

On January 30th - 31st 2017 about 160 Mayors, experts, local politicians, MEPs, refugees and NGO-representatives from 22 nations gathered in Vienna to discuss the situation of children on the move. At the **Third International Mayors' Conference NOW**, curated by Viola Raheb, 4 panels and 12 workshops offered space to discuss main problems and share solutions in an area which is often overlooked, even though children make up half of all current refugees. In addition, three round tables provided insights into municipal and European perspectives and refugees shared their stories and experiences.

Apart from country-specific contexts, **all children share the same needs for shelter, security and hope**. However, the reality of refugee children is often far from providing any of these. The situations they flee from: war, terror and poor living conditions, have increased their general vulnerability. In this situation, opportunities and perspectives for children and their families need to be ensured, and assistance must not be restricted to basic need response only. Furthermore refugees face social and economic exclusion, which puts them close to or under the poverty line and extends their vulnerability on multiple levels.

In this environment refugee children are rarely granted their rights as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children born in transit countries like Lebanon for instance, often remain without birth registration and citizenship. As a consequence, they can officially neither enter Syrian territory, nor remain in the hosting country.

“The main reason children are vulnerable is the war itself. The war itself has caused displacement. It has caused a humanitarian crisis where people don't have shelter, don't have food. This makes people desperate. There are so many families affected by war and by displacement, who would never have dreamt of putting their children in a situation of labour exploitation, of forced marriage or of sexual exploitation, but they're simply struggling to survive.” (Claire Healy, ICMPPD)

If accompanied, the children's protective nucleus would be their family. But in their struggle to survive, families often simply cannot keep their children safe. In this context the phenomenon of early marriages increases even in Europe. It is linked to poverty and family reunion and often entails sexual abuse of minors. As a consequence of smuggling debts and restricted access to labour markets, economic exploitation increases, and smuggling and trafficking become intertwined. Growing up in such circumstances with an insecure future ahead causes traumatisation. Children need a perspective. Education is an essential basis on which they can build a future. Refugee children need inclusive teaching methods, trauma relief and empowerment in order to support their integration and development to their full potential within society.

Next steps are required

Children are the most vulnerable members of society and especially those on the move. They have special needs, which have to be met by an integral approach to avoid the emergence of a “lost generation”. This goal requires long-term commitment of human and financial resources. As a follow-up to the third NOW-Conference, working groups are being set up to work on the topics of education, exploitation, traumatisation and gender, and a team of Mayors from different countries is working on a toolkit to provide simple and feasible guidelines on the communal level.

“We pledge to continue developing and sharing our best-practice examples, to stand up for an open society, which shall protect the weakest and welcome those in danger with open arms and an open heart.” - Declaration of the 3rd International Mayors' Conference NOW in Vienna 2017

Financing and international cooperation

We have to ensure opportunities and perspectives for children and their families, not restrict assistance to basic need response.

- Long-term solutions going beyond mere humanitarian aid and providing possibilities for sustainable future development for refugee children and their families (who often live in transit countries for years) should be developed, financed and implemented
- Funding for education in humanitarian response should be increased and sustainable financing should be ensured

Humanitarian aid and decrease of vulnerability

Refugees face social and economic exclusion, which increases their vulnerability on multiple levels, and puts them on or under the poverty line.

- Basic needs (food, housing, education, training) have to be fulfilled for a healthy and protected development
- Provide support (social, psychological and economic) to families, in order to alleviate the negative impact of the circumstances of vulnerability on the development of their children
- Enforce legal and non-legal means combating phenomena of child labour, exploitation, early marriages, etc.

Legislation

Refugee children are often denied their right to education until they obtain the residence permit, a fact that violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Refugee children born in transit countries, like Lebanon, often remain without nationality, as they cannot be registered. As a consequence, they cannot enter Syrian territory but are also not allowed to remain in the hosting country.

- Children must be granted their full rights regardless of their residency status
- Birth registrations and the assignments of citizenship for refugee children have to be regulated
- Children and their families have to be given a legal status as soon as possible
- Family reunions have to be processed faster

Protection from sexual violence

The phenomenon of teenage marriages is increasing in Europe. It is linked to poverty and a lack of regulated family reunion, but also covers sexual abuse of minors.

- Children and youth must be granted their rights and be given protection from their violation in any form e.g. sexual violence, sexual exploitation and early marriage

- National child protection systems have to be applied to immigrant children from day 1
- Authorities need qualification to identify and support victims and recognize and address exploitation of any form
- Information and support structures for victims need to be created and implemented in order to increase protection of human rights, and especially sexual rights.
- Boys and men have to be integrated in the process of prevention of exploitation phenomena
- Data collection on early marriages is mandatory for addressing the issue at its core

Protection from exploitation

Smuggling and trafficking are more and more interconnected. Exploitation is a result of restricted or no access to official travel and to the labour market.

- Support and increase of safe flight routes in order to empower the independence of people from smugglers
- Provide refugees with legal access to labour markets in order to facilitate their economic and social integration process and prevent exploitation of any form
- Save smuggle victims from re-entering the vicious circle exploitation e.g. modern slavery / forced labour
- Raise awareness and teach Human Rights as an exploitation prevention measure

Education

Refugee children need inclusive teaching methods and empowerment in order to support their full integration within society.

- Support an inclusive environment - in and outside school - for learning and social integration (within neighbourhoods)
- Work towards a school system more adaptive to intercultural contexts and trauma
- Map knowledge and competences of children
- Include children, parents and teachers as stakeholders in the education process and provide support according to their potential and needs
- Support and capacity building (qualification) of teachers and civil servants on trauma
- Create a platform to share curricula and skill development between transit and receiving countries
- Provide opportunities for further studies or vocational training after the compulsory school age