

About

This briefing and its conclusions are informed by World Vision's experience responding to the refugee crisis in Serbia, and from interviews with refugees as well as partner agencies working in the region. Interviews were conducted with refugees traveling through the country in late January 2016. The majority of the refugees interviewed are from Syria, but refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan were also interviewed.

Context

The European refugee crisis is a startling reminder of the tremendously difficult decisions refugees are forced to make for the safety of their families. An unprecedented number of men, women and children find the situation in their countries of origin so challenging that they risk their lives to reach Europe. In 2015 alone, over 880,000 people crossed from Turkey to Greece.¹ Many refugees subsequently travel through the Western Balkans towards Central and Northern Europe.

The ability of countries that neighbor conflict zones, such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, to continue accepting new waves of refugees is strained and at its breaking point. The European Union (EU) and countries in the region continue to wrestle with how best to respond to the European dimension of the refugee crisis. A key priority must be political action to address the cessation of violence in countries from which refugees flee, including Syria. Alongside this overarching priority, we recommend continued humanitarian support and interventions to address root causes of refugee flows from countries neighboring conflict zones into Europe—including the lack of economic opportunity and the lack of social growth within the neighboring refugee hosting countries.

An increasing number of children are journeying across Europe as a part of the refugee crisis. According to UNICEF, 37 percent of refugees and migrants who came through Macedonia in December 2015 were children, compared with 23 percent in September of the same year. In Serbia, 36 percent were children in December, an increase from 27 percent in September.² Children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation, or other forms of violence along the refugee route.

Priorities

Through our discussions with refugees, many who were traveling with children, three priorities emerged—especially for those fleeing the Syrian conflict:

1. Establishment of safe and legal routes to and within Europe by host countries;
2. Protection of children, including unaccompanied and separated children, through psychosocial support and family tracing and reunification;
3. A comprehensive, long-term, and common approach to the European refugee crisis.

The lack of options available to refugees en route to, and in, Europe often compromises their safety, their physical and emotional wellbeing, and even their dignity. Refugees face immediate risks that particularly threaten the wellbeing of their children. Far too many children are haunted by the brutal violence and the devastating consequences of war. Now, the dangerous European refugee route adds yet another layer of mental stress and physical exhaustion on children and their families. Once in Europe, they face an uncertain and challenging future.

Reflections from Serbia

World Vision operates in Serbia and offers protection, material, and psychosocial support to children and their families on their journeys.

¹ European Commission. "Implementing The European Agenda On Migration: Commission Reports On Progress In Greece, Italy And The Western Balkans"[Press release], February 10, 2016, available from: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-269_en.htm.

² UNICEF. "News note: Concern over health of children on the move during harsh winter," January 19, 2016, available from: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_89845.html.

Children: Most at Risk and Lacking Basic Protection

"My children have not slept through the night for four years. They wake up screaming from nightmares from the bombing. They are scared."

Refugee children experience the horror of war and its devastating aftermath, including from the Syrian conflict—which enters its sixth year in March 2016. The treacherous journey to Europe through Turkey, and then across the Mediterranean, can have further significant impact on a child.

A refugee mother told World Vision that she was charged an exorbitant rate by two smugglers for her and her 6 year old daughter to make the journey through Turkey and into Europe. Her daughter broke her leg along the route, yet they could not stop. Failing to address the emotional impact and stress children experience through war and migration has the potential to create an entire generation of children impacted by long-term psychosocial problems.

Beyond food, water, and shelter, a greater emphasis on the unique needs of children along the migration route is critically needed and could be met through child specific interventions such as safe spaces for play and rest. **Psychosocial interventions need further emphasis, both during the journey and after children reach their final destination.** World Vision places a large emphasis on psychosocial work through child-friendly spaces along the refugee route through Serbia, where children engage in recreational activities that encourage self-expression through art, crafts, and storytelling. For children, the power of play is critical for them to learn to cope with the horrors of their war experiences, and it promotes mental, social, and emotional wellbeing. Robust psychosocial support continues to be necessary once refugees reach their final destination. Refugee integration must take into account the high levels of mental stress experienced by refugee children so they can eventually regain a sense of normalcy.

Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who are en route to Europe are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.³ **A protection mechanism for unaccompanied children is needed across European migration routes.** This protection mechanism should include case management and case tracking that involves humanitarian actors such as UN agencies, civil society, and national governments to ensure access to a formal, confidential, cross-country referral pathway. Governments along the refugee route should appoint a single national authority with child protection expertise who facilitates state coordination for UASC.

Correct and consistent information needs to be released about the procedures for identifying minors. It can be daunting to identify as an unaccompanied child, particularly when the next steps are unclear. Protection and communication systems for refugees need to be established by governments and other international actors that do not deter unaccompanied children from identifying themselves. Often after UASC identification, children continue their journey with limited support and protection. **Children should be provided with accurate information, using age-appropriate language, in a child-friendly manner. Information needs to include details about protection opportunities and procedures, legal pathways for resettlement, and available services.**

Upon arrival in a final destination, a thorough assessment needs to be conducted to ensure family tracing and reunification (FTR) is carried out in a timely manner. Child friendly and age appropriate arrangements should be made available and access to education, legal support, and psychosocial care should be made a priority. If family reunification is not possible or appropriate, long-term solutions should be considered in line with child protection best practices and ensure the best interests of the child.

Sometimes, family separation occurs along the route. **Practices that prevent family separation should be introduced at all points, including integrating practices that allow families to be processed and move together.** When family reunification en route is not possible, there should be provisions in the destination country to ensure safe and appropriate reunification.

