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INTEGRATION MAPPING OF REFUGEE
AND MIGRANT CHILDREN

Protecting migrant and refugee children from the social effects of the COVID-19 crisis

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Policy Brief #2



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This paper is the second of a series of policy briefs. The main aim of these documents is to link the progresses and findings of the IMMERSE project to specific policy recommendations. Migrant and refugee children are one of the most vulnerable groups in our societies and are particularly exposed to the negative effects provoked by the COVID-19 crisis. In this document, we propose some measures aiming to mitigate these impacts.

1 Background

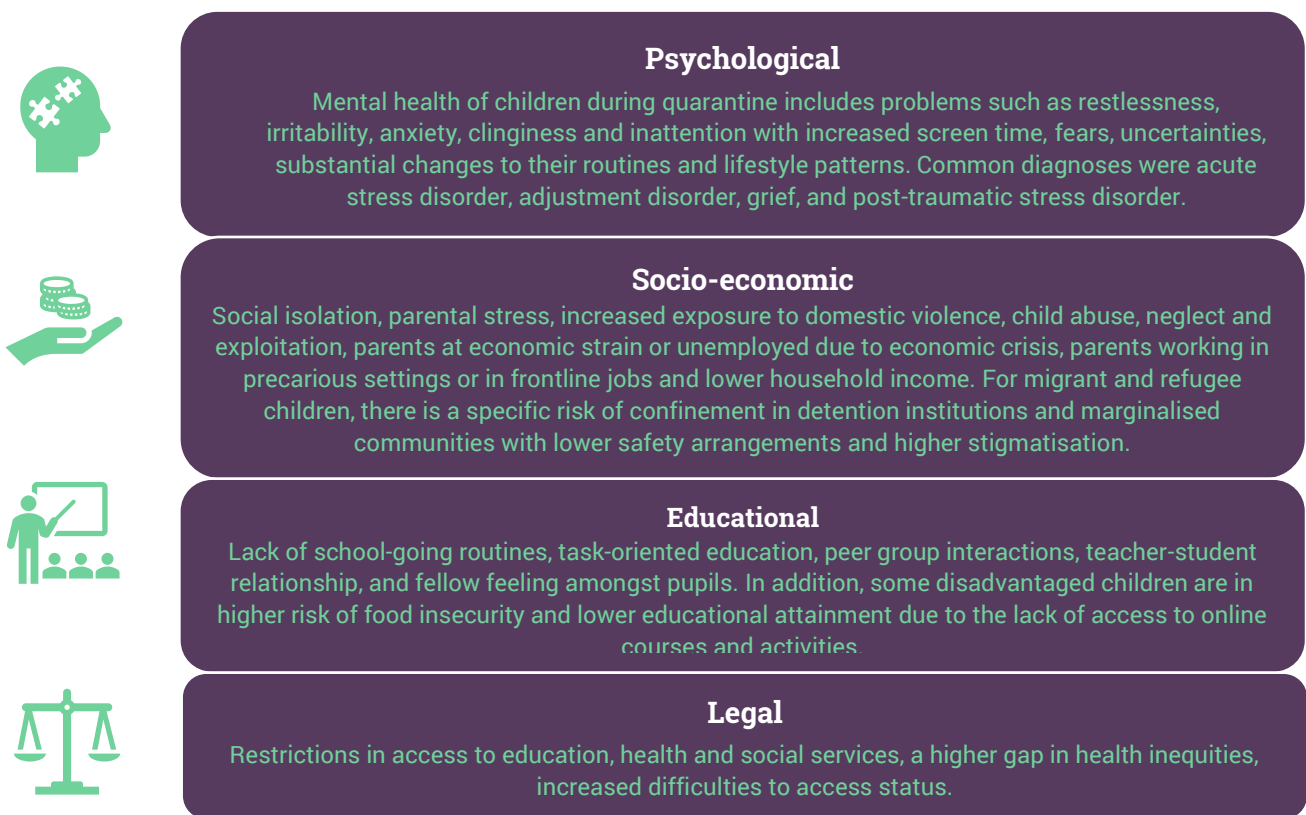
Understanding health from a biopsychosocial perspective implies enabling people to increase control over social and personal resources to achieve well-being. When disadvantages derived from social, political and legal structures and processes cause health problems, these are considered **health inequities** (WHO, 2015). These disadvantages are the **social determinants of health** (SDH) and include income, education, occupation, social class, gender and race/ethnicity (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999).

Migrant children are a population where all SDH intersect making them one of the most vulnerable groups facing the COVID-19 pandemic (You et al., 2020).

SDH constitute a great framework to contextualise the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in migrant childhood, articulating a wider action to accomplish the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected children worldwide, and particularly migrant children because, although this population is minimally susceptible to get COVID-19, **the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic impose great burdens and consequences at different domains** (Ghosh et al. 2020; Imran et al. 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020) (see Figure 1). Migrant children **need wider protection** to mitigate the risks in health, safety, poverty and education. The way in which States deal with the pandemic has deep consequences in their everyday lives, especially of those that, due to their vulnerability, depend in a greater extent on the public provision and protection. **A responsive COVID-19 Policy needs to aim at social justice, social cohesion and sustainability promoting and ensuring their full integration.**



Figure 1 Burdens and consequences imposed to migrant children due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



2 Migrant and refugee children: impacts of the pandemic on their social integration

Although refugee and migrant children are essentially **dissimilar** due to the situations to which they were exposed in their countries of origin and usually have different legal status in the host country, they both share one common characteristic: **vulnerability**. This is not only derived from their age but is also due to the path they had to follow to arrive to the host country as differential intersections of SDH directly affect their well-being, situating them in a vulnerable condition and hampering their integration in the country of destination (IOM, 2020b).

