Away from Home

ENSURING PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE
A large number of children are on the move within and beyond Southeast Asia due to globalization, socio-economic situations, poor governance, war, conflict, and natural disasters.

**Children on the Move: Who are they?**

The term children on the move refers to children who are away from home and leave their place of origin, with or without their parents or adult companions, due to various reasons.

Children on the move can be divided into different categories such as the migrant children, trafficked children, street children, stateless children, refugee children, and internally displaced children. Each of them bears different purposes for leaving their homes, but all of them have needs to be fulfilled and rights to be protected.

Addressing the needs of these children on the move is a concern for all government agencies, international NGOs, and local NGOs. However, dealing with only one category of children on the move cannot provide an overall picture of these children. For instance, the situation of child trafficking alone cannot fully explain the movement of children, and in the case of stateless children, not all of them are on the move or have left the place they consider home.

Despite the dynamics of these different categories, the general situation of children on the move should demonstrate that moving and living away from home does not mean giving up one’s nationality and losing one’s human rights.
With or without their parents or guardians, children leave their homes to seek better economic and living conditions, or to escape from neglect, exploitation, violence, natural disasters, war, or armed conflict. In other words, they move to have a better life.

However, during the course of their journey, these children on the move become at risk to various forms of violence. They gamble their safety against ending up in disadvantaged and exploitative situations, especially when they move on their own without any legal travel/identification documents and without adequate information, knowledge, and skills to protect themselves.

Children on the move have a very slim chance of reaching their desired destination. Most end up in places they do not want to be in. But wherever their destination may be, they have to face the horrors of being discriminated against or being subjected to forced labor and other exploitative, indecent, and illicit jobs. They also end up in poor and unhealthy living conditions. When apprehended by law enforcers, children on the move are oftentimes treated as adult offenders, confined in detention centers and deported without considering the risks and their best interest. More so, they have limited or no access at all to basic social services necessary for their full growth, development, and protection.

There are some children who have successfully settled in better places away from home, but their number is still less than the majority of children on the move who still remain vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

In the case of stateless children, they grow up without fulfilling their right to a nationality. One of the reasons is that most of the stateless children are descendants of intergenerational undocumented migrant families. Thus, unless they are acknowledged by the state and given certificates of nationality, these children and their future generation will continue to struggle in their claim for their right to a nationality.
While key stakeholders push for the creation of child protection laws at the national level, international and local NGOs implement prevention and protection programs for specific categories of children on the move at the grassroots level.

Current efforts include:

- Collaborating with key players from both government and NGOs;
- Establishing or strengthening existing child protection mechanisms;
- Enhancing capacities of local officials and leaders;
- Raising the awareness of the village people; and
- Engaging the participation of children and youth

In spite of these efforts, there are still gaps in responding to issues concerning children on the move such as the:

1. Unavailability and inadequate provision of basic services to children on the move;
2. Unsafe migration, especially for children and young people;
3. Lack or absence of reliable and efficient reporting mechanism for cases of child abuse, especially on sexually exploited boys;
4. Weak implementation of child protection laws and mechanisms;
5. Lack or absence of comprehensive research on children and migration;
6. Lack or absence of protection and care for social service providers and caregivers;
7. Lack or absence of a clear and detailed strategy to combat the demand for sexual services of children and other factors that push children to leave their home; and
8. Lack or absence of comprehensive research on the successful migration of children despite undergoing exploitative situations/conditions.

Key players face the challenge of filling in these gaps and institutionalizing a more comprehensive child protection mechanism that covers all children on the move in every phase of their journey.

Bridging the gaps between the efforts of GOs and NGOs will put in place a more comprehensive protection system that aims to ensure the children’s safety when they are still at home, while in transit, and upon reaching their destination. Anchored on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the protection system must primarily consider the best interest of the child.

Children have the right to move and search for better opportunities. Being away from home does not lessen their claim to their basic and fundamental human rights, thus, the State must still accord protection to children of other nationalities who are within their national territory.
The consultation workshops with children on the move conducted in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Philippines created the venue for the voices of trafficked children, stateless children, refugee children, and migrant children.

