



LEARNING BRIEF

The Role of Faith in Strengthening the Continuum of Child Protection for Children on the Move

This is one in a series of three learning briefs presenting findings of an updated review of faith-based action for children on the move. A set of briefs was first published in 2018¹ to support the evidence base for the Faith Action for Children on the Move Forum, held in Rome 16–19 October 2018. To maintain an understanding of the current academic and practitioner landscape, those briefs have now been updated with recent literature and good practice examples. When developing the original briefs, which included an extensive literature review and review of case studies submitted from around the world, three key themes around faith engagement with children on the move emerged: Continuum of Child Protection, Spiritual Support and Peacebuilding. This brief is an update to the brief on Peacebuilding and similarly draws on data collected through literature review, ad hoc searches and direct submissions from faith actors. These briefs do not intend to provide an extensive overview of all available evidence on faith and children on the move. Instead, they aim to help faith actors, development and humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and donors increase their understanding of faith communities' contributions to supporting children on the move, and shape policy and practice.

The term “faith actors” is used to reflect a broad understanding of a diverse group of actors who are commonly referred to in different ways, including, but not limited to, local, national and international faith-based organizations (FBOs), faith communities and religious leaders.

The term “children on the move” refers to children (under the age of 18) who have been uprooted from their homes, for example international child migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and internally displaced (IDP) children.

Faith actors make an important contribution to the protection of children on the move, offering various types of support such as shelter, food, education, and health and legal assistance. They are often part of and have access to communities and individuals who might not be able to receive support from other actors. As a result, their engagement can be important in terms of reach, referrals and partnerships that can strengthen child protection mechanisms. Faith actors also raise awareness about issues affecting children on the move and work to help strengthen the continuum of protection, both during and after displacement, including through processes of resettlement and (re)integration.

In the past few years, faith actors have been continuously and increasingly engaged in efforts to assist children experiencing forced displacement, increase and support safe passages to refuge, and develop multi-sectoral, holistic approaches to the protection of children on the move.



Responding to the Needs of Children on the Move

Faith actors reach communities and children

Faith actors can be found working in some of the most isolated and fragile contexts, demonstrating that they are part of and can **access places and communities that may feel inaccessible** to other actors.² Faith actors also often have links with marginalised refugee and migrant groups who otherwise may find it difficult to connect with the host community and local services.³ As a result, faith actors are often the first to identify and respond to needs of vulnerable children, and

can constitute an entry point for other organisations seeking to address child protection issues. For example, an evaluation of the International Organisation for Migration’s work with refugees from Venezuela found that faith actors were important partners ensuring that support reached the affected indigenous population.⁴ Faith actors also form and support grassroots partnerships with civil society organisations and local government representatives, as demonstrated by a collective formed to protect unaccompanied minors in Lille, France.⁵ Strong relationships at the grassroots help ensure that case reporting and referral mechanisms are in place, so that all actors (local faith actors, secular NGOs, police and government actors, including the judiciary) can identify and address needs through the most appropriate methods.⁶

Faith actors also make a notable contribution in **refugees and IDP camps**, helping to fill a gap in camps without adequate child protection measures. For instance, a 2013 study on child protection mechanisms in Rwandan refugee camps found the benefits of community support and guidance to be important, especially when a child faced protection threats such as child prostitution, lack of access to (continued) education and early pregnancy. Churches helped by ‘providing classroom space, space in both camps for ECD (early childhood development) centres and regularly disseminating child protection messages through their church networks. Churches also reportedly provided some financial support to families in need, such as those without refugee registration.’⁷ The study cited the example of Gihembe Camp, where representatives from NGOs, UNHCR, churches, government representatives and other camp committees set up a child protection forum to address specific issues collaboratively and holistically.⁸ This collaboration between formal and informal actors is important, as other examples have shown that community-based child protection measures can be disconnected from more formal child protection measures.⁹

