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**Protecting and supporting internally
displaced children in urban settings**

KEY MESSAGES

- At the end of 2018 over 17 million children were internally displaced by conflict or violence, and millions more by disasters or other causes.¹
- Within a global context of increasing urbanization, towns and cities are becoming a major refuge for displaced populations, including children. The majority of the world's internally displaced persons (IDPs) already live outside camps, with many fleeing to urban areas.²
- Displaced children and their families in urban settings may find it difficult to access basic services, including housing, protection and education. The problem stems from discrimination and stigmatisation, lack of documentation, financial barriers, inadequate information about available services and difficulty navigating the systems.³
- Urban areas also present opportunities for the displaced, as well as host communities, to thrive when the right policies are in place.
- Local authorities and other local actors are at the forefront of responding to the internal displacement of children and finding long-term solutions in cities.
- Critical to addressing the challenges faced by internally displaced children and youth are local investment and policies that explicitly include them in local and national plans and budgets for services. Other issues that should be addressed in urban settings include the child-specific drivers of internal displacement; the need to reach children at risk and offer protection; and the removal of legal and practical barriers preventing displaced populations from accessing services.
- Internally displaced children and their families should participate in decision-making around issues that concern them, including humanitarian responses and city planning.

1 IDMC's estimate based on the number of IDPs recorded as of December 31st, 2018, in countries affected by internal displacement, in the context of conflict and violence.

2 Brookings Institute, Project on Internal Displacement, Under the Radar - Internally Displaced Persons in Non-camp Settings, 2013, available at: [link](#).

3 IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019, May 2019, available at: [link](#).



CONTEXT AND CONSIDERATIONS

Urban displacement has emerged as a new challenge in meeting the needs of internally displaced children. Currently, more than 1 billion people under the age of 18 live in urban areas worldwide, including cities, towns and other urban settlements. By 2030, cities will contain 60 per cent of the world's population,⁴ and as many as 60 per cent of all urban dwellers will be under the age of 18.⁵ At the end of 2018, IDMC estimated that over 41 million people lived in internal displacement due to conflict and violence alone.⁶ This includes over 17 million children and 5 million youth.⁷ Within this context of increasing urbanization, towns and cities are fast becoming a refuge for displaced populations. Urban growth can also generate new vulnerabilities for populations, for instance when urban renewal or development pushes people away from their homes to make way for construction projects.

Urban settings offer advantages for internally displaced children, their families and those attempting to support them. Resources and opportunities can be easier to access, and existing systems can be built on for emergency efforts.

State and local governments also serve as partners in delivering the services needed.⁸ For example, in Colombia, the poorest urban children, are better able to access services than rural children.⁹

But this is not always the case. Urbanization can stress water supplies, waste management, air quality, housing, transportation, the environment and public health. In some countries, the poorest and most vulnerable urban children are worse off than their peers in rural areas.¹⁰ Any rapid influx of IDPs to urban settings can further strain already deficient infrastructure and increase the vulnerability of the already resident urban poor. Competition for resources and livelihood opportunities aggravates these social tensions, as does discrimination, when the displaced come from different ethnic groups than host populations. All these factors impact children's lives.

Internally displaced children who do not receive the protection and services they need may suffer significant

4 UNICEF, Shaping urbanization for children – a handbook on child-responsive urban planning, p.12, 2018.

5 UN Habitat, Youth Agenda, available at: [link](#).

6 IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019, May 2019, available at: [link](#).

7 IDMC's estimate based on the number of IDPs recorded as of December 31st, 2018, in countries affected by internal displacement in the context of conflict and violence.

8 UNICEF Nigeria Country Office, 2019.

9 UNICEF Colombia Country Office, 2019.

10 UNICEF, Advantage or Paradox – the challenges for children and young people of growing up urban, 2018, available at: [link](#).

physical and psychological consequences. The stress of events that cause displacement and displacement itself can impact their ability to develop to their full potential and contribute to their communities and cities. When deprived of the right to education, their socio-economic contributions may be further limited. Without the skilled workforce and engaged citizenry that come with high-quality education, nations weaken. The discontent that arises from thwarted potential can put communities and economies at risk.¹¹

Leaving behind large numbers of internally displaced children can slow progress towards peace and inclusive urban development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the New Urban Agenda. With the right policies in place to protect IDPs, ensure their access to services, and integrate them into host communities, however, life in cities can allow IDPs to better exercise their rights and freedoms, contribute to their communities and live with greater dignity and independence.¹²

National authorities bear the primary responsibility for protecting and assisting IDPs. But, within their areas of influence, local governments are uniquely placed to protect the rights of displaced children. Local governments receive IDPs first and are often responsible for meeting their immediate needs, including those of protection, housing, education and healthcare. They also are closer to displaced populations and may have an in-depth understanding of their challenges and opportunities. Some local governments already are implementing innovative solutions.



