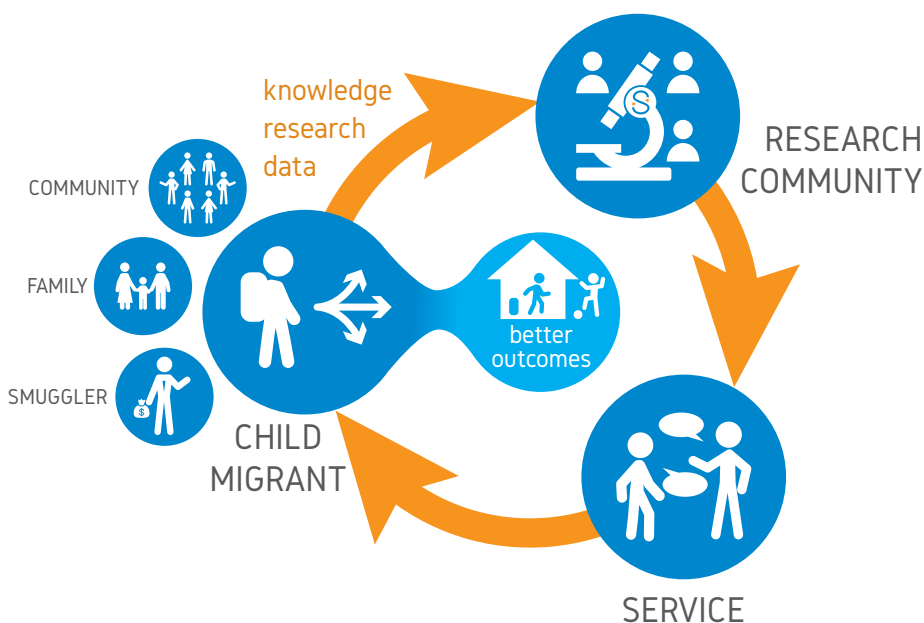
All migrants are influenced by a complex network of family, friends, community members, mainstream and social media, service providers, government messages, and other voices. Children interact with these influences in a markedly different fashion from adults.

- **Family at home:** Children often decide to migrate with encouragement from family members or facing resistance. For some, the desire to migrate is ever-present, waiting just for family financial contributions. Household conditions, the safety and sanctuary at home, and access to resources send powerful, if more implicit, signals to children considering migration.
- **Others at home:** Many trafficked children know their smugglers (or traffickers), who are often relatives or community members. The imbalance of power between adult smugglers and child potential migrants, especially in places where elders are not to be questioned, can make it difficult for children to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy advice. Moreover, most child migrants Seefar speaks with do not know child returnees or victims of trafficking, who might otherwise counter messages from smugglers or brokers.
- **Schools:** Schools take on powerful roles as incubators of migration aspirations, as teachers and classmates influence perceptions of migration.
- **Friends and contacts abroad:** Children who are currently abroad play an outsized role in decision-making. Most children in transit are in touch with at least one person living abroad; many children have multiple contacts living abroad. The desire to emulate peers can be stronger among children than adults.

Child migrants rarely mention messages from official government or non-government sources. They generally do not mention anti-migration media campaigns, or are not influenced by such messages. As a result, children rarely have accurate and reliable information about the acute protection challenges that they may face before undertaking a migration journey.

Towards Child-Centered Migration Communications

Programs designed to responsibly address irregular child migration must be based on this knowledge. Supporting children on the move is not easy, but concerned actors can do more to improve outcomes for child migrants before they depart and while they travel. One way to accomplish these goals is to offer **supportive communications and counselling** to children. This approach would be based on empirical research on children's decision-making process and tailored to specific age groups in line with best-practice cognitive research (see image below).



Such campaigns should be:

Carried out by trusted voices in safe places (which vary based on the context) - such as in schools in the Gambia or churches in parts of Nigeria, and based on evidence.

Informed by research - As noted by leading actors in the response to child migration, "the specific patterns of children and youth movements within the broader patterns of mixed migration are - to a large extent - unknown".¹⁰ To develop an effective child-centred campaign, more evidence is needed. Areas to address include:

- **Invisible children:** Children born in transit or displacement, children from nomadic families, and variously unaccompanied or accompanied minors are in different times and places invisible to actors seeking to support them.

¹⁰ Save the Children and Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, "Young and on the move: Children and youth in mixed migration flows within and from the Horn of Africa", 2016. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/10080/pdf/young_and_on_the_move_sep_2016.pdf

- **Geographic ‘black spots’:** After leaving, most children lack the resources or knowledge to stay in safe accommodation. They often stay in smuggler holding houses or make informal accommodation arrangements. Many simply sleep outside, or become lost in urban environments. Identifying children in these locations, especially outside of donor priority countries, can be extremely difficult.
- **Aversion to formal channels of support:** Children on the move often fear national and local authorities and do not trust non-government actors. They often go far out of their way - putting themselves at greater risk of exploitation and violence - to avoid contact.
- **Fragmented journeys:** Many child migrants do not successfully arrive in Europe. Seefar’s research has found instances of children in transit who believe that their conditions are difficult, but better than life in their home country; few would rather return to their home country, even in notoriously dangerous transit countries like Libya. These children rarely come to the attention of protection actors.
- **Strictly adhere to child protection** - In research and programs, actors must abide by best-practice child protection principles.¹¹ But in practice, this can be difficult: actors must carefully balance ethical concerns with the pressing need to better understand children’s own perspective on migration. These challenges often slow the pace and reliability of data collection, or lead to the hardest to reach groups being excluded.

“I try not to have relations with Libyans and Libyan authorities. This attitude makes me safe.”
17 years old Sudanese, Libya,
March 2017

“There is no path to naturalisation in Egypt. Once you arrive as a refugee, you stay a refugee forever”
NGO worker, Cairo, May 2017

¹¹ See, for example, Save the Children, “A Practice Handbook For Family Tracing and Reunification in Emergencies”, 2017, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12398/pdf/ftr_handbook_4web_002.pdf

Potential for impact

Seefar has observed that after receiving targeted migration counselling, children considering migration are more likely to consider alternatives to irregular migration, including legal migration, than adults. This calls for a concerted effort - through research and dialogue with communications specialists, child psychologists and child protection experts - to further develop a child-friendly and strategic approach to communications with children on the move.



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