Faith actors support the whole child

Faith actors’ **work with children on the move is often multi-sectoral**, addressing diverse needs, including in health, education, nutrition and protection. For example, a 2014 ethnographic study focusing on the Kilifi Catholic Church near Mombasa, Kenya, identified that the Bamba Pastor Fellowship and Muslim leaders had

a particularly important role in helping vulnerable children, supporting orphans with fees, building houses and sensitising parents on child rights.¹⁰ Similarly, in Mombasa slums, Muslim and Christian leaders developed awareness programmes and taught children about child protection issues. Child friendly spaces (CFSs) are an example of a multisectoral support service for children on the move. Faith actors run CFSs in many locations around the world. For example, the “Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities” (AMMPARO) project, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), includes a range of activities, from providing safe spaces and legal assistance to awareness building, advocacy, education and more general support to children on the move in the Northern Triangle, Mexico, and the United States.¹¹ In Serbia, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the development arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, runs a community centre for children on the move and their families (principally mothers and girls) and unaccompanied minors (mainly boys), most of whom are from Syria or Afghanistan. The centre is based in and run by the host community, with some people also volunteering from local Adventist churches.¹² CFSs can also be intrafaith or interfaith. For example, World Vision established an interfaith CFS for IDPs in the Central African Republic (CAR), working with local imams, pastors and priests.¹³ The limited literature on the involvement of faith in CFSs, however, highlights the need to focus on improving the evidence base for such efforts.¹⁴

Faith actors have been particularly active in **formal and non-formal education** delivery for children on the move, many of whom may otherwise be out of school. Indeed, school has emerged as a preventative protection measure for vulnerable children in many studies.¹⁵ As evidenced by the above-mentioned 2014 study on community-based child protection mechanisms in Kilifi, Kenya,¹⁶ faith actors can be instrumental in education provision, for example, by raising money and finding sponsors for children’s school fees. Research in Rwanda has shown that churches have played an important role in supporting children with financial aid, particularly helping those without refugee registration to attend school.¹⁷ A 2018 study from Korea gives a typical example of non-formal education provision, whereby Karen refugee children from Myanmar and Jumma refugee children from Bangladesh (two persecuted minorities) found access to Korean language classes and other cultural activities in religious facilities.¹⁸ In Lebanon, faith actors have been operating an extensive network of unofficial schools and non-formal educational programmes for Syrian refugees.¹⁹ It is estimated that up to 100,000 Syrian refugees are enrolled in unofficial schools²⁰, with an unknown number in non-formal education projects provided by faith actors. Non-formal education programmes can also support children on the move to transition to formal education. For example, the Marist International Solidarity Foundation (FMSI)’s English language programme in Johannesburg, South Africa, prepares children for entry into high school and engages local religious leaders in class visits and special events.²¹ While such support meets a significant need and fills an important gap, concerns have been raised about specific deliveries of education services. Unofficial and non-formal programmes have at times meant less stringent regulations. These include unlicensed and unvetted teachers, lessons outside national curricula²² and poor funding or influence from donors on educational content when there is funding,²³ with varying levels of evangelism-based religious education²⁴ and divergent Western and local ideologies.²⁵



Faith actors also **support (re)integration processes** for children who move into host communities or return home from displacement. In Senegal, the Marists of the Sector of Senegal run the Nazareth Centre in Dakar which supports children living or working on the streets. They have a range of services, including showers, meals, laundry services, family reunification, awareness-raising, medical treatment and an outreach programme.²⁶

Another Catholic-run organisation, Associação Promocional Oração e Trabalho (Promotional Association Prayer and Work, APOT) in Campinas, Brazil, has been running a similar outreach programme for children living or working on the streets. It aims to help children to return to their communities by offering training and educational programmes to facilitate substance-abuse recovery.²⁷ The organisation has a halfway house for adolescents and another six-month rehabilitation centre. Results indicate that the APOT programme has been successful, with 56 per cent of all APOT residents reinserted into the community upon leaving the programme, the majority returning to their families.²⁸ However, despite this growing body of evidence, there is still a gap in understanding the specific role of faith and religious beliefs and practices in supporting children and their families in (re)integration processes. A 2019 review of German and English literature on the integration of displaced children showed that only 16% of publications considered the religious affiliation of the refugee populations in their analysis.²⁹