In times of crisis, such as the one caused by COVID-19, **their vulnerable condition provokes even bigger and more devastating consequences on their lives in all dimensions**, and, particularly, at the psychological, socio-economic, educational and legal levels (IOM, 2020b; Kluge et al., 2020; UN, 2020b; You et al., 2020).

In terms of **physical health**, children living in refugee camps or similar settings face critical conditions. The lack of adequate living arrangements, medical assistance and proper access to COVID-19 information and measures, in addition to overcrowding, put their **health at risk** (Kluge



et al., 2020). Regarding **mental health**, these children's pre-existing psychological trauma can be worsened by this crisis, causing even depression or other chronic psychiatric disorders (You et al., 2020).

At the **economic level**, it is important to note that this group usually lives in underprivileged settings or in low-rent neighbourhoods, which are the most affected locations by poverty and marginalisation (You et al., 2020). Providing that the current crisis affects humankind worldwide, **the consequences of economic recession are expected to be significantly worse on migrant and refugee children**, putting them in jeopardy of becoming victims of labour exploitation, human trafficking and other forms of abuse (IOM, 2020b; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

At the **social sphere**, this means that there is a high risk of **failing in their social integration**, which can become, in the near future, a **severe problem for their lives and for social cohesion**. In addition, several reports show that these children are increasingly suffering from discrimination in terms of xenophobia and stigma due to the belief that they are the ones partly responsible for spreading the virus (IOM, 2020a; UN, 2020a; Zeng et al. 2020). This discrimination is not only led by ordinary people, but also by some local authorities that, in several countries, impose different measures to migrant and refugee people than for native citizens, such as curfews and restrictions (You et al., 2020). While children worldwide are affected by school closures, this only expands the existing inequalities, as not all children have access to online learning and not all schools can provide them with the needed resources to keep up with their education. This is **especially dramatic** for migrant and refugee children, who are more likely to lag even further behind in all subjects, especially language learning (IOM, 2020b; You et al., 2020).

It is important to note that the **impact of school closures** on these children goes beyond the negative outcomes related to the school curriculum, as for many, schools are considered a second home more than an educational setting. For them, school provides freedom, the opportunity to socialise with other children and adults, psychological support, and all of that is hindered for them, causing severe damages on their global well-being (Ghosh et al., 2020). All of this may result in **dropping out of school, whose negative social consequences may have a definitive impact on social cohesion in their host countries** (Portes et al., 2016).

3 Recommended actions

The COVID-19 crisis is still ongoing. If the beginning of the pandemic took the international community by surprise and the first strict confinements had to be organized without previous protocols, the current situation requires urgent measures to protect migrant and refugee children. The **volatility** of the present circumstances makes this group one of the most **vulnerable, threatening their integration process and posing a major problem both for the individuals themselves and for the host societies.**

We therefore request to take into account the following **measures** in order to mitigate as much as possible the impact of the social crisis caused by the pandemic on this group:



We urge the European Commission to develop a **specific action plan for the protection and integration of migrant and refugee children**. As already mentioned in the "Action Plan for the Integration of Third Country Nationals" (COM (2016) 377), "children are exposed to a particularly high risk of poverty" (p.3) while acknowledging that "education plays a strong role in the socialization of children and can foster social cohesion and mutual understanding between third country nationals and the receiving societies" (p.8). There is consequently a particular need for specific measures to protect and promote this in the context of the current crisis.



The measures contained in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament on the protection of migrant minors (COM (2017) 211) are **positive**, but as they are **non-binding**, there is a risk (especially in a period of crisis) that they will not be implemented. We suggest including these measures and those contained in the specific action plan mentioned in the previous point, in a **Decision of the Commission**, so that their implementation becomes legally binding throughout the European Union.



We propose to mention migrant and refugee children as a **specific collective** in all the measures adopted by the European Union to counteract the effects of the pandemic, such as the Common European Response in order to **ensure that concrete measures will be devoted to guarantee their protection and social integration**.



It is vitally important, as well, to include **specific budgetary lines** in the funds aimed at mitigating the effects of the crisis to guarantee the **integral access of migrant and refugee children to education and the full maintenance of reception centers**.



Both, the "Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived" (Regulation EU 223/2014) and the "Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund" (Regulation EU 516/2014), whose Article 9 specifies that it will finance "childcare" measures, **must allocate specific resources for the promotion of a successful integration for migrant and refugee children**.



As mentioned by the UNHCR (2020), **access to asylum should not be curtailed for any reason**; interviews must continue to take place telematically and relocations should be reactivated immediately after being suspended in May 2020.



Legal uncertainty and, above all, irregularity, are bound to have a highly negative impact on the lives of the children of immigrants. We recommend the European Commission to call on member states to carry out **comprehensive regularizations** and **grant residence permits to all those who had pending applications** following the example of Portugal, which has been recognized as an exemplary case by the Commission itself ¹.

¹ See <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/covid-19s-impact-on-migrant-communities>

4 Conclusions

If in the first IMMERSE Policy Brief it was highlighted that one of the biggest challenges that the EU was facing was the **successful integration of about 400.000 migrant and refugee children**, now, the COVID-19 crisis **urges** to take direct measures to avoid a **critical situation** in this regard.

Migrant and refugee children are between the **most vulnerable populations** and this crisis is having a huge impact on their lives and their social integration. If immediate actions to tackle these problems are not taken, European societies **will suffer their consequences in the long term**.

We exhort the European Commission to take **decisive steps** towards reversing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on these groups. Our proposals may be taken as a starting point but a **firm action to promote and ensure the social integration of migrant and refugee children should be adopted as part of EU's structural policies** if it aims to build a fair and egalitarian society.



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