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¹¹ UNICEF, Education Uprooted – For every migrant, refugee and displaced child, education, 2017, p.6, available at : [link](#).

¹² UNHCR, Policy on alternatives to camps, 2014.



KEY CHALLENGES

Internally displaced children in urban settings go under the radar

Reliable, timely and accessible data and evidence are essential for understanding how internal displacement affects children and their families and for putting in place policies and programmes to meet their needs. Only 14 per cent of countries with data on conflict-related IDPs currently have age-disaggregated data. That means that in 86 per cent of countries, internally displaced children are invisible. In many cases, data are not regularly collected, or are collected by different actors for different purposes, resulting in inconsistent and poor quality data. This calls for more disaggregation of displacement data by age, and of child-specific data by displacement status, when feasible and relevant.

Acquiring data on IDPs living in non-camp, urban areas is particularly challenging. IDPs are often hard to identify, particularly when they are dispersed among communities that are poor themselves. They also may move from one city to another where they have existing connections or to another neighbourhood in the same city, as has been the case in Iraq.¹³ These factors increase the difficulties of

developing appropriate evidence-based policies to protect and assist them¹⁴ and make it more likely that they will be overlooked in displacement responses. They suggest that better internal displacement data and better disaggregation by age and gender are needed to inform more targeted and effective policies.

Drivers of internal displacement in urban settings

Urban areas can be particularly harmful to children who seek protection. Child-specific drivers of displacement, such as forced recruitment into armed groups, forces or gangs; child trafficking; female genital mutilation; forced or underage marriage; and domestic violence are often exacerbated in situations of urban warfare and disasters. Armed conflicts and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas cause death and injury among civilians, including children. They may lead to the destruction of schools, hospitals, water facilities and other civilian infrastructure, forcing children and their families to flee their homes. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, severe storms and floods also devastate cities.

¹³ IDMC, "Nowhere to return to": Iraqis' search for durable solutions continues, 2018.

¹⁴ Brookings Institute, Project on Internal Displacement, Under the Radar - Internally Displaced Persons in Non-camp Settings, 2013, available at: [link](#).

Protection needs of internally displaced children in urban areas

1. Negative coping mechanisms

IDPs' financial struggles, including the high costs of living in urban areas, and their increased vulnerability affect the safety of internally displaced children.

• Child labour

Children from impoverished families may be forced to work, putting them at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. Urban centres are home to both formal and informal labour markets. But in many developing economies, the informal market represents the larger share of the economy. Many internally displaced children work within this sector, which is typically unregulated and often involves illegal activities. Hazardous and exploitative working conditions, and risks associated with unregulated jobs, pose severe protection concerns and potentially put children in conflict with the law.

Displaced children are often only able to work at unskilled jobs that negatively impact their lives, including their health and education. In a recent study on displaced families in urban Afghanistan, 21 per cent of surveyed families had at least one working child under 14 years of age. In Kabul, 26 per cent of families sent at least one child to work, compared to 15 per cent among rural IDP families.¹⁵ In Khartoum, children, generally confined to the unskilled labour market, sell cigarettes or water, labour in factories or do domestic work.¹⁶ They may be forced to sell things on the street, to wash cars or beg, putting them at risk of being hit by a motor vehicle, being kidnapped or suffering some other kind of violence.¹⁷ In the cities of Dhaka, Goma and Bukavu, the need for survival has pushed some displaced girls into prostitution.^{18,19}

• Child marriage

Child marriage as a negative coping strategy for internally displaced families has been documented across several displacement contexts. In Afghanistan, women tend to marry at a later age than in the past. But this is not the case for displaced women. A survey of young women living in informal settlements in Jalalabad, Kabul and Kandahar showed that these women were having children as early as 16 and may have married when they were even younger.²⁰ A research study on the protection of IDPs in Afghanistan found that in a third of IDP families, at least one child was forced to marry. Overall, 27 per cent of internally displaced girls were forced to marry against their will.²¹