Faith actors as advocates

Faith actors often **raise awareness and influence attitudes and behaviours** about issues affecting children on the move within and beyond their communities. A 2015 study examining awareness-raising initiatives on HIV and AIDS for young people and children in a Dar el Salaam refugee camp in Sudan demonstrated that the most influential educational channel for spreading knowledge about HIV and AIDS engaged with sociocultural beliefs and practices, for example by working with religious and traditional leaders, and sharing songs in the refugees' first language.³⁰ In this case, the NGOs worked with the leaders as intermediaries through which knowledge could be shared. For instance, rather than sharing messages themselves, they asked Muslim leaders to speak during the Friday prayer sermon about HIV and AIDS and how people can protect themselves, using the Qur'an to reinforce their messages.³¹ In another example, an area advisory council in Kilifi, Kenya, facilitated a collaboration between religious leaders and other actors, such as government officers and members of the business community. The council sensitised the community on child rights, promoted education and supported children whose rights were violated or limited, such as child labourers.³² In Lebanon, the NGO ABAAD has worked with religious leaders on gender-based violence, raising concerns that the dynamics of displacement and the evolving economic situation in the 2010s may have curtailed religious leaders' level of influence.³³

A 2019 study on internally displaced Colombians showed that faith actors can raise awareness and **challenge dominant social norms** related to key issues affecting children and youth on the move, such as sexual abuse,³⁴ child marriage³⁵ and other forms of gender-based violence.³⁶ Religious leaders have also played an important role as convenors, who are able to bring together a variety of stakeholders into joint efforts. This is thanks to their experience in child protection and due to them enjoying communities' respect and trust.³⁷ By working within faiths, across faiths and with those of no faith, increased cooperation can help change attitudes and behaviours to positively impact children on the move.

Faith actors build evidence on needs and solutions for children on the move

There is currently only **limited evidence** on children on the move and their needs, even though robust and comprehensive data and analysis is key to providing adequate support and protection. While initiatives like the

“International Data Alliance on Children on the Move” greatly contribute to improving the quality and quantity of information available,³⁸ there are still considerable gaps, for example in the area of unaccompanied or separated children and child victims of trafficking.³⁹ In recent years, faith actors have increased their efforts to produce quality evidence about their work.⁴⁰ For example, a 2020 Church World Service report mapped and analysed the work of a broad range of local faith communities in providing services such as maternal and child care, and organising children’s club meetings for Venezuelan children on the move and their families.⁴¹ While there is a good amount of evidence available on faith engagements with children on the move in general, this example stands out because it is a report compiled by a faith actor which does not focus only on their own activities, but rather on those of a broader groups of local faith actors from different religious traditions. Faith actors, more generally, are also contributing to building a more solid evidence base on the specific challenges that displaced children face.⁴²

Key Trends

“ **As the needs of children on the move continue to grow in complexity, faith actors continue to play important roles in filling protection gaps and developing creative, sensitive and holistic responses.** ”

1 Faith actors continue to fill child protection gaps in response to growing crises. Children across the globe are increasingly forced to flee. In 2021, there were a record 37 million forcibly displaced children worldwide,⁴³ a number that more than doubled over the last 10 years. While children make up 30% of the global population, they represent 41% of all forced migrants.⁴⁴ Refugee and migrant children are particularly vulnerable to violence.⁴⁵ Recent data shows that they account for 28% of global victims of trafficking.⁴⁶ Moreover, they are at risk of being forced into child marriage and exploitation, and of dropping out of education.⁴⁷ Unaccompanied children are particularly exposed to risks, including risks relating to health and legal protection.⁴⁸ Evidence also shows that children on the move, and girls in particular, remain among the most vulnerable groups, and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are now facing ‘a web of insecurity.’⁴⁹ As children move, there needs to be a continuum of protection to ensure they remain safe throughout their journeys.

