Save the Children

TIPPING POINTS TO TURNING POINTS:

DECEMBER 2022

HOW CAN PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES BETTER RESPOND TO THE RISKS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION ON THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, tens of thousands of children – many of them unaccompanied – attempt to make a hazardous journey from East Africa and the Horn of Africa to Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route, driven by factors such as conflict, climate crisis, persecution, economic hardship or shortage of opportunities in their home country. Children's vulnerabilities and inadequate protection at high-risk points on the route such as border-crossings, leave them highly vulnerable to trafficking – which becomes increasingly likely as risk factors accumulate and compound on their journey.

A distinction is often made between the smuggling of migrants, which is generally understood to mean facilitating a person's entry to a country in which they are not a national or permanent resident in return for payment, and trafficking, which is carried out for the purpose of exploitation. Yet, the line between smuggling and trafficking is often blurred and in reality, it can be difficult for child migrants and others to clearly distinguish between smugglers and traffickers.

From smuggling to trafficking: how risks accumulate on the CMR

This research study – undertaken by Samuel Hall for Save the Children's Migration and Displacement Initiative – focuses on the protection risks that migrant children face on the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) and the gaps that exist in policy and programming responses, to inform the East African Migration Routes (EAMR) project in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan.

Under the EAMR project, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) has mandated Save the Children to implement a routes-based approach to improve the protection of migrant children and youth, and support their self-reliance, in countries along East African migration routes.

This study responds to the question: **how can programmes and policies better respond to the risks of trafficking and exploitation facing children along migratory routes?** It analyses child migration, smuggling and trafficking patterns along the CMR to identify links and tipping points between child migration, including with the help of smugglers, and trafficking, as well

as the key junctures, risk multipliers and gaps in protection and support services for children in transit. It also provides a light analysis of regulatory and policy frameworks along the CMR.

The aim is to support practitioners to develop more tailored risk prevention and protection interventions for child migrants at each stage of their journey and to influence the development of national and global policies that will strengthen the protection of child migrants in Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and other transit and destination countries on the CMR.

Amplifying the perspectives of child migrants and their community

The study's qualitative methodology included one-to-one interviews, focus group discussions and case studies with 200 participants including migrant children, youth with prior experience of child migration, community members, experts and practitioners. This was complemented by a thorough analysis of secondary sources on child smuggling, child trafficking and exploitation.

Data collection and desk research was conducted between October 2021 and July 2022 on site in four countries (**Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia**) and remotely in two countries (**Eritrea and Italy**). Primacy was given to the voices of child migrants and their community, and efforts were made to include the voices of girls.

A child-sensitive approach was taken, which allowed the researchers to gather sensitive information about children's experiences and perspectives in a respectful and sympathetic manner that minimised emotional distress. The volume of qualitative interviews conducted among children and stakeholders means that the study findings provide a breadth and depth of information and perspectives, while accounting for the individual experiences of a smuggled or trafficked child.

Focus group discussions with migrant children were conducted by age cohort (10-13 and 14-17), while case studies were carried out with children aged 10-18 and with youth aged up to 20. Conversations focused on children's journeys, experiences, risks and tipping points along the route.

The inception phase of the study highlighted three core themes for the research:

1. Child trafficking and exploitation patterns along migration routes
2. The link between smuggling and trafficking
3. Legal and policy frameworks, responses and gaps along migratory routes.

Learning from the 'chain-of-risk' model

To guide the reader through the risk factors that affect child migrants on the CMR and how they accumulate and compound, this report uses and builds on the chain-of-risk model. This shows how a succession of negative factors and events can increase the likelihood that a child on the move will have further adverse experiences, and increase the risk of trafficking. The model also considers the interventions needed at micro and macro levels, and thus provides a 'prevention centred understanding of anti-trafficking efforts and a focus on upstream solutions to risk factors'.

This multi-levelled approach is embodied in the EAMR theory of change, which builds on four components - direct service delivery, system strengthening, knowledge management, and policy and advocacy - to support the most vulnerable children and youth on the move, through flexible route-based programming.

Key findings

Trafficking risks accumulate and are most severe at border, sea and desert crossings

- **Risk factors stem from a child's existing vulnerabilities and inherent characteristics.** Risk accumulate and multiply along the migration route, gradually increasing the likelihood that smuggling will turn into child trafficking and exploitation. If children are subjected to several risk factors at the same time, for example, if a child is both unaccompanied (vulnerability) and hails from a particular ethnic or religious group (second characteristic), the risk of becoming a victim of trafficking

(VoT) heightens. Moreover, their ability to form strategies to prevent being trafficked decreases exponentially as risk factors accumulate and as they move further away from home.