Food insecurity and poverty are often important motivators, cited by 52.1 per cent of surveyed IDP households as reasons for child marriage.²² Young IDPs desire to be independent and establish their own households rather than live in crowded makeshift dwellings with their birth families, may also be a driver.²³

• Recruitment by armed forces, armed groups and gangs

Children displaced in urban areas where conflict or violence is ongoing can be caught in the crossfire. They also are at risk of being recruited by armed forces, armed forces or other armed groups. IDPs tend to live in poor and unsafe districts where they are exposed to criminal activities and gangs.²⁴ Unaccompanied displaced children, such as those separated from their families, are especially vulnerable. They may face 'round-ups', forced conscription and sexual assault.^{25,26} Colombia is a case in point. Because adolescents there can evade heavy criminal sentences, they are sought out by armed groups. This is more likely to happen

15 IDMC, Going "home" to displacement: Afghanistan's returnee-IDPs, 2017, available at: [link](#).

16 Abdelmoneium, A.O. Ways to Survive: Child Labor among Internally Displaced Children in Khartoum-Sudan. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 2017, available at: [link](#).

17 NRC, Challenges of IDP protection: research study on the protection of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan, 2012, available at: [link](#).

18 Thomson Reuters Foundation, I did it only for the money': Climate displacement pushes girls into prostitution, 2018, available at: [link](#).

19 Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, Bringing internally displaced persons back into sight in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2016, available at: [link](#).

20 NRC, Listening to women and girls displaced to urban Afghanistan, 2015, p.13, available at: [link](#).

21 NRC, Challenges of IDP protection: research study on the protection of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan, 2012, available at: [link](#).

22 World Vision Afghanistan. As Water Levels Drop, Early Marriage is on the Rise, 2018, available at: [link](#).

23 UNICEF Myanmar Country Office, 2019.

24 Angela Cotroneo, Specificities and challenges of responding to internal displacement in urban settings, International Review of the Red Cross 99.904, 2017.

25 Anne-Lynn Dudenhoefer, Understanding the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Africa, 2016, available at: [link](#).

IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2018, 2018, available at: [link](#).

Nese Erol et al., Effects of internal displacement and resettlement on the mental health of Turkish children and adolescents, European Psychiatry 20.2, 2005.

Ruth V Reed et al., Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in low-income and middle-income countries: risk and protective factors, The Lancet 379.9812, 2012.

26 IDMC, An atomised crisis: Reframing displacement caused by crime and violence in El Salvador, 2018, available at: [link](#).

in peripheral or marginalized neighbourhoods and villages where social support and access to education is limited and where household conditions do not provide the necessary support. In Bogotá, the main employment opportunities for displaced children and adolescents are in the military or with paramilitary and guerrilla forces. In urban slums with limited rule of law, young IDPs also face a high probability of arbitrary arrest or detention.

In Nigeria, while primary and secondary health care services are often more accessible to internally displaced children in urban areas, compared with their rural counterparts, secondary health care is frequently unaffordable.

2. Access to quality services

Internally displaced children in urban settings face significant challenges in accessing services without registration and documentation. In displacement camps, registration of displaced people is often the only requirement for accessing aid and services. But in cities, access to services generally requires personal identification papers. Without these, children and their families may be unable to enrol in school, or to receive healthcare, humanitarian aid and secure housing. This makes the loss of personal identification documents, and challenges replacing them, a recurring issue for all IDPs, especially problematic for children in urban areas.²⁷

In Afghanistan, national identity cards are issued only in the area of origin. Children, including the displaced, cannot attend school without them, despite their constitutional right to an education.²⁸ Children without birth certificates cannot access health services.²⁹

Without immunization cards or medical records, they may be unable to receive vaccinations, increasing their risk of preventable disease.³⁰ In Iraq, ration cards are issued only to male heads of households, preventing unaccompanied children or families headed by women from accessing food assistance.³¹ In Uganda, ration cards may be distributed only to IDPs living in camps, not to displaced children in non-camp, urban settings.³² Missing documentation can also make it impossible for families to secure formal tenancy contracts, forcing them to live in constant fear of eviction and homelessness or to end up in substandard shelters.³³

