MIGRANT CHILDREN IN AFRICA:

A SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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The mobility of children and youth presents challenges for West and North African countries when it comes to implementing inclusive education systems. Access to education, training, and integration is a right for young migrants and a responsibility for authorities. Education is also one of the most effective ways to contribute to safer mobility, serving as an investment in the future by promoting knowledge for future generations and ensuring better integration into host communities.

In tandem with the global population rise, the number of international migrants has increased over recent decades. There are an estimated 281 million migrants, with 36 million being children under 18 years old (a 28% increase between 2010 and 2019). The youthfulness of the migration phenomenon is especially pronounced on the African continent.

CHILD MIGRATION IN AFRICA – A MULTI-FACETED REALITY

Africa hosts the largest percentage of children and youth among its migrant population – over one in four immigrants in Africa is a child, more than double the global average. In 2017, Africa had at least 13.5 million child migrants, including those living as refugees, migrants, or internally displaced persons. These figures are underestimated due to the lack of reliable data, and the migration of children and youth is often not readily visible. Moreover, these numbers fail to fully capture the complexity of migration, which is influenced by various overlapping factors.

Although children and youth make up a significant portion of these population movements, the drivers of this mobility are highly diverse, including extreme poverty, lack of employment, a desire for quality education, pursuit of sustainable development opportunities, family or social traditions of migration, violence, political instability, conflicts, environmental issues, or simply the pursuit of a better life. Girls and young women share these motivations, along with gender inequality and discrimination resulting from socio-cultural constraints within their communities of origin. They frequently encounter these challenges during their migration journey.

# THE DUAL VULNERABILITY OF CHILD AND YOUTH MIGRANTS

Children and youth on the move are even more vulnerable than adult migrants. They face uprooting, marginalization, lack of economic and material resources, limited access to essential services, and an elevated risk of abuse, violence, and exploitation. In addition to the general risks faced by all migrants, there is an intrinsic vulnerability linked to childhood, especially for unaccompanied or inadequately accompanied children and youth. Other vulnerability factors influence and shape the experiences of children and youth along migration routes. These factors interact and can combine to expose them to greater risks (as discussed in the recent webinar on gender and diversity analysis).

While it is true that children and youth migration can heighten vulnerability, it can also provide opportunities to alleviate this same vulnerability. This includes access to protection, education, employment opportunities, and the acquisition of new skills and competencies. Transit and destination areas can benefit from a skilled mobile workforce, while areas of origin can gain from the human capital accrued by these children and youth.

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION

To capitalize on these benefits, stakeholders need to more effectively incorporate migration realities into local, national, and regional policy frameworks. Until now, state and international cooperation stakeholders have primarily addressed migration through sectoral interventions (e.g., security, protection) and specific institutions (e.g., ministries, departments). However, they have made limited progress in integrating migration into other core sectors (e.g., education, health, vocational training). It is crucial to adapt services to better cover protection needs and leverage migration-related opportunities.
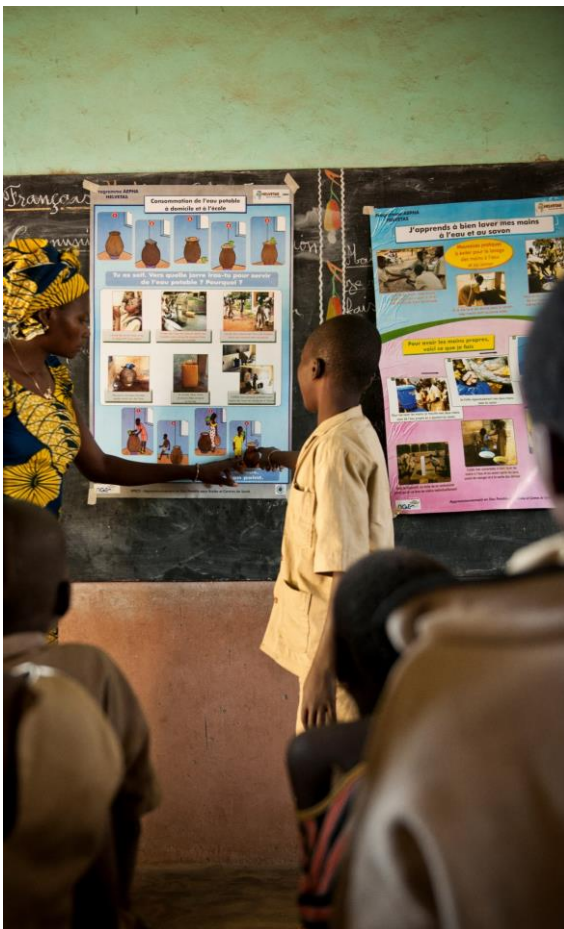
This principle underscores the approach of the "Children and Youth on Migration Routes in West and Northwest Africa" (EJM) project, an initiative by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. EJM focuses on the North and West African regions, supporting actors and service providers to comprehend the implications of migration and adapt services to better incorporate identified migration-related needs and opportunities.

In these contexts, children and youth on the move face numerous protection risks and substantial challenges in accessing education, vocational training, and labor markets.

EDUCATION ACCESS FOR THOSE ON THE MOVE

The legal frameworks of all countries covered by the project theoretically promote universal school access for all children, including non-nationals. However, mechanisms supporting access for non-national children are often lacking.