- **Risks tend to manifest more frequently and with more severity during border, desert and sea crossings, particularly when children cannot access their protective ecosystem.** Other high-risk situations during the migratory journey include long-term transit, poorly monitored refugee camps, detention centres, negotiating with smugglers without the support of adult relatives, coming into contact with border enforcement actors, and areas where outreach and intervention is extremely complicated (for example, in the desert in Northern Sudan).

- **The most recurrent forms of child exploitation on the CMR are forced labour, debt bondage, sexual exploitation and trafficking for ransom.** Children's existing vulnerabilities, characteristics and backgrounds either protect them from or exacerbate the risks for each type of exploitation. For example, Eritreans are generally seen as high value ransom targets by traffickers, as it is understood that they often have relatives in Europe able to pay high ransom fees.

- **The type of trafficking and exploitation that child migrants are subject to is highly gendered.** Boys tend to be exploited and trafficked for the purpose of forced labour, whereas girls are most at risk of being trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation or domestic slavery.

Distance from home and acceptance of smuggling practices can lead to trafficking

- **A child migrant's protective ecosystem diminishes as they move further away from their community of origin.** Additionally, the key actors that surround child migrants during their journey can be sources of both protection and sources of risk. Under conditions of extreme stress and hardship, parents cannot be assumed to be capable of providing a meaningful form of protection to their children.

- **A diaspora community can be a source of information and financial assistance** for a child migrant, **but can also heighten the risk of the child being trafficked for ransom** if the trafficker determines that the child's relatives or acquaintances from the diaspora community have the ability to pay large sums.

- **Smuggling practices can be accepted in local cultures and the risks of trafficking may not be fully recognised.** Child migration is seen as a rite of passage in some cultures. In these cases, smuggling is seen as a common practice and the risks associated with trafficking have traditionally not been sufficiently regarded. However, there are signs that community attitudes towards smuggling are becoming less favourable due to higher risk awareness and diminished expected returns from irregular child migration. As a consequence, the trend of children migrating in groups without informing adult relatives of their intentions is increasing, often with little preparation and planning, which increases their vulnerability.

- **Children only perceive their treatment as trafficking if there is a sale or exchange of money.** Even aggravated smuggling, which becomes dangerous or exploitative and should be punished by more severe sentences than 'ordinary' smuggling, is accepted as a risk associated with their migrant journey. However, institutions often use rigid definitions of smuggling and trafficking, which, among other factors, can lead to gaps in protection services and prevent the provision of necessary assistance to child survivors of trafficking.
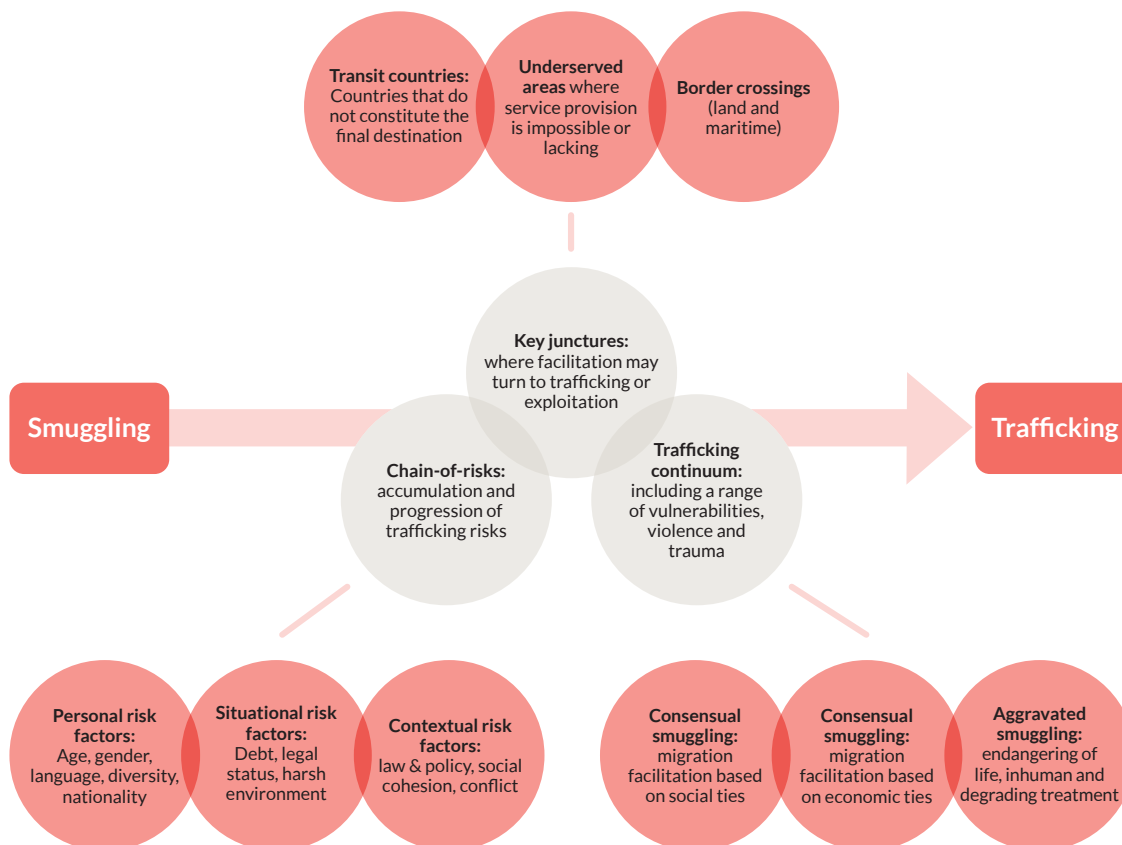