• Education

Schools serve as an essential safe haven for internally displaced children. They can be essential to helping children regain a sense of normalcy and receive the support they need to integrate into their host communities. But internally displaced children in urban areas often face significant challenges to their right to education. These include their families' financial struggles, the children's lack of documentation or legal status, discrimination, and language barriers. Displaced children may not be able to study because they have been forced to work or marry or because schools are being used as emergency shelters for IDPs. Overcrowded classrooms serve as another impediment to a quality education. IDP camps, by contrast, tend to have better educational resources because they are the focus of humanitarian interventions and donor attention.^{34,35}

In Libya, 20 per cent of all IDPs live in former schools or empty warehouses, lacking access to sanitation. Beyond the health concerns, this means that children from the host community and those that are internally displaced cannot use these facilities as they were intended. When schools serve as shelters, children's access to education, as well as their social life and psychological stability, are affected. In Iraq, the start of the school year was delayed by six months in 2014 because schools were being utilized as emergency shelters for IDPs.³⁶

27 Angela Cotroneo, Specificities and challenges of responding to internal displacement in urban settings. International Review of the Red Cross 99:904, 2017.

28 Chaloka Beyani, End of Mission Statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Mr. Chaloka Beyani, on his visit to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2016, available at: [link](#).

29 UNHCR, Birth Registration, 2013, available at: [link](#).

30 Kennedy Nyabuti Ondimu, Child Exclusion Among Internally Displaced Populations in Rift Valley and Nyanza Provinces of Kenya, African Books Collective, 2010, available at: [link](#).

31 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. Rights and Guarantees of Internally Displaced Children in Armed Conflict. 2010, available at: [link](#).

32 Julia St. Thomas King and Dennis Ardis, Identity crisis? Documentation for the displaced in Iraq, 2015, available at: [link](#).

33 Hilde Refstie, Chris Dolan and Moses Chrispus Okello. Urban IDPs in Uganda: victims of institutional convenience. Forced Migration Review 34, 2010, available at: [link](#).

34 OCHA, Breaking the impasse, 2017, available at: [link](#).

35 IDMC/NRC, Iraq – IDPs caught between a rock and a hard place as displacement crisis deepens, 2015, available at: [link](#).

36 UNICEF Somalia Country Office, 2019.

37 ICRC, 2018, Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps, p.10, available at: [link](#).

38 ACAPS, Iraq: Displacement in KR-I, 2016, available at: [link](#).

- **Adequate and affordable housing**

There are several housing situations common to internally displaced children and their families in urban areas. These include sharing a house with relatives or a host family, renting an apartment alone or with other displaced households, staying in collective shelters and living in informal settlements on a city's margins. Internally displaced children also may end up on the street when housing is unavailable. For adolescent boys, the search for housing can be particularly difficult. For example, in El Salvador, governments do not accommodate IDPs. This forces mothers to seek refuge in women's shelters that do not accept boys over age 12.³⁷ Children's shelters often do not accommodate parents, causing families to be separated. Each of these situations can affect children's physical and mental health. Family unity protects children's lives, their development and their well-being. Internally displaced families that stay together are more likely to thrive and contribute productively to host communities, thereby encouraging their acceptance and integration.³⁸

The location of housing is crucial to ensuring children's access to schools, health care and other services. If settlements are far away from schools, or if transport is either non-existent or too expensive, children cannot access the services they need. Additionally, the informal settlements where IDPs often live tend to be located in precarious areas. These may include river banks, exposed to flooding and landslides, and out of reach of municipal services such as waste management and sanitation. For those without housing, the consequences are significant. Homelessness can compromise the growth,

mean long journeys to collect water at remote water points, particularly for girls who are often assigned this chore. Such journeys can negatively impact children's education and subject them to harassment and other threats along the way.⁴⁰

Internally displaced families in South Sudanese urban centres tend to live in overcrowded, illegal settlements with lower humanitarian indicators than those in camps.⁴¹ Substandard shelters and overcrowding facilitate the transmission of communicable diseases that are particularly dangerous for children. Diseases such as measles, mumps, rubella, polio and yellow fever thrive in densely populated urban areas.⁴²

Towns and cities in regions where flows of forcibly displaced people are common need to be prepared to absorb large population movements. This means factoring displacement into urban plans, which need to be flexible enough to adapt to changing situations, so that they can better manage growth. Where urban areas are at risk of disasters, relocation sites should be identified as part of disaster preparedness. This type of contingency and preparedness planning also requires building the capacity of urban authorities and equipping them with the tools to manage displacement well, during both normal times and crises.

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