The issue is twofold: On the demand side, children and youth migrants might lack the time, desire, or necessary means to attend school or training. On the supply side, even though systems strive for inclusivity, they often fall short for these specific audiences due to a lack of willingness and/or technical capabilities.

The challenge lies in enhancing the alignment between these two aspects:

• Either by influencing demand (e.g., persuading young migrants to delay their departure to allow time for training)

• Or by adapting the existing supply (e.g., offering flexible schedules, easing administrative constraints)

• Or by introducing tailored measures to facilitate the integration of this group into existing services (e.g., language courses, skill recognition, psycho-social support, upgrading prior learning)

To ensure the relevance of activities in individual contexts, the project initially sought a deeper understanding of the diversity among children and youth on the move in each region it operates. The project employed innovative survey methods to identify communities of young migrants, engage with reliable informants, and gather insightful information.

The project's partner, the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (MAEJT), composed of children and youth groups, organized dialogues with specific groups to present project-related topics. They adapted and conducted a digital user assessment survey designed to be child and youth-friendly. This methodology, which relies directly on youth to reach young migrants, demanded significant preparatory and support work. However, it granted access to vulnerable and hidden groups. Moreover, youth investigators enhanced their capabilities and established connections with children and youth on the move. Some of these young individuals even joined the MAEJT association after participating in the user assessment survey.

Once a better understanding of the educational backgrounds and needs of a community was achieved, the project aimed to guide them towards tailored solutions. This approach, however, necessitates that local education providers and authorities already possess an appropriate orientation mechanism. If this is not the case, the project assists in establishing one.

However, in many instances, this approach alone may not suffice. Several barriers exist between children and youth on the move and the existing services they aspire to access. For example, administrative documentation (e.g., residence permits, birth certificates), often missing among many young

migrants, might be required for enrollment..

Those accompanying children and youth may also lack information about the possibilities and rights to access education. Frequently, language forms a challenging barrier to overcome. In West African countries, the subpar quality of education significantly hampers attractiveness to children and youth – including nationals (50% of Nigeriens aged 7 to 16 do not attend school).

A comprehensive analysis of these obstacles guides us in proposing suitable solutions. While a comprehensive response might not be achievable at present, we have prioritized specific actions to conduct pilot initiatives. These pilots enable us to learn through experimentation while immersing ourselves in local ecosystems and building partnerships and alliances.

In Morocco, a promising partnership has been established with the central administration responsible for the education of children and youth on the move.

Although the country already possesses a strategy for integrating this group into its education system, resource shortages hinder its implementation. A central challenge lies in local school leaders, who, despite official guidelines, are not always fully aware of their responsibilities to streamline administrative procedures for children's registration. One of our primary actions will involve raising awareness and training educational actors in implementing the official integration protocol in their regions.

In Guinea, numerous children and youth on the move, including nationals, are excluded from formal primary education. Our support here will concentrate on various technical aspects that complicate their integration into host schools and communities. This includes pedagogical training to help teachers address classroom diversity, capacity development for parent councils and school boards, and the empowerment of "student governments."

In Mali, our vocational training project will adapt its methods to the needs and constraints of young migrants. Enthusiastic youths will receive initial guidance to formulate their "life projects" and subsequently will be directed towards short-term professional training aligned with their aspirations and market trends.

Additionally, we plan to explore the potential of digitization in facilitating access to learning materials for people on the move. The project's online learning platform will serve as a gateway to existing educational resources that suit the needs of these children and youth. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the development of valuable content by West African countries. Making this content accessible to mobile children and youth will help them maintain their connection with language and culture. Furthermore, we will develop specific content to address cross-cutting needs, such as safe migration skills modules. The platform will support individual and peer-to-peer learning, and we will also encourage its use in classrooms, workplaces, and digital centers.

Beyond these inspiring yet locally confined actions, we strive for systemic and sustainable changes. We must progressively persuade more stakeholders to consider vulnerabilities related to mobility in education and employment policies and strategies. By enhancing the capabilities of these stakeholders and developing appropriate tools, we aspire to move closer to a situation where the needs of children and youth on the move are consistently taken into account. Hopefully, these considerations will eventually become as mainstream as gender issues, the inclusion of individuals with special needs, and more recently, mobile populations such as nomads, refugees, and internally displaced persons.

Simultaneously, we believe this process will amplify the voices of children and youth on the move. By strengthening their ability to voice their perspectives, from school to national consultations, and by preparing existing stakeholders to listen to them, we can ensure their concerns are heard and addressed.

ABOUT THE PROJET

The "Children and Youth on Migration Routes in West and Northwest Africa" (EJM) project is a Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation project that runs through 2024. The project aims to strengthen national and regional systems of protection, education and socio-economic integration in a sustainable manner and to facilitate access of children and youth on the move to the services provided by these systems (economic integration from the age of 18). The project started with five pilot countries (Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia) to develop and test approaches to strengthening systems that will be sustainable and not structurally dependent on external resources. This project is implemented by a consortium led by Helvetas, Terre des hommes and GIZ in partnership with Mixed Migration Centre, Médecins du Monde Belgium, Enda/MAEJT, SSI AO and SSI-International.