Faith actors are often key respondents where other stakeholders are either absent or not willing/allowed to intervene. Recent crises have highlighted these engagements. For example, in Serbia, the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation was the only organisation allowed by governmental agencies to provide support in some refugee camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its “Empowerment of Refugee Children and Women” programme, implemented in two reception centres, includes informal education and workshops guided by a team of teachers and a psychologist.⁵⁰ In another example from the COVID-19 pandemic, Pastoral Social Caritas Bolivia was one of the very few humanitarian actors with access to Venezuelan refugees and children in orphanages and detention centres during times of lockdown, which led to a collaboration with UNHCR.⁵¹ Faith actors can also sometimes be the fastest to respond in an emergency situation.⁵² Since the start of the war in Tigray in November 2020, World Vision, in collaboration with other organisations, has provided assistance to IDPs in Ethiopia, including unaccompanied and separated children.⁵³



Reacting to displacement emergencies: Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation’s “Safe Harbour for Children on the Move” programme in Romania, Poland and Moldova⁵⁴

Local religious leaders and representatives play a vital role in responding to the large-scale displacement from Ukraine to Poland, Romania and Moldova. They are the first responders and provide material support, such as food, shelter, transportation, mental health and spiritual support. Through the “Safe Harbour” programme, Ukrainian children living in Poland have access to medical care, language classes, psychosocial support and recreational activities, like music or sports, together with children from the host community.

In their response to the needs of refugee and migrant children from Ukraine, Tzu Chi Foundation is partnering with several organisations, including Fundacja Polki Moga Wszystk, UNICEF, CADIS, FPMW, Airlink, Caritas International, International Red Cross, Camillian Disaster Service International and UNHCR. They have reached over 35,000 children through an effort involving more than 105 religious leaders and 1650 volunteers.

Lessons learned:

- As long as the war is ongoing, the future for the children on the move is not settled and they require ongoing support.
- Even if children integrate into their new lives well, mental health support remains a long-term need.
- Integration processes are challenging for governmental policies and NGO support.
- NGOs need to have a platform to coordinate mutual goals and activities, and to share resources.

2 *There is a need to strengthen child protection mechanisms across all stages of displacement, from the provision of safe passages to digital safeguarding.* Recent literature highlights that faith actors are often involved in strengthening child protection mechanisms that can prevent and respond to the unique needs of displaced children.⁵⁵ Faith actors provide legal accompaniment, especially in contexts where this support is difficult to access and where opportunities for resettlement are restricted, as illustrated by HIAS’s work with refugees in Greece.⁵⁶ In Turkey, the Vaiz (“preachers”) of Bursa played a key role in ensuring that displaced children from Syria could access birth registration and education.⁵⁷

Faith actors are also engaged in providing safe and legal pathways to protection, including through resettlement and complementary pathways, such as private sponsorship programmes.⁵⁸ For example, since 2016, FBOs in Italy have provided safe passages to refugees through humanitarian corridors from Lebanon, Jordan, Ethiopia and Niger, prioritising families and children as well as people with health conditions.⁵⁹ This practice has been expanded to other European countries and remains one of the few examples of legal and safe pathways to refuge for children on the move and their caregivers.

An emerging and increasingly important dimension of child protection, especially in contexts of forced displacement, is that of digital safeguarding.⁶⁰ This dimension should be addressed in relation to faith and the role of faith actors in responding to forced migration. Digital connectivity is a lifeline for many displaced and separated families. However, religious and cultural elements can be used by criminal organisations to manipulate children, girls in particular, and force them into sexual exploitation. For example, several studies published in 2019 and 2020 exploring the trafficking and sexual exploitation of young women and girls from Nigeria have described how perpetrators draw on religious and traditional beliefs to force or manipulate children, often using online platforms and social media to convey their messaging.⁶¹ Faith actors are only beginning to develop creative strategies to address these rising concerns.



Engaging in resettlement processes: Church World Service’s “Resettlement Support Centre (RSC) Africa”⁶² and “Africa Regional Deployment Unit” (ARDU)⁶³

Since 1990, Church World Service (CWS) has been involved in refugee processing in sub-Saharan Africa. RSC Africa has country offices in Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. Between October 2021 and August 2022, it has helped resettle 6,114 individuals to the USA, two-thirds of which are families with at least one child, including 76 unaccompanied or separated minors. ARDU, one of CWS’ entities managed by RSC Africa, has provided resettlement processing staff to UNHCR in Sub Saharan Africa. These assist, for instance, in conducting Best Interest Determinations for children on the move.