Coming from different backgrounds and having different experiences in moving away from home, the children shared their hopes and aspirations for themselves and for the other children on the move:

- We hope that no child will ever be abused and exploited again.
- We hope to live with our families in a peaceful home, without war, fear, and threat.
- We hope that proper protection measures for children will be put in place, including protection for those children who are on the move.
- We hope that children will no longer be deprived of their right to a nationality.
- We hope that children will not be sent back to their conflict-stricken areas.
- We hope that our community will not cause the abuse and exploitation to children and adults.
- We hope that the government will provide appropriate assistance to us, which includes education opportunities for all children regardless of their nationality.
- We hope that the government will pay attention to children and be firm in responding to our needs, especially those who are still in exploitative situations.
- We hope that corruption, which contributes in aggravating national issues and children’s issues, will stop.
Southeast Asia Conference on Children on the Move

On November 16-18, 2010, the Southeast Asia Conference on Children on the Move convened international and local NGOs working in Southeast Asia to respond to the different categories of children on the move.

Held in Bangkok, the conference aimed to: 1) gain better knowledge and understanding about the children on the move in the context of Southeast Asia; 2) share and learn from the existing programs/responses for children on the move; 3) identify the gaps in the existing mechanisms to protect these children; and 4) facilitate the crafting of a manual for exploring and understanding the concept of children on the move.

The conference was organized by Asia Against Child Trafficking (Asia ACTs), ECPAT International, Save the Children UK Cross-Border Programme, and Foundation for Women, in cooperation with Terre des Hommes – Netherlands (TDH-NL), Terre des Hommes – Lausanne, Oak Foundation, the Terre des Hommes International Federation (TDHIF), and independent experts/consultants Mike Dottridge and Mary Robinson.
Participating in the conference were the following organizations:

**CAMBODIA:** Cambodian Children Against Starvation and Violence Association (CCASVA), Vulnerable Children Assistance Organization (VCAO), Cambodia Women’s Crisis Center (CWCC), and Santi Sena

**INDONESIA:** Yayasan KKSP, Yayasan Setara, and Sekretariat Anak Merdeka Indonesia

**LAO PDR:** Village Focus International

**MALAYSIA:** Pusak Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Good Shepherd Welfare Center)

**PHILIPPINES:** Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA), Philippines Against Child Trafficking (PACT), Katilingban Para sa Kalambuan Inc., and ECPAT Philippines

**THAILAND:** Foundation for Women (FFW), Mae Sot Center for Women and Children - FFW, Committee for Protection and Promotion of Child Rights, Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC), Jesuit Refugee Service Asia-Pacific, Hill Area Community Development Foundations, ECPAT Foundation, Network Children and Community Development Center, HREIB, and Cross-Ethnic Integration in Andaman Project

**VIETNAM:** Ho Chi Minh City Child Welfare Foundation, CEFACOM, and Street Children Program of Da Nang City, Vietnam.

Save the Children Sweden, Save the Children China Program, and Save the Children Myanmar; Terre des Hommes Italia (based in Pha Nga, Thailand); TDH Lausanne, TDH-Netherlands and the Terre des Hommes International Federation (TDHIF).

The messages of some children on the move were obtained through preliminary workshops conducted by Indonesia ACT, Burma ACTs, PACT and FFW. Two children representatives, who have been children on the move, also shared their personal experience during the conference.
Children have the right to move. They have the right to seek better opportunities within and across borders. However, when children move and live away from home, they are at risk to various forms of violence.

In 2010, international and local NGOs working in Southeast Asia convened to respond to the different needs of children on the move. The voices of these children were also heard through the consultation workshops conducted in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Philippines. Coming from different backgrounds and having different experiences in moving away from home, the children shared their hopes and aspirations for themselves and for the other children on the move.

Each of these children on the move has different purposes for leaving their homes, but whether away from home or not, all children have the right to claim their basic and fundamental human rights.