³ UNHCR. "Europe Refugee Emergency—BRIEFING NOTE: Unaccompanied and separated children," October 9, 2015, available from: <https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=85>.

Creating a Safe Passage: The Unsustainability of the Status Quo

“The boat crossing from Turkey to Greece was just so scary. Getting into that little boat and crossing the sea was the most frightening time of my life. It was horrible, horrible.”

These are the words of an adolescent refugee boy with five younger brothers and sisters who told World Vision that the most difficult part of the journey for him and his family was the boat crossing across the Mediterranean. Refugees who have initially fled warzones should not have to endure additional hardships as they attempt to find new opportunities for their families. Current European policies fail to protect those who desperately need safety, and encourage human smuggling activities. The status quo must not continue: there needs to be safe and legal ways for victims of conflict to seek further refuge in Europe.

Refugees in Serbia spend weeks and sometimes months making the dangerous journey to Europe. During last year alone, over 3,700 men, women, and children drowned as they were smuggled across the Mediterranean.⁴

While the journeys are chaotic and dangerous, there are few alternatives. Currently, there are few legal processes that allow refugees to seek safety in Europe without exposing themselves to the treacherous refugee route.⁵ Children and families who have witnessed bombs fall on their towns carry emotional scars and face renewed stress as they head to Europe. The fact that children and families describe this journey as the most frightening thing they have experienced—when they have experienced so much already—is a damning indictment on the global response to the European refugee crisis.

One refugee from outside Damascus told World Vision that he had “died a thousand times on this journey.” When asked to elaborate, he talked of the treatment he and his family endured—the conditions; the lack of hygiene; his untreated illness; and the almost unbearable stress. He travels with his wife and three children. His youngest is only eleven-weeks old.

In Europe, unpredictable border closures make refugee journeys more complex. Men, women, and children who flee conflict have the right to claim asylum. This becomes difficult when border closings occur. **When the current situation of border closings occur, shelter needs to be available to refugees who sometimes wait twelve hours or more to be allowed to the next country along their journey.** Furthermore, routes could be made more efficient and cost effective, both for refugees and transit countries through Europe. Along the Macedonia-Serbia crossing, for instance, refugees still need to walk over three kilometers in deep mud to reach a series of bus routes to take them through Serbia, despite there being a direct rail line through the country.

Communication along the various legs of the refugee route through Europe needs improvement. Many refugees and partner organizations interviewed expressed concern about the lack of clear communication, particularly at border crossings, about processing procedures at checkpoints, directions about the location of buses and trains to combat smugglers taking advantage of refugees, and which types of humanitarian relief is available. **To address communication needs at border crossings and processing centres, we recommend radio announcements on loudspeakers in multiple languages at these critical locations along the refugee route.**

⁴UNHCR. “Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015,” December 30, 2015, available from: <http://www.unhcr.org/5683d0b56.html>

⁵ One exception is the UNHCR resettlement application process.

A Long-Term Solution: The Need for a Coherent Refugee Approach

“There is nothing there for us. No food, water. Nothing. There are no jobs. No future.”

The international community needs to anticipate future refugee flows and possible repercussions on European countries currently along transit route into Northern Europe. Countries that host significant numbers of refugees, such as Germany and Sweden, may ultimately limit the flow of refugees into their countries. Meanwhile, protracted conflicts in the Middle East and other places continue to push civilians to journey onwards. Decreased humanitarian assistance, mass displacement in Iraq and Syria, and saturation of refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, for instance, add even more reasons for victims of war to seek further refuge in Europe. A young refugee mother traveling through Serbia with her family said that, “If I knew the war in Syria would be over in a year or two, I would not have left. I would have stayed in Syria or waited in Turkey. Syria is my home, but I need to make a new life for my family since there’s no end in sight to this war.”

A sustainable response that addresses anticipated refugee flows is critically needed for all governments hosting refugees. For the EU, this should include a common EU asylum system based on shared responsibility whilst other wealthy countries, such as the United States, also consider ways to resettle additional refugees. EU asylum procedures are currently applied in many different ways under the Dublin Regulation. Many EU member states compete to become the least attractive for refugees and would rather refugees go to neighboring countries instead of establishing a common European solution.

European transit countries, especially Greece and the Balkans, could soon face pressure to resettle refugees as Northern European countries reach their refugee capacities. **International donor assistance, in addition to resettling refugees and supporting relief in Syria and neighboring countries, should support economically-burdened countries in Europe that resettle refugees.** These projects can include developing sustainable infrastructure capacity for both the local populations and resettled refugees. In addition, integration into local host communities that includes language and life skills training will be key for refugees to effectively transition and contribute to the economy.

The greatest challenge the EU currently faces, undoubtedly, is the refugee crisis. The EU estimates that another two million refugees will arrive by the end of 2017.⁶ The recent upsurge in heavy violence in northern Syria may result in further influxes of refugees in the coming months.

The European refugee crisis faces two simultaneous trends: fluctuating refugee flows that require a flexible and highly mobile response capacity, and an upward trend of refugee migration that requires longer term support as violence wages on in places such as the Middle East. As a consequence of the violence, refugees continue to make the journey to Europe and want to start a new life for themselves and their children. A comprehensive approach is critical. Recommendations to establish a unified, sustainable path for refugees to gain asylum in Europe must not continue to fall on deaf ears.

⁶ European Commission: Economic and Financial Affairs. “Winter 2016 Economic Forecast: Weathering new challenges,” available from: http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/eu/forecasts/2016_winter_forecast_en.htm.