Other RSC Africa initiatives have included providing COVID-19 vaccines to children on the move (aged 12-17 years old) and their families, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health in Kenya” and the pre-resettlement “Cultural Orientation” programme. This is a set of trainings targeting specific refugee groups, including children (6-11 years old), youth (12-17 years old) and unaccompanied minors. The trainings are aimed at equipping participants with the necessary tools and information for their resettlement process to the USA.

3 Faith actors promote support for caregivers, as part of a holistic understanding of children on the move and their needs. To be able to best respond to children’s needs, caregivers also need support. A 2020 study focusing on parents of Syrian refugee children in the USA has highlighted how caregivers reported that faith and community networks enabled them to increase their own resilience. Many faith actors develop ways to support the whole family. For example, in Florida, the Redlands Christian Migrant Association has been running 70 centres providing early education to children of farmworkers and low-income families while integrating voluntary childcare for parents/caregivers. The programmes are adaptable to the schedules of seasonal farmworkers and their needs. Many former migrant workers are employed as staff and teachers. A community learning centre supports the learning needs of parents.⁶⁵



Stepping up engagement through a multi-faceted approach: World Vision's Child Protection and COVID-19 work in Lebanon⁶⁶

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, World Vision Lebanon adapted and strengthened its programming to ensure that child protection activities could continue. The organisation reinforced its network with local governmental institutions to adapt and improve prevention and response measures, for example through the establishment of new child protection hotlines. Psychosocial and educational tools were adapted and shared, including remote psychosocial support (PSS) and psychological first aid (PFA) for caregivers using WhatsApp, Zoom and other digital platforms. According to World Vision, "of the caregivers who received remote PSS and PFA, 100% reported being satisfied, or very satisfied."⁶⁷

World Vision Lebanon also stepped up its engagement with local religious leaders, including through the Channels of Hope vaccine programme which specifically trains faith actors to integrate key scientific and religious messages to address vaccine hesitancy. Cooperation with UNICEF, international and local NGOs, and local government was key to developing and disseminating activities for children that could be carried out remotely, for example through WhatsApp.

Challenges:

According to the project report:

One of the main challenges relating to coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic was funding for child protection. When work in the sector had just begun to stabilise, funding was cut off, making it very hard for organisations in the sector to sustain their work addressing the pandemic. There needs to be more consistency in funding as the context is always changing, and usually for the worse.⁶⁸

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen collaboration between faith actors, governments and other child protection actors:** Partnerships with and between faith actors are key to building and supporting efforts on the continuum of child protection. Faith actors' grounding in local communities often allows them to build the community's trust in and ownership of child protection mechanisms. They can help to build bridges within and across religious traditions, government representatives, other child protection actors and the host community; these are crucial for the success of child protection programmes for children on the move.
- 2. Adopt holistic approaches that include spiritual support:** Tailored and coordinated efforts are required to address the complex and varying needs of children on the move, including healthcare, education, psychosocial and spiritual support, and the needs of parents and caregivers. Faith actors operate in ways that are often holistic and multi-sectoral, which can serve as an example and complement the efforts of others.



3. **Build the evidence base:** More evidence is needed on the effectiveness of faith-sensitive child-friendly spaces and other faith-based child protection activities to continuously improve current practices and enhance future programmes.
4. **Support capacity-strengthening:** Community and grassroots initiatives should be supported with capacity, training and resources and given authority by broader networks. Capacity strengthening is beneficial to local faith actors so they can protect children on the move. Links with religious networks across countries and regions help support faith actors to provide for children on the move and advocate for continued protection.
5. **Increase funding for formal and informal child protection capacity, systems and support.**

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End Notes

1 This brief was published in November 2022. To read the 2018 version of this brief, please visit: <https://jiflc.com/resources/learning-brief-continuum-of-protection-for-children/>

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