Figure i - Overview of the key elements that lead from smuggling to trafficking

- **Key tipping points when smuggling turns into trafficking** include the **transfer or sale of migrant children from smugglers to traffickers after border crossings; kidnappings; opportunistic behaviours by abusive smugglers;** and the use of **negative coping strategies** such as child labour, domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. **Certain smuggling and payment arrangements** can also lead to trafficking and exploitation.

A focus on border controls, limited services, and lack of trust leave gaps in protection, identification and greater trafficking risks

- **Existing and proposed legal and policy frameworks oscillate between the need to protect child migrants during their journey, and national priorities that centre on law enforcement and control of external borders** - often at the expense of human rights protection. Legislation that is supposed to grant protection to migrants and victims of trafficking (VoTs) often remains incomplete or unenforced. **The risk of child trafficking can increase when no legal migration routes exist;** when anti-trafficking policies are delegated to migration control; and when border management responsibilities are given to unaccountable military actors.

- **In many study locations, migrant children have limited or no access to protection and essential services.** Gaps in services are most common in hostile environments where traffickers operate most freely, as services tend to be concentrated in the main urban and refugee-hosting areas. For example, migrant children face the highest risks in the border region between Sudan, Egypt and Libya, but few agencies and service providers are present.

- In locations where there are services, **a lack of trust in service providers and local authorities** was a recurrent theme among the research participants. As a result, migrant children's needs often remain unmet. Moreover, complex status-based eligibility criteria and **challenges identifying child VoTs lead to dysfunctional referral mechanisms**.

Summary of recommendations

Save the Children urgently calls for governments, humanitarian and development agencies, service providers and local communities on the Central Mediterranean Route to:

- **Strengthen capacity and capabilities to protect and assist migrant children** by offering **coordinated, cross-border, needs-based support services, improved data sharing and access to specialised training at all key junctures** along the migration route.

- **Advocate to establish and expand safe, regular migration pathways**, which is at the root of the problem and support authorities to **shift their focus from criminalisation to victimisation** to reduce children's dependence on irregular migration pathways.

- **Implement child-sensitive anti-trafficking laws and policies** and ensure migrant children are **treated as children first and foremost with equal level of protection** as national children.

Detailed programme and policy recommendations are set out in section five.

Programme recommendations

1. Improve inter-agency coordination to ensure services are provided at key locations on the CMR and to avoid duplication of effort, including those that are currently underserved

2. Strengthen data collection, monitoring and sharing to address the information asymmetry that puts child migrants at risk

3. Strengthen cross-border and international partnerships across agencies

4. Build partnerships with and upskill trusted local actors

5. Strengthen multidisciplinary child protection services at national and subnational levels

6. Recognise and treat all child VoTs (and children at risk) as children first and foremost, and ensure their access to essential services on a needs-basis regardless of their status.

7. Ensure that returns to countries of origin only take place when in the child's best interest

8. Build border officials' capacity to deliver child protection at hard-to-access border points and advocate to increase humanitarian access

Policy recommendations

1. First and foremost, states and humanitarian and development agencies on the CMR should work to establish and expand safe, regular migration pathways

2. Prioritise child protection services over migration enforcement, so that children are protected regardless of nationality or status.

3. Develop and implement child-sensitive anti-trafficking laws, policies and action plans with comprehensive protection for survivors

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Section 1: Introduction	Section 2: Chain-of-risks that leads to trafficking	Section 3: When child smuggling turns into trafficking	Section 4: Legal and policy frameworks, responses & gaps	Section 5: Conclusion and recommendations
How child smuggling, trafficking and exploitation overlap, the role of the ecosystem surrounding the child, and the study's objectives and methodology	How trafficking and exploitation risks accumulate along the CMR, types of trafficking risks, the most common forms of trafficking, and child vulnerabilities in the countries of research	The tipping points when smuggling becomes trafficking, harmful smuggling practices that lead to trafficking, and harmful coping strategies adopted by child migrants	Strengths and weaknesses in frameworks and responses, and opportunities for the structural framework to be reinforced in order to enhance child migrant protection	Reflections on the st udy's key findings and a series of practical programme and policy recommendations, for practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders