Save the Children

TIPPING POINTS TO TURNING POINTS:

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

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FOREWORD

It has become common practice the world over for children fleeing from various forms of violence, insecurity, and desperate poverty to engage smugglers to help them on their journey to what they hope will be a safer and more sustainable future. Desperate families scrape together precious funds to pay a smuggler, who is very often someone they know and trust in their community, to safely transport their children and navigate international borders toward a more promising life. Tragically, many of these children are subject to an accumulation of risks and are unable to cope, gradually increasing the likelihood of trafficking, exploitation and abuse.

While policymakers distinguish between smuggling and trafficking, children and families often don't make this same distinction. The line between the two is so easily blurred and misunderstood, resulting in families who want only the very best for their children to unwittingly put them in harm's way. Too often, children themselves not only miss the crucial care they need, but they are criminalized by authorities rather than seen and treated as victims.

How do we as practitioners and policymakers break this chain for children at risk of trafficking and exploitation? To try to answer this question, Save the Children worked with Samuel Hall Consultants to understand more from children and participants in the smuggling ecosystem itself about the circumstances that create the highest vulnerability for children. We conducted this research across the East Africa Central Mediterranean route, through Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt as part of Save the Children's work on the East African Migration Routes project, mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC). Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan and Tunisia were among the top ten countries of origin of migrants reaching European shores in the first half of 2021. Over the course of the research, we heard directly from more than 200 individuals, including children, community members, practitioners and experts.

Fundamentally, as the report lays out, the efforts governments are taking to control borders and restrict movement are increasing the risks that children will be exploited and trafficked. Jour-

neys have become longer and more dangerous. Traffickers take advantage of restrictions on movement to exert their power over children. Border crossings are particularly risky, as well as desert and sea crossings, given that they are difficult, if not impossible, for benevolent actors to monitor or even access to protect children. And perhaps worst of all, children themselves are not aware that they are at victims of trafficking. Echoing the findings in our recent report "**Wherever We Go Someone Does Us Harm**" about the experiences of children arriving in Europe via the Balkans, children moving across East Africa have come to accept and even expect the exploitation and abuse they experience as part of the cost of trying to reach safety.

Children all over the world have the same rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including children who are migrating across borders. It is imperative that governments, including border agencies, as well as the international community take this obligation to children seriously. Child trafficking victims are just that: victims. They are not criminals and they should never be treated that way. States along the Central Mediterranean route must improve, or where absent, establish anti-trafficking policies that protect children, and shift their focus from criminalisation to victim protection. Inter-agency and international coordination on the Central Mediterranean Route is key to strengthen protection and assistance for migrant children at all key junctures along the route.

It is our sincere hope that, the findings and recommendations from this report provide a useful guide to policy makers and the international community on key steps we need to take to break the chain from child smuggling to trafficking. We look forward to hearing from colleagues and friends from across the world on how we can make such collaboration a reality.

Tory Clawson,
Director of the Migration and Displacement Initiative,
Save the Children International

ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
AU HoAI	African Union Horn of Africa Initiative on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling
CMR	Central Mediterranean Route
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organisation
EAMR	East African Migration Routes
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
ICAT	Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NCCM	National Council for Childhood and Motherhood
NCCPIM & TIP	National Coordinating Committee on Preventing and Combating Illegal Migration and Trafficking in Persons
NCCT	National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking
NCW	National Council for Women
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on Children in Armed Conflict
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SEM	State Secretariat for Migration
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SOP	Standard operating procedures
UASC	Unaccompanied and separated children
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VoT	Victim of trafficking

TERMINOLOGY

Term	Definition
Aggravated forms of smuggling	Smuggling of migrants in circumstances that endanger, or are likely to endanger, their lives or safety, or that 'entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants.' [1]
Chain-of-risk	A sequence of risks and exposures to negative events that accumulate and increase the overall risk, because one negative experience or exposure tends to lead to new negative outcomes.[2]
Child	Any person under 18 years of age.
Child exploitation	The abuse of children who are forced, tricked, coerced or trafficked into exploitative activities. Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual.[3]
Child labour	Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, which is harmful to their physical and/or mental development. It is work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children. It interferes with their schooling by: • Depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; • Obliging them to leave school prematurely; or • Requiring them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.[4]
Exploitation	The act of taking advantage of something or someone, in particular taking unjust advantage of another for one's own benefit (e.g., prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs).[5]
Migration	The movement of a person or group of persons, either within a state or across an international border, whatever its duration, composition or cause. It includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification.[6]

Term	Definition
Mixed migration	Cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed migration flows have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling irregularly, wholly or partly assisted by migrant smugglers.
Separated children	Children who have been separated from both parents or from their legal or customary primary caregiver but not necessarily from other relatives, who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for their care. Children may become separated at any point during their migration.[7]
Smuggling of migrants	The procurement of illegal entry of a person into a state of which they are not a national or permanent resident, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.[8]
Trafficking continuum	The understanding of trafficking as a continuum, with transaction-based facilitation by smugglers at one end of the continuum, and trafficking for exploitation at the other. Between the two extremes are a range of inhumane and degrading practices, known as aggravated smuggling.[9]
Trafficking in persons / human trafficking	The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.[10] The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation is irrelevant where coercive means have been used.[11] The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered trafficking in persons even if this does not involve the use of coercive means.[12]
Unaccompanied children	Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives, who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for their care. Children may become unaccompanied at any point during their migration.[13]
Youth	The United Nations defines persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth.

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'.[14]

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,[15] 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.

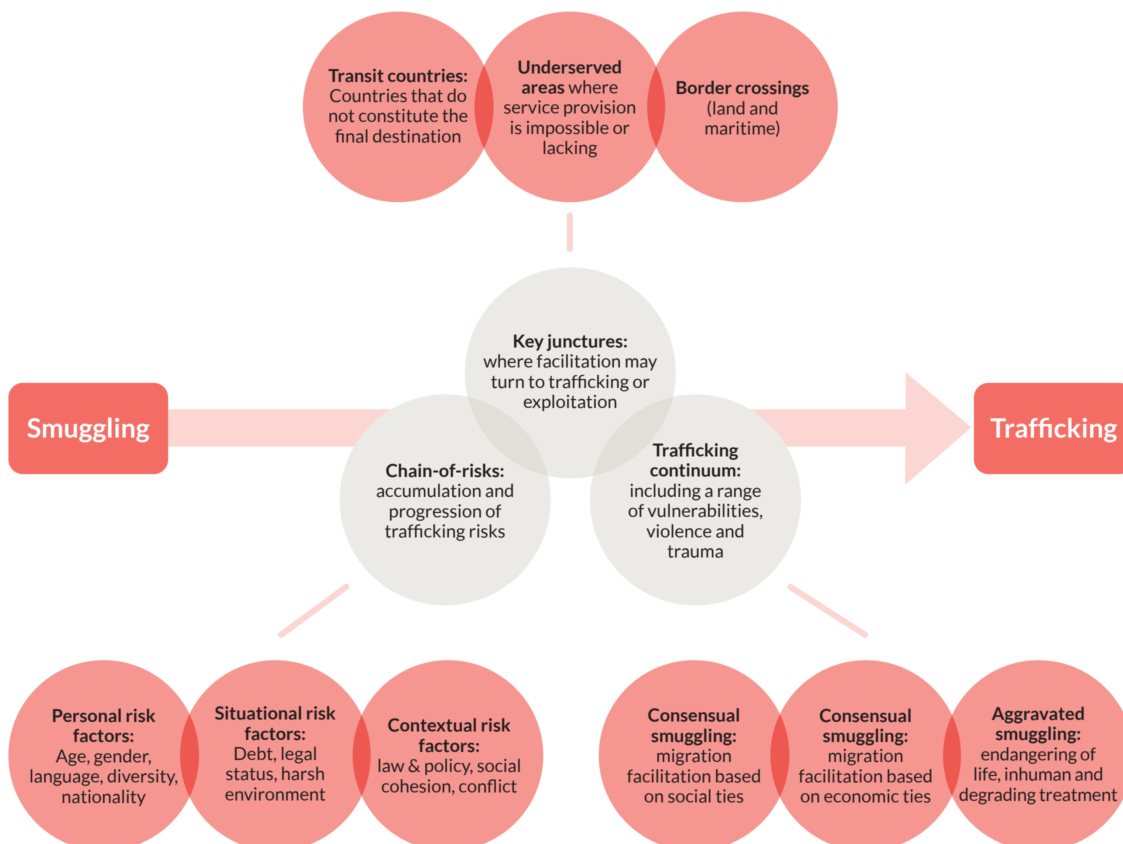

Figure i - Overview of the key elements that lead from smuggling to trafficking

- **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

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Child smuggling, child trafficking and exploitation

Every year, tens of thousands of children attempt to migrate from East Africa and the Horn of Africa to southern Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route. It's a difficult and dangerous journey, which children embark on for reasons such as conflict, climate crisis, persecution, economic hardship or shortage of opportunities in their home country. Along the way, the risks that they face accumulate and compound, leaving them highly vulnerable to child trafficking.

However, international legal frameworks and policies relating to human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants[16] fail to reflect the complex realities on the ground. They **make a clear distinction between human trafficking and smuggling of migrants - but in practice these activities often overlap**, particularly in mixed movement contexts where refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants travel along the same routes. The premise is that the claim of victimhood is reserved for survivors of human trafficking, and not those who are subjected to violence and exploitation at the hands of migrant smugglers.[17]

The complex legal definition of human trafficking does not account for all types of survivors. Instead, the criminalisation of migrant smuggling 'has served to justify the criminalisation of immigration and weaken the protection that is owed to migrants.[18] Indeed, smuggling is framed in international law as a crime against the state, while trafficking is framed as a crime against the person. As a result of these inconsistent responses to smuggling and trafficking, which are largely framed by broader migration and border management policies, **child migrants are often left unprotected**.

The UN Trafficking Protocol defines child trafficking as the 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons [...] for the purpose of exploitation'. **Unlike in the case of adult victims, the use of coercive means is not required to establish whether a child has been trafficked.** This definition postulates that children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

From a legal standpoint, the definition seems clear. However, authors have argued that the UN Trafficking Protocol has cast its net too wide, blurring the line between child exploitation and non-exploitative forms of child mobility and participation in work activities. This can have significant practical implications when authorities produce regulations and policies that consider all children who are travelling unaccompanied to be victims of trafficking.[19] The policy consequence is that different approaches to child trafficking can generate protection risks of their own and divert attention and resources away from those who suffer acute harm.[20]

Role of the ecosystem surrounding child migrants

Child migration decisions are dependent on the broader ecosystem that surrounds children, including their families, peers, smugglers and traffickers. Some of the actors in the child's ecosystem have a protective role, while others are a source of risk that increase the child's likelihood of being trafficked. It can be challenging to distinguish between smugglers, who facilitate consensually agreed migration and traffickers, whose motive is exploitation. The ecosystem presents children with opportunities, constraints, and access to information and support before and during their journey, as well as in destination countries.

For the purpose of this study, it is useful to distinguish between a child migrant's:

- Microsystem: interactions with their family and peers.
- Mesosystem: interactions with community actors such as religious or community leaders, elders, teachers etc., whether in person, online or on social media.
- Exosystem: external actors they encounter on their journey, such as service providers, smugglers and traffickers.
- Macrosystem: the broader political, economic and social environment that surrounds them.

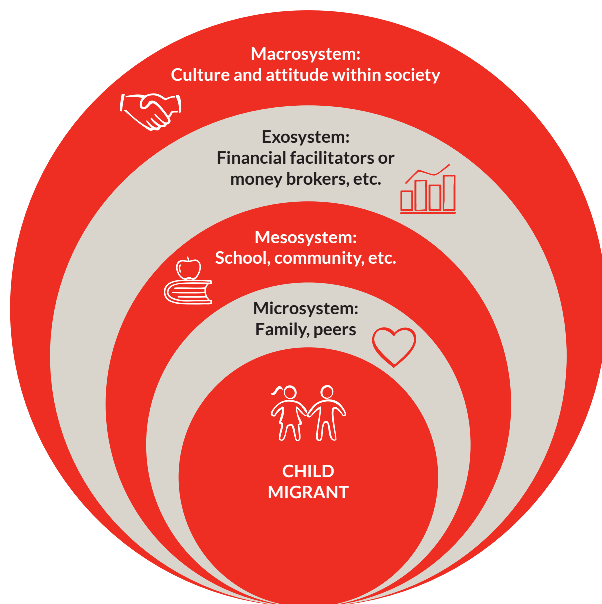

Figure 1 - Child migrants and their ecosystem

Actors within the ecosystem impact child migration patterns in multiple ways. They can shape expectations, provide information, mobilise support networks, link up prospective child migrants with smugglers, and fund migration journeys. More generally, child trafficking is influenced by how societies recognise children as rights-holders and acknowledge their age-specific vulnerabilities, as well as their agency and capabilities.

Child trafficking and exploitation is a result of underlying socio-economic factors and local practices. In sub-Saharan Africa, many communities have a long and supported tradition of child mobility and support foster care and child participation in the labour market. These practices may lead to negative household-level coping mechanisms that result in child smuggling and trafficking and other negative outcomes such as child labour, domestic servitude or sexual exploitation.

The experts who took part in this study said that the main socio-economic migration drivers in the region are school dropouts related to child labour, low household income, poverty and the hope for better life conditions. **Children and their families knowingly accept the risks of the migration journey because of unbearable living conditions in their country of origin.**[21] Furthermore, economic disadvantages continue to affect children on the route. Those who cannot afford the costs of their journey upfront may need to stop for work, which increases the risk of exploitation and trafficking.[22]

To tackle the socio-economic factors that drive child trafficking and exploitation, authorities and organisations must provide integrated responses that move beyond siloed action plans, and incorporate anti-trafficking referral mechanisms into broader child protection systems.[23]

At a structural level, legislation and programmes that are intended to safeguard migrant children usually lack efficacy in enforcement and implementation. **Many states prioritise national and border security rather than the protection of migrants' human rights and the protection of unaccompanied migrant children.**[24] Inconsistencies and gaps in programmes and policies may also result in harmful behaviours and missed opportunities for intervention at crucial moments along child migration journeys, resulting in greater risk of trafficking and exploitation.

1.2. Study objectives

To date, research on smuggling and trafficking along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) has focused on analysis of risk at specific junctures along the route – notably the border region between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia,[25] and Libya.[26], [27] Moreover, research has focused mostly on adult migrants, who are more accessible to researchers, while studies of child trafficking and exploitation have been confined to countries of destination. This leaves policymakers and practitioners with limited information on child trafficking and exploitation patterns during transit. While the risk factors that emerge along the route are generally understood, there is **a lack of analysis into how risks accumulate and compound** during children's complex, non-linear and often segmented migration journeys.

This study aims to address gaps in research about the accumulation of risk on child migration journeys, the tipping points between smuggling and child trafficking, and gaps in protection and support services on the Central Mediterranean Route. The overarching research question was: **how can programmes and policies better respond to the risks of trafficking and exploitation facing children along migratory routes?**

This study was commissioned under the framework of the East African Migration Routes (EAMR) project. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) mandated Save the Chil-

dren to implement a routes-based approach and make **policy and programming recommendations** to improve the protection of migrant children and youth, and support their self-reliance, in countries along East African migration routes.

The project targets vulnerable children and youth (aged 15-24) on the move, including those at risk of undertaking unsafe migration. Specific attention is given to the most vulnerable and those most at risk of abuse and exploitation, including girls and young women, unaccompanied and separated children, minors living or working in the street, trafficked children and youth, along with younger children and babies travelling with families. The project is based on four key components: direct service delivery, system strengthening, policy and advocacy, and knowledge management.

1.3 Methodology

Qualitative research

This study's qualitative methodology, developed by Samuel Hall, included one-to-one key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and case studies with 200 participants including migrant children, youth who had previously experienced child migration, child migration experts and practitioners, duty bearers, community representatives and smugglers. Data collection was conducted between October 2021 and July 2022, on site in four countries on the Central Mediterranean Route (Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia) and remotely for two countries on the route (Eritrea and Italy).

Primacy was given to child migrants and their community, and efforts were made to include the voices of girls. The research team collaborated with Save the Children to ensure that a child-sensitive approach was taken, which allowed the researchers to gather sensitive information from children about their experiences, risks and perspectives, in a respectful and sympathetic way that minimised emotional distress.

This research was complemented by a thorough analysis of secondary sources on child smuggling, child trafficking and exploitation, carried out during the inception phase of the study, which 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 in protection along migratory routes.

Table 1 - Sampling overview

Country	Research areas	KIIs	FGDs	Case studies
Egypt	Cairo, Alexandria	12	7	6
Ethiopia	Addis Ababa, Metemma[28]	11	6	9
Sudan	Khartoum	14	5	6
Tunisia	Tunis, Medenine	15	2	7
Eritrea	Remote	2	-	-
Italy	Remote	4	-	-
Regional/ global	Remote	14	-	-
Totals		72	20	28
In total, 200 respondents were interviewed for this study				

- **KIIs with experts and duty bearers** focused on legal, policy and programme frameworks at country, regional and global level. KIIs with community representatives focused on their perceptions of child vulnerabilities, migration trends, smuggling and trafficking.
- **FGDs with migrant children** were carried out by age cohort (aged 10-13 or 14-17) with up to five children, separated by gender or mixed. **FGDs were also held with parents and caregivers.** Information was collected on migration decisions and trajectories, the relationship between child migrants and smugglers, risks of child trafficking and exploitation, risk mitigation measures, and barriers accessing services.
- **Case studies were individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews with migrant children aged 10-18, and with youth aged up to 20** who had a prior child migration experience. Out of 28 case studies, 10 were conducted with girls. These facilitated conversations focused on children's migration journeys, decision-making processes, positive and negative experiences, and the risks and tipping points they faced along the route.

All tools were reviewed by Save the Children and national researchers, and piloted. COVID-19 preventive measures were followed during fieldwork.

Criteria for selection of research locations and study participants

The selection of research locations and study participants were based on key migration routes, the programme and policy landscape, and access to and availability of data sources (see annex 1 for more details). The study aimed for a balance between breadth and depth, to address key knowledge gaps without diluting the sample in ways that would compromise its ability to generate significant and robust insights.

The study focused on the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) for the following reasons:

- Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt are traversed by flows of migrants, including children, who are moving to (or returning from) North Africa and Europe along the CMR. By contrast, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean migration routes are mostly used by Ethiopian migrants. Studying either of these two routes would not deepen understanding of child migration and trafficking risks relating to Sudan and Egypt.
- Migrant children who move along the CMR are confronted with huge risks. This includes risks that are inherent to dangerous desert and sea crossings, an unfavourable policy framework, widespread violence, and the established presence of traffickers. Moreover, the CMR has seen a significant increase in movements and in 2022, migration flows reached pre-pandemic levels.
- The CMR is characterised by significant tensions between security-oriented and human rights approaches, which increases risks of child trafficking and exploitation. This study generates practical recommendations at a policy and programme level for stakeholders and duty bearers in Europe, North Africa and Eastern Africa.

Figure 2. Routes from the Horn of Africa to North

The geographical scope of primary data collection was defined by three concentric circles:

- **Core circle:** the three core countries where fieldwork was carried out (**Ethiopia, Sudan** and **Egypt**).
- **Middle circle:** one additional country selected for field research (**Tunisia**) because of its strategic position. Tunisia experienced a 310% increase in sea departures in 2020, due to increasing departures of Tunisian and third country nationals, including migrants from East Africa and the Horn of Africa.[29] Libya was not included in the study because of barriers to conducting fieldwork.
- **Outer circle:** two additional countries located further downstream or upstream along the route (**Eritrea** and **Italy**), where information was collected through remote KIIs and secondary sources. Eritrea is a major country of origin for migrant children along the CMR, for well-known reasons related to endemic poverty and a repressive regime. Eritrean nationals

tend to be disproportionately at risk of abusive smuggling and trafficking from the earliest segments of their journey. Italy is the CMR's main gateway to Europe, following the dangerous Mediterranean crossing. Migrant children face new risks and challenges in Italy.

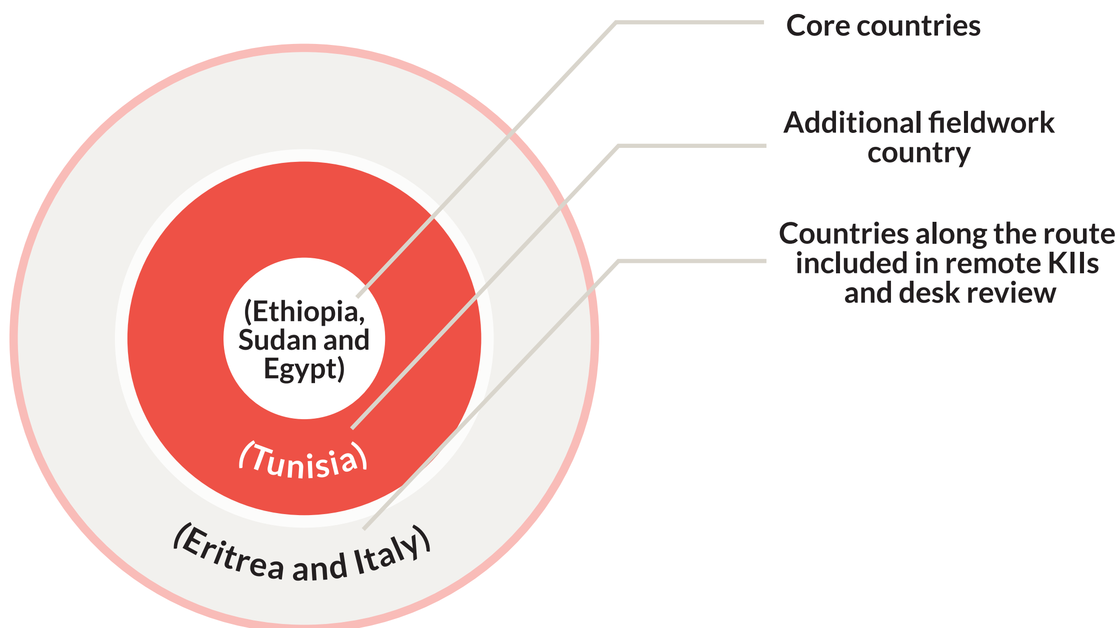

Figure 3. Concentric migration circles within the target region

Constraints and limitations

Against a backdrop of COVID-19 and constantly changing political and security dynamics in the countries where fieldwork was conducted, certain limitations and constraints materialised during the research.

Obtaining research permissions in Sudan represented the most significant obstacle during data collection. Difficulties accessing migrant settlements in Tunisia and identifying venues for focus group discussions in Egypt also created delays.

Some of the research tools employed for the case studies were not always suited to the different levels of maturity that we found among children who participated in the study, who were aged between 10 and 17 years old. In the rare cases where this issue arose, the research team did not use the models that were too child-like for the respondents and took a more flexible approach to how to ask the questions.

Sensitivities surrounding the study as well as the security situation in some of the countries where fieldwork was conducted presented obstacles in terms of access. In Sudan, all fieldwork was conducted in Khartoum. Accessing the border city of Kassala (for example), which constitutes a migratory hotspot, was deemed unfeasible due to difficulties obtaining research permissions in cities and regions outside Khartoum.

Another limitation was that the study did not obtain the views of child migrants' family members that remained in their countries of origin. For the sake of a more holistic study, it would have been useful to interview family members in home communities who had children migrate, as their perceptions and rationale could have provided interesting data. While researchers did interview family members of child migrants, they were typically migrants themselves.

2. CHAIN-OF-RISKS THAT LEADS TO TRAFFICKING

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Migrant children experience a chain-of-risks on their journey on the CMR: a succession of risk factors, shocks and traumas that accumulate and multiply, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.** When children experience several risk factors at the same time, it can exceed their coping capacity, increasing the risk of trafficking and exploitation.
- **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).
- Based on the accounts of children and others who participated in this study, the **most recurrent forms of child trafficking on the CMR are bonded or forced labour, sexual exploitation, and trafficking for ransom.** Children's existing vulnerabilities, characteristics and backgrounds either protect them from or exacerbate the risks for each types 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.

2.1 Chain-of-risks model

Child trafficking and exploitation occur when child migrants experience a sequence of risk factors that accumulate and compound during their migration journey, which is often highly fragmented and characterised by starts and stops, diverging paths and immobility.[30]

The **'chain-of-risks' model** is a helpful framework for understanding the dynamics of the child migrant's journey, so that appropriately tailored prevention and response interventions can be devised. The model shows how 'one adverse (or beneficial) exposure or experience tends to lead to another one, and so on.'[31] It also illustrates how a sequence of adverse experiences can lead to protection concerns and threats to children's wellbeing.

Adapted to human trafficking, the chain-of-risks model depicts this crime 'as a continuum that includes a range of vulnerabilities, violence, and traumas.'[32] Multiple risk factors and negative experiences before departure or at the initial stages of a child's migration journey can accumulate and lead to trafficking and exploitation further along the route.

The story of **Omar, a 17-year-old Eritrean boy** interviewed in Tunisia, illustrates this concept. Omar used to live in Eritrea with his mother and two brothers in conditions of extreme poverty. When his older brother was killed due to the escalation of community tensions, Omar's mother persuaded him to leave the country, to avoid becoming entangled in a cycle of revenge and to seek better life prospects. Against his will and with limited financial support from members of the Eritrean diaspora in Sweden, Omar moved to Sudan – first to Gedaref, then to Khartoum. In Sudan, Omar was out of school, unable to find jobs, at risk of harassment and detention due to his undocumented status, and afraid that his brother's murderers would eventually come after him.

When Omar learnt that a group of peers intended to migrate to Libya, he joined them. He had no precise idea of the risks that he would encounter along the way and made no preparation for the journey. The group of child migrants relied on smugglers to take them across the border. Omar did not know the smugglers and arrangements were made on his behalf by the group. Once

in Libya, the children were transferred to traffickers, held for ransom and tortured. His brother's friend in Sweden helped with the ransom. After two months, a rival armed group stormed the location in al-Kufra where they were held captive. Omar and some of his fellow migrants managed to escape in the commotion, while others went missing or died. Omar eventually reached Tunisia with the help of smugglers.

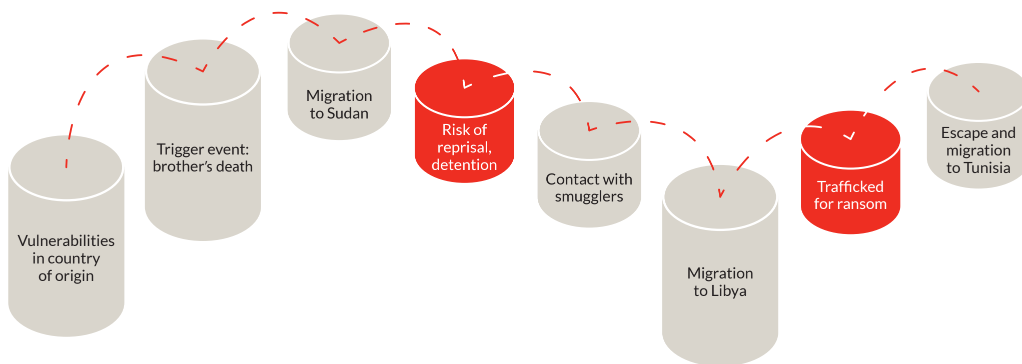

Figure 4 - Omar's migration story

This illustration shows the chain-of-risk at play in Omar's experience: **a complex progression of risk factors that lead to trafficking.** Omar's chain-of-risk started before his departure from Eritrea, where high socio-economic vulnerability and a lack of education (personal risk factors) was compounded by the tragic event of his brother's death and fear of revenge. Omar's exclusion from the decision-making process - his mother took the decision - leading to his migration to Sudan, as well as his undocumented status (a situational risk factor) and his lack of safety net in Sudan, added to his vulnerabilities in the first segment of the journey. The second segment of Omar's journey, from Sudan to Libya, was affected by new situational risk factors, such as the absence of a trust-based relationship with the smuggler and a lack of preparation for the journey. Moreover, Omar's nationality may have been an additional risk, as traffickers tend to believe that Eritreans are more likely to pay a ransom thanks to their extensive diaspora. It was a series of interconnected events - rather than a single negative experience - that pushed Omar from socio-economic vulnerability to a situation where he was trafficked and exploited. This shows how trafficking is 'part of a larger continuum of violence, vulnerability, and exploitation.'[33]

Omar's experience echoes that of many other children interviewed for this study, who find themselves in situations of trafficking and exploitation as a result of decisions taken by themselves, their families, their peers, community members and smugglers, as well as the impact of structural factors at programme and policy level.

2.2 Types of trafficking risks along the CMR

The interaction of personal, situational and contextual risk factors can set off chains of negative events or risks that may eventually lead migrant children to be exploited and trafficked. **These risk factors manifest themselves differently at different stages of the migratory journey.** Children who participated in this research frequently cited family abuse and protracted deprivation as major concerns and migration drivers at the start of their journey, but risks linked to nationality or ethnicity For example Eritreans are likely to be at risk of trafficking due to perceived high ransom values and perceptions of a rich diaspora in Europe. For children from North African transit countries, including Egypt, there are examples of racial discrimination by host communities.

Table 2 - Types of risks

Type of risk	Key factors observed in the study
Personal	• **Nationality**: Eritreans who are expected to mobilise significant resources through their diaspora are disproportionately at risk of being charged high smuggling fees or being kidnapped for ransom. Ethiopians in Egypt face more discrimination due to a Nile dispute. • **Ethnicity**: Migrant children from sub-Saharan Africa face discrimination and exclusion in North Africa. • **Language**: Language barriers, notably lack of fluency in Arabic, prevent migrant children from communicating with smugglers, local communities and service providers along the CMR. • **Gender**: Girls are disproportionately at risk of early marriage, parental exploitation, and abuse by families and foster families in their country of origin. This is a well-known driver of migration (see section 2.2). In some communities, being an SGBV survivor is a source of stigma and marginalisation, sometimes leaving survivors with no other option but to migrate with limited or no support. Gender is also a factor of vulnerability during migration, as girls have limited access to information and limited regular migration avenues, and are therefore exposed to higher risks of trafficking (see section 2.2.). In countries of origin, boys in conflict-affected regions are disproportionately at risk of forced recruitment and conscription by armed forces and armed non-state actors. During transit and at destination, they are particularly at risk of being exploited in dangerous work activities in mines and farms. • **Age**: Younger children are less mature, less able to anticipate risk, and less able to adopt effective coping strategies. This is typically the case for children aged 13 and under.

Situational	• **Child-smuggler relationship**: When smugglers are not members of the child migrants' community of origin, they are more likely to engage in abusive and opportunistic behaviours that may lead to trafficking (see section 3). • **Lack of family contact and support**: UASCs have less recourse to family support, especially if they have fled abusive family situations. Accompanying adults may be unable to protect child migrants due to past trauma and stress, or because they conceal key information from children. • **Lack or confiscation of IDs and travel documents**: During transit, this exposes child migrants to risks of ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests and expulsions. It may also limit their ability to access essential services, particularly education. • **Debt**: High levels of debt result in a higher risk of forced labour and increase the adoption of negative coping strategies. • **Harsh environment**: During border and desert crossings in remote locations, migrant children have diminished access to water, food and healthcare, resulting in reduced coping capacities.
Contextual	• **Lack of protection responses**: A lack of regional and national programmes and services along migratory routes, due to a lack of will or means to combat smuggling, exploitation and trafficking, or even corruption or bribery in some contexts, puts children at increased risk. • **Lack of social cohesion**: Local communities in transit and destination countries are often hostile to migrants from supposedly distant cultures, resulting in discrimination and stigmatisation. Migrant children may adopt coping mechanisms to reduce their visibility in the public sphere. • **The legal and policy framework**: Inconsistencies in laws, policies and interventions, and inadequate implementation mechanisms, leave migrant children with limited regular migration options and major protection and assistance gaps during transit. • **Conflict and instability**: In countries of origin and transit, conflict and instability increase the space of lawlessness where smuggling and trafficking groups can operate and thrive.

Together, these factors increase the overall risk of trafficking and exploitation of child migrants. For example:

- **Personal risk factors** may increase trafficking and exploitation risks for children who cannot speak Arabic, who migrate due to SGBV risks, or who are expected to be able to mobilise extensive support from their diaspora.
- **Situational risk** factors may result in increased trafficking risks when they lead to unplanned migration decisions, harmful coping strategies and traumatic events during the journey.
- **Contextual risk** factors such as border control, COVID-19 restrictions, and conflict or instability, may lead to higher smuggling fees, increased danger along the route, and the breakdown of family and community support networks.

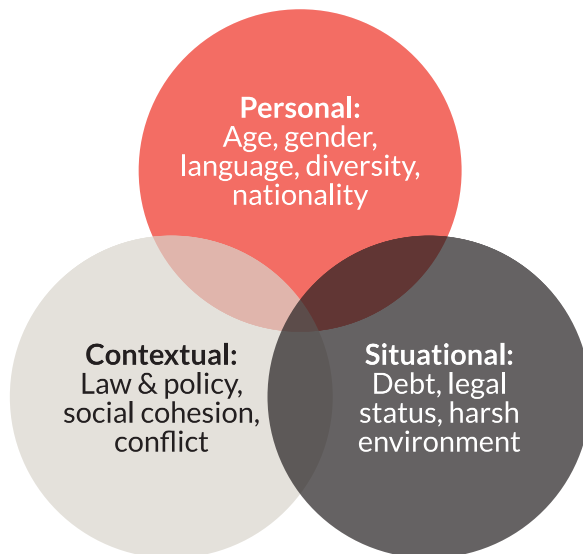

Figure 5: Interaction of different trafficking risks

Layered and interconnected factors impact the trafficking and exploitation risks that child **migrants face on their journey**[34] **and migrant children experience multiple risks at the same time.** For example, a migrant may be a girl (personal risk factor), travelling unaccompanied (situational risk factor), and facing discrimination by local communities in a transit country (contextual risk factor). **Risk factors accumulate as children progress on their journey**, exposing them to different forms of trafficking.

The fragmented nature of migration journeys adds to the number of negative experiences that migrant children experience as part of a chain-of-risks. As they arrive in new locations and countries, migrant children must adapt to a new context, and often a new language, and can only count on limited external support in

the best cases. As study participants pointed out, whatever migrant children learnt in the initial segments of their journey may not be useful in subsequent segments. This is because **the risks that they face along the route change and evolve,** often becoming more intense, while children tend to exhaust their coping mechanisms along the journey (see section 3.3). The CMR extends across different countries and contexts, each with its own risks. A child's experience coping with labour exploitation in a Sudanese mining site may be of little use if they are held for ransom in Libya, or placed in administrative detention in Egypt.

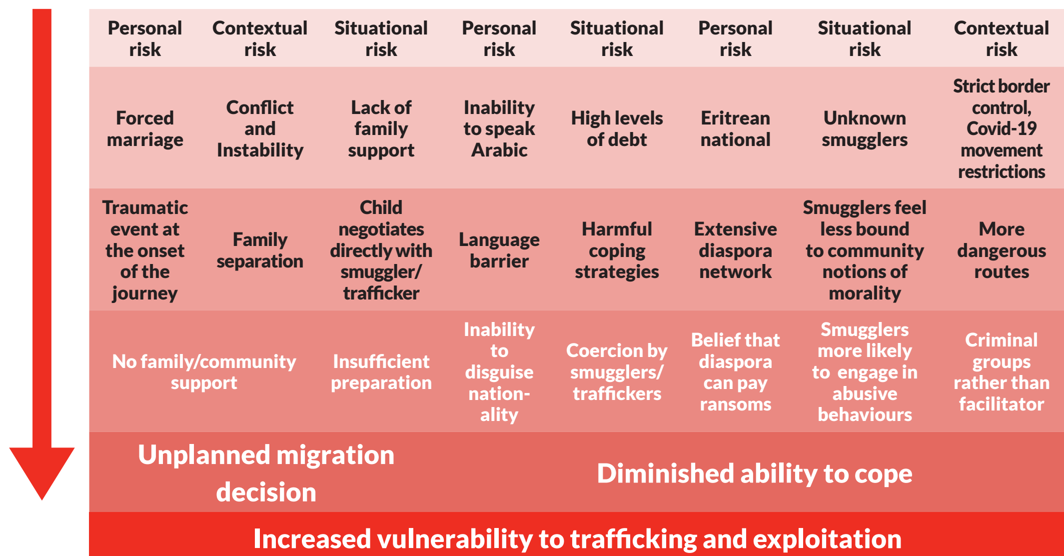

Figure 6: How risks faced by migrants increase their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation

In Figure 7, **Nura, a Sudanese migrant girl** who was interviewed in Egypt, mapped the positive and negative experiences on her migration journey. She highlighted some positive experiences (such as spending time with her friends before departure, and reaching Egypt), and a sequence of negative events that she experienced during the border crossing and on arrival (such as 'spending the night without shelter', witnessing 'beating and torture by a trafficker', and 'lack of food and work'). These negative events were triggered by a combination of personal risk factors (Nura's young age and inexperience at the time of migration), situational factors (insufficient family support), and contextual factors (instability in Sudan, border management practices on the Egypt-Sudan border).

The **non-linearity of child migration routes is another factor that can lead to exploitation and trafficking**, as a result of the drive that migrant children have to continue their journey,

whatever the risk and whatever regrets they may have. While narrating her own story, Mariam, a 14-year-old Ethiopian girl interviewed in Khartoum, who had been held captive for ransom in a storage room near Kassala in Sudan for one month, stated: *'If I had the chance to go back, I would never have left [Ethiopia]'*. Later in the conversation, she said: *'I want to work and stay here [in Khartoum] until I turn 15. I then want to travel abroad to Europe and send money to my family.'*

Figure 7 - Nura's depiction of positive and negative experiences on her journey from Sudan to Egypt

During the study, we found several instances of children who regretted their decision to migrate and considered returning home when under stress or facing challenges they had not prepared for, such as when they were crossing borders. In spite of this, none gave up their plan to proceed to their destination. This **contradictory attitude of child migrants has been well-documented**[35] **and compared to entrapment,** 'the psychological condition of gamblers who feel obliged to continue betting both time and money owing to the perception that they have gone too far to give up.'[36] Entrapment can be thought of as a ladder in the migration journey, where the stakes and risks become progressively higher along the route. The stories of research participants show that the accumulation and interconnectedness of traumatic experiences along fragmented journeys that must continue at all costs, pushes many child migrants further towards exploitation and trafficking.

2.3 Intensification of risks at key junctures

Some child migrants are recruited into trafficking within their own countries and then transferred across international borders, notably from Ethiopia into Sudan. But risks emerge more frequently and with more severity during border, desert and sea crossings, and upon arrival in a new country. 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 key tipping points when smuggling becomes trafficking, and the key hotspots along the route are outlined in section 3.3.

2.4 Forms of trafficking along the CMR

Migrant children who participated in this study recounted numerous direct experiences of different forms of exploitation and trafficking, such as forced and bonded labour, sexual exploitation and kidnapping for ransom. These experiences are the culmination of chains-of-risks that involved a succession of negative events and left migrant children highly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Some research participants also mentioned the risk of organ harvesting for sale, but this study has not collected sufficient data on the subject.

Table 3 - Most commonly cited violations against child migrants along the CMR

Violation	Children most at risk	At-risk locations
Forced labour	Children in transit who need to raise money for their journey. Boys are more exposed to exploitation on farms and at mining sites. Girls are more at risk of forced domestic labour.	Major cities such as Khartoum, Cairo and Tunis. Regional centres such as Kassala, Medenine, al-Kufra and Aswan. Farms and mines in isolated areas.
Bonded labour	Children with high levels of debt and limited support from their family and diaspora.	
Sexual exploitation	Migrant girls of all ages.	Brothels, beauty parlours and tea houses in urban areas and along main roads.
Trafficking for ransom	Unaccompanied and separated migrant children, children travelling with opportunistic smugglers, and Eritrean children.	Sudan (particularly Eastern Sudan and the borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia) and Libya.

Gender as a marker of vulnerability to trafficking

The type of trafficking and exploitation that child migrants are subject to is highly gendered. With restricted access to information and limited regular migration routes, women and girls are exposed to a 'greater risk of physical and sexual exploitation and abuse, including trafficking'.[37] In contexts where patriarchal social norms are widely accepted, gender is a well-known driver of child migration, to delay early marriage[38] or escape discrimination.[39] Although they are less likely to travel unaccompanied and they move across shorter distances on average, girls are significantly more likely than boys to become victims of trafficking.[40] Women and girls are disproportionately at risk of sexual exploitation, domestic slavery and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV, which can take many forms).

Boys are more at risk of forced labour and recruitment by armed forces and armed groups. However, according to several research participants, sexual exploitation among boys is underreported.

- **Sexual exploitation is rife in domestic labour cases. According to an Ethiopian migrant girl interviewed** in Metemma in Ethiopia: *'My worst memory was working as a housekeeper in Sudan, where the son of my employer was raping me every day. It was the worst experience of my life.'*
- **Research participants reported that exchanging sex for basic services among migrant women was common in large migration hubs.** These practices range from sexual services offered in separate rooms at beauty parlours and tea shops in Khartoum, to brothels in Libya and temporary marriage arrangements in Egypt. SGBV is rampant in detention contexts. A Sudanese child migrant interviewed in Egypt recounted that he witnessed a migrant girl, alongside whom he was detained for four days by smugglers on the Egypt-Sudan border, being sexually abused 'more than 17 times at the hands of brokers and smugglers.'
- **Girls expect to be sexually assaulted on the journey** and some start taking contraceptive pills before they depart as a mitigation measure. According to a social worker in Tunisia: *'girl victims [of trafficking] consider the risk of raping [during migration] as normal… a sort of price to pay'.*

Forced and bonded labour

Forced labour was reported as one of the most frequent forms of exploitations along the CMR. The main sectors employing child labour along the route are agriculture, pastoralism, construction, mining, domestic work, restaurants and manufacturing. Forced labour occurs more frequently after border crossings and during long-term transits. In many instances, migrants are recruited into forced labour through job offers that circulate by word-of-mouth or on social media. Child migrants interviewed for this study sometimes proactively sought opportunities in highly exploitative sectors due to lack of opportunities elsewhere, in order to fundraise for their journeys. When this happens, child migrants don't describe their situation as one of forced labour, but as a necessary step in their journey. As noted in the literature on this subject, 'people in forced labour often do not see themselves as victims, but rather as workers in a difficult situation.'[41]

Ahmed, a Sudanese boy from Darfur, who found himself jobless in Khartoum after a coup in October 2021, accepted a friend's suggestion to move to Egypt and seek opportunities

in gold mines. After they tried and failed to obtain a Sudanese passport, Ahmed's friend arranged their journey through a smuggler who met them near Port Sudan and transferred them across the border. This was how Ahmed described the unfolding of events after his encounter with an Egyptian intermediary near Aswan:

'[The intermediary] took us to the mine. He threatened us and said, "You entered Egypt without passports or papers. If you enter the city [of Aswan] you would not know how to find jobs." He threatened us with weapons, saying that we had to work for him or be killed. We were detained for about 10 days. We were loading stones and filling cars. They took advantage of us and did not give us any money, only food. Then they took us back to Aswan and left us. In Aswan, a Sudanese merchant took us for two months to work in another mine. It was hard work crushing stones. When the police came to the mine, the merchant ordered us to hide in the mountains until the police left, and then we went back to the mine because we had no papers.'

In his journey from Khartoum to Alexandria, where he was interviewed, Ahmed experienced another instance of forced labour on a farm, and witnessed severe ill-treatment by smugglers during the border crossing. His story exemplifies how the accumulation of negative shocks creates a chain-of-risks pathway from vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. It also indicates that forced labour is deeply ingrained in contexts where opportunistic smugglers and business owners often see vulnerable child migrants as disposable commodities.

The use of child migrants as forced labourers is at systemic levels in Libya – a country whose economy, in the words of one research participant, *'is completely dependent on sub-Saharan labour.'* Besides working in mining sites, child migrants transiting through Libya are frequently exploited in *al-mazraa* (farms), and migrant children from pastoralist backgrounds (notably the Sudanese) are sometimes forced to work as herders. Farms are depicted as labour camps, where children are constantly threatened and abused by armed men and have no possibility to move. As described by an Eritrean boy:

'The [Libyan] armed militia held us in a hangar and we couldn't go outside by ourselves. They took us out to the farm when they needed us to work. We had to chop the palm leaves, harvest dates, pack them in boxes, load the boxes into a big truck, then go back to the hangar [...] They treated me like a machine, not a human being'.

"'The [Libyan] armed militia held us in a hangar and we couldn't go outside by ourselves. They took us out to the farm when they needed us to work. We had to chop the palm leaves, harvest dates, pack them in boxes, load the boxes into a big truck, then go back to the hangar [...] They treated me like a machine, not a human being'."

Eritrean boy

These forced labour situations render child migrants all but invisible to service providers, and sever remaining ties with their protective ecosystem. While boys are usually more at risk of being exploited in farms and mines, **girls are disproportionately at risk of domestic servitude**, often leading to SGBV. This is particularly concerning, as domestic labour is by nature concealed from public eyes and hard to detect by agencies and service providers. Genet, an Ethiopian girl who was forced to work in her Sudanese smuggler's house to pay her debt, under the constant threat of being reported to the police for her irregular entry, described her experience:

'I had to conceal my face and was not permitted to look at any male in the home, even their spouse, even if he ordered an activity. I had to carefully complete the activities without making eye contact, otherwise the housewife would punish me'.

As this case exemplifies, **debt is a key risk factor**. Due to increasingly strict border control policies and higher smuggling fees, child migrants' debt is on the rise – and it keeps rising as children move along the route. Debt may reach extremely high amounts by the time migrant children reach their final destination. Child migrants are often unaware of their total debt, and to whom it is owed. A key informant in Italy explained:

'They are told [by traffickers], "you owe me 30,000 Euro," and they don't even know how much that is.'

The inability of children and their families to pay smuggling debts was identified by the study's key informants as one of the most significant risk factors along the route, leading to labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and debt bondage - which involves confiscation of child migrants' documents and their earnings from legal and illegal activities, including prostitution. According to key informants, there has been an **increase in cases of debt bondage**, which may last indefinitely.

"'They are told [by traffickers], "you owe me 30,000 Euro," and they don't even know how much that is.'"

A key informant in Italy

Trafficking for ransom

According to study participants, **trafficking for ransom is the most extreme form of exploitation suffered by children along the CMR**. The widespread risk of trafficking for ransom in both Eastern Sudan and Libya is well documented.[42], [43], [44] It requires significant levels of organisation on the part of traffickers: premises in remote locations where children can be held captive

(often referred to as 'hangars'), firearms, and a degree of control over the surrounding territory. Therefore, they can only be conducted by organised groups such as criminal gangs and non-state armed groups, in lawless regions that are partly beyond the reach of government authorities. According to informants, these groups sometimes operate in collusion with police and formal security actors.

Recurrent patterns leading to child trafficking for ransom include being kidnapped by criminal gangs on isolated roads, and being sold or transferred to traffickers by opportunistic smugglers, who do not have the setup in place to effectively kidnap and ransom children themselves. **Eritrean children are more at risk of being kidnapped**, and the ransoms demanded to set them free are generally higher than for other nationalities. Traffickers subject migrant children to torture, such as spraying them with cold water and beating them with sticks and rubber hoses, as well as sexual assault and rape. For negotiations with families, traffickers arrange phone calls and send pictures of the children in humiliating poses. A Sudanese boy described his experience in Libya:
'At times, they would make a line of Eritreans, making them lay on the floor, and they would burn plastic bags above them, and let it drop on their backs. They would wrap metal fibres around our feet and light them until their feet turned red. They did all of this because we couldn't get them money.'

Negotiations can take months, during which families try to raise funds and reduce the ransom. Families adopt different negotiating strategies. An Ethiopian boy who was kidnapped in Sudan explained that when a gang requested 100,000 Birr (approximately USD 2,000) to free him, his mother stalled for time by defiantly replying to the traffickers: *'I can also give you his brother, don't worry.'* Research participants indicated that ransoms could reach up to USD 8,000. A Sudanese boy who was held in Libya described the catastrophic effect that the ransom payment had on the wellbeing of his family:
'[My family] sold our house to pay the ransom and secure my release. We were left without a house. My mother was the only person who helped me.'

“
'At times, they would make a line of Eritreans, making them lay on the floor, and they would burn plastic bags above them, and let it drop on their backs. They would wrap metal fibres around our feet and light them until their feet turned red. They did all of this because we couldn't get them money.' ”

Sudanese boy

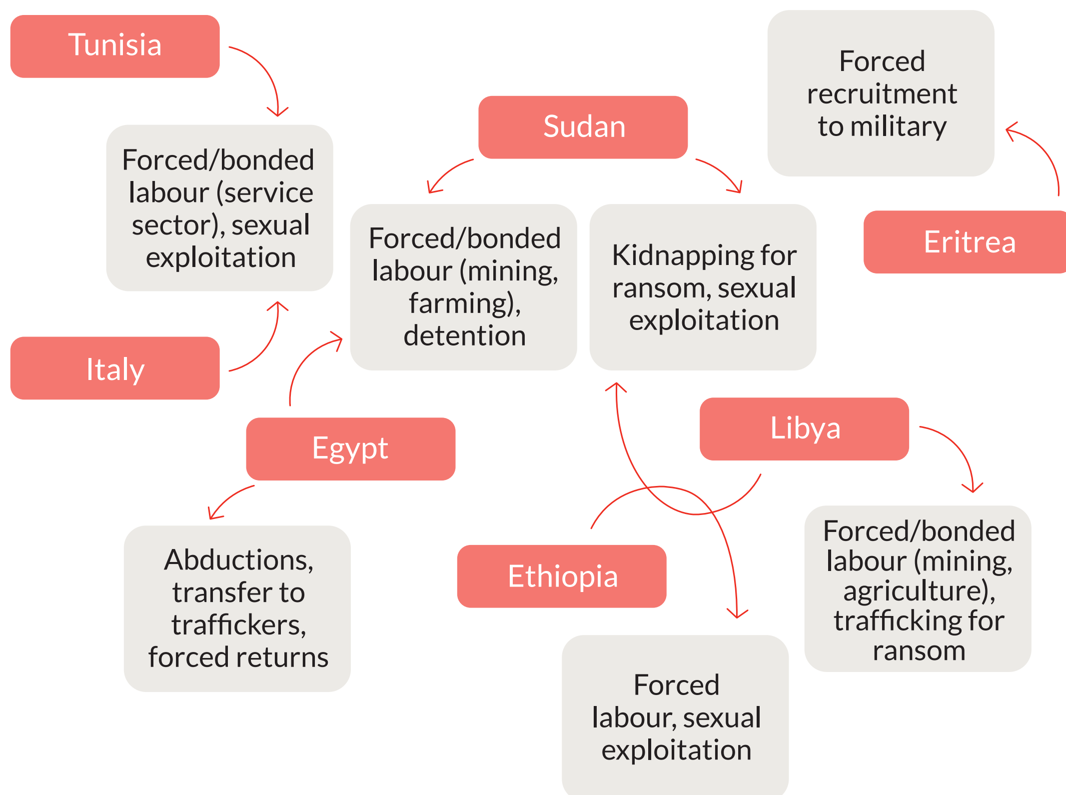

Figure 8 - Most reported risks along the CMR route by study respondents

2.5 Child migration, smuggling and trafficking in Ethiopia, Egypt & Sudan

This study uses a cross-country, route-based approach to capture the trafficking continuum associated with child migration[45] from the East of Africa and Horn of Africa to southern Europe, and to identify gaps in services and support.

The table below summarises the key trends concerning child migration, smuggling and trafficking, and the most vulnerable groups, in the three central countries of study: Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

Table 4 – Key trends concerning child migration, smuggling and trafficking

Country	Key child migration, smuggling and trafficking trends	Vulnerable groups
Egypt	Egypt is a source country and a key transit country due to the Syrian crisis and increased insecurity in Libya. Due to Egypt's strong law enforcement apparatus, smuggling networks tend to be more organised.	The most vulnerable groups to trafficking in Egypt are foreign and domestic workers, unaccompanied minors, and refugees and asylum seekers who have been 'kidnapped or escaped from refugee camps.'[46] Additional risks include child sex tourism and 'temporary marriages', sex trafficking of Egyptian children to Europe, the exploitation by gangs of unaccompanied minors for petty crime and the sale of drugs, and the use of Syrian refugee children as child labourers.[47]
Ethiopia	Ethiopia is located at the crossroad of migration routes to North Africa and Europe, the Arabian Peninsula and Southern Africa. Smugglers operating along the main border areas often overlap with trafficking networks. Ethiopian migrants transiting through Sudan, Libya and Yemen, for example, find themselves vulnerable to groups that specialise in kidnap for ransom, extortion, debt bondage, sex-trafficking and forced labour.[48] Migrant children described smugglers as a potential source of abuse.[49]	Trusted community members, known as manamasas, recruit and groom youth on behalf of local and international human trafficking syndicates by exaggerating the advantages of working abroad.[50] High levels of internal displacement increase the risks of trafficking. In July 2022, more than 2.7m Ethiopians were internally displaced as a result of conflict, drought or social tensions.[51]The conflict in Northern Ethiopia affecting Tigray, Amhara and Afar is one example of where displaced persons are at risk of trafficking. Since the conflict erupted there have been reports of attacks, killings, sexual violence and beatings in addition to the destruction of the refugee camps. Eritreans, South Sudanese and Somalis also often migrate through Northern Ethiopia towards North Africa.[52] The current conflict, may heighten their risk of trafficking among Eritrean refugees who were forced to flee the fight in Ethiopia.

Sudan	Sudan is a major gateway to North Africa and Europe for Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants,[53] as well as Syrians. Sudan is also a host to 1.1 million refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea, the Syrian Arab Republic, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Chad, Yemen and other countries.[54] Smuggling networks operate out of eastern Sudan, from where migrants travel to Egypt, and from the capital, Khartoum, a key consolidation point for migrants from the Horn of Africa who seek passage to Europe via either Libya or Egypt.[55]	Sudan is a country of origin for migrants to Europe through Libya, Egypt or Chad, notably from Darfur. [56] Traffickers exploit homeless children in Khartoum, including unaccompanied migrant children. Other groups in Sudan specialise in kidnapping for ransom and trafficking, often targeting refugee children who are living in camps.[57] Child forced labour is present in various sectors, including agriculture and informal mining.[58] Within these flows, abuses, extortion, kidnapping and human trafficking often take place and the lines between smuggling and trafficking are often blurred. In some instances, abuses are perpetrated by smugglers who exploit the people whose journey they are facilitating. Migrant children in Sudan tend to report a positive view on smugglers, but many of those who have used smugglers reported being kidnapped for ransom, as well as torture and trafficking.[59]

Noting common themes, **encouragement (if not coercion) of family members to migrate** has been recorded in testimonies given by children from Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. Based on the testimonies of the research participants it seems that both **Ethiopian and Sudanese smugglers have a tight knit network that stretches from Addis Ababa to Khartoum and Dongola.**[60] In Sudan, the smuggling and trafficking that stretches from Ethiopia to the Libyan borders is mainly controlled by groups associated with large tribes who historically inhabited these regions. In the case of Ethiopia, a culture of migration seems to be much more prevalent in rural communities.[61] The **overarching difference in Egypt is government centralisation and the omnipresence of the Egyptian security services**.

Migration journeys along the CMR have become longer and more dangerous for all migrants as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in involuntary immobility and loss of livelihoods for migrants. **Movements along the CMR decreased in 2018 and 2019,**[62] **but the trend throughout 2021 has been**

upwards, with 22,826 arrivals to Italy in the third quarter of 2021 and 399 deaths at sea over the same period.[63] Of these arrivals, almost one in three (28%) started their journey in Tunisia, followed by Egypt.[64] Tunisia is both a country of departure and a country of transit. While Tunisia is a country of relative safety in North Africa, migrant children and youth from East Africa and the Horn of Africa overwhelmingly reach Tunisia by road, crossing extremely dangerous routes through Libya.[65]

Migrants from the Horn of Africa are disproportionately at risk of trafficking and exploitation along the CMR. Abuse and exploitation patterns are highly gendered: male migrants are more prone to direct abuses and exploitative practices such as unpaid work and forced labour, offers of arranged marriage or being held against their will, while female migrants are more vulnerable to sexual violence.

Risks of child trafficking and exploitation are present throughout the route. This is often the case when children's first movement is triggered by conflict or violence, resulting in internal or cross-border displacement. For example, in one of the early segments of the CMR, from Ethiopia to Eastern Sudan, child and adult migrants risk being abducted by traffickers from refugee camps,[66] notably from Shagarab and other settlements in the regions of Kassala and Gedaref, where 'children disappear from the camps.'[67] The occurrence of exploitation, physical abuse, smuggling and trafficking among refugee children in Sudanese camps is a long-standing issue and has been well documented by international human rights bodies.[68]

Conflict and violence increase child trafficking and exploitation. **Most countries along the CMR experience some form of conflict, violence or political instability.** The most notable examples are the conflict in Northern Ethiopia, which has resulted in refugee flows to neighbouring Sudan, long-standing conflicts and inter-communal tensions in Sudan (Darfur, Eastern Sudan, etc.), as well as state collapse and armed conflict in Libya. Children risk being entrusted to smugglers by their distressed families, being recruited by armed forces and armed groups, and being kidnapped by traffickers during and after flight. Cases of child labour increase as children are expected to sustain their families after flight.[69] Along the CMR, particularly in Sudan and in Libya, child migrants are subjected to the double impact of conflict and risks of trafficking and exploitation.

3. WHEN SMUGGLING TURNS INTO TRAFFICKING

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **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 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 normalised in local cultures and the risks of trafficking may not be fully recognised.** Child migration can be 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.
- **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 can lead to gaps in protection services and prevent the provision of necessary assistance to child survivors.
- **Key tipping points when smuggling turns into trafficking** include the **transfer or sale of migrant children from smugglers to traffickers; 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.

> ‘The distinction between smuggler and trafficker has become obsolete. There is always a degree of abuse and coercion [...] I know the legal differences [but] I’m not sure they matter much in practice today on the African continent.’
>
> The UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation, Vincent Cochetel

3.1. The trafficking continuum: from facilitation to exploitation

From a legal standpoint, the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking differ on several grounds. In the context of this study, the most relevant distinction is purpose: smuggling involves facilitating a migrant’s movement across international borders so that they can proceed with their journey, for a fee. It may include assistance with legal, administrative, or geographical obstacles. However, trafficking is motivated by exploitation; migrants are deprived of their resources or physical integrity through violence, coercion, or deceit for the trafficker’s gain.[70]

Yet the lines between facilitation and exploitation are blurred, and smuggling and trafficking may overlap. For example, even while acting as facilitators, smugglers who operate along the CMR may detain or kidnap migrants and seize their belongings or extort them for financial gain, perpetrate acts of physical or sexual violence or exploitation, compel them into sexual enslavement, sell them for forced labour, abandon them midway on the journey, or subject them to other ill-treatment.[71] When smugglers engage in these trafficking-like practices it is known as aggravated smuggling.[72],[73]

In East Africa and the Horn of Africa, ‘the line between smugglers as “humanitarians” or service providers helping people to flee a repressive state, and the exploitation and abuse associated with trafficking, is seen as painfully thin.’[74] Speaking in February 2021 about protection challenges on the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes, the UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation, Vincent Cochetel, affirmed that:
‘The distinction between smuggler and trafficker has become obsolete. There is always a degree of abuse and coercion […] I know the legal differences [but] I’m not sure they matter much in practice today on the African continent.’[75]

In some cases, migrants participate in smuggling activities. Smuggling operations are sometimes described as, 'layered pyramid structures with high-level coordinators sitting at the top of the pyramid, far removed from the "recruiters" at the bottom.'[76] Intermediaries and facilitators at the bottom of the smuggling pyramid are sometimes drawn from migrant communities. In these cases, the distinction between migrants and their smugglers is not always clear cut, and may result in the unjust criminalisation of migrants or even asylum seekers,[77] sometimes as accomplices of their own smuggling or, in states that did not retain the 'financial and other material benefit' element in their anti-smuggling legislation, for facilitating entry without receiving any benefit or compensation.[78]

The **blurred lines between smuggling and trafficking** can be illustrated by the trafficking continuum (figure 9), which runs from transaction-based facilitation by smugglers at one end of the continuum, through to trafficking for exploitation at the other. Between the two extremes are a range of inhumane and degrading practices.

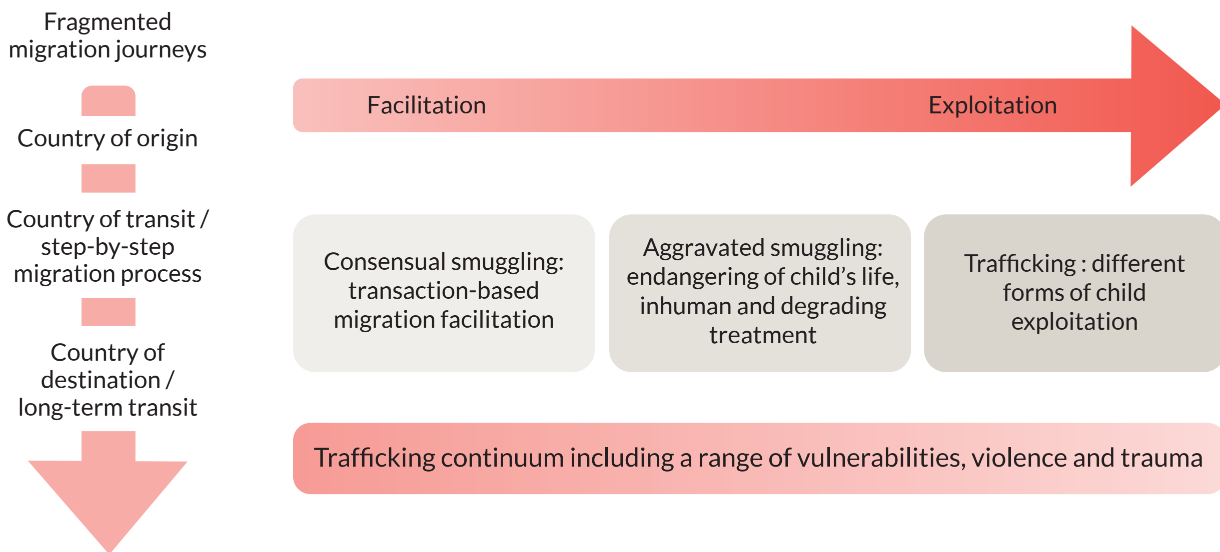

Figure 9 – Trafficking continuum

3.2 Children's and families' perceptions of smuggling and trafficking

Although international law - and institutions, policymakers and agencies - make a clear distinction between smuggling and trafficking, data gathered for this study indicates that children have different perceptions of these practices. **Many children only perceive their treatment as trafficking if there is a sale or exchange of money.** Even aggravated smuggling, which becomes dangerous or exploitative – is accepted by child migrants as a risk associated with their migration journey. For example, one Sudanese girl who was interviewed in Egypt, said:
'I do not know the difference between trafficking and smuggling and so far, I still do not understand it.'

Key informants interviewed for this study pointed out that **migrant children are often unable, or unwilling, to recognise exploitative situations.** One researcher suggested that: *'trafficking is seen and understood by children only when they arrive at a given moment in a violent situation'*. This statement was supported by the testimonies of children who were interviewed for this study. For example, when asked about the difference between smuggling and trafficking, a 17-year-old Eritrean boy interviewed in Tunisia said:
'Smuggling is when they smuggle weapons or such things. Yet, trafficking is about selling and buying people and organs.'

In some cases, migrant children do not proactively seek support from their families and from service providers due to the shame and stigma of having gone through extreme abuse and exploitation. The **reluctance of many child victims of trafficking to recognise their own situation as exploitative** was flagged as a particular challenge by informants in Italy, as it affects status determination proceedings and their access to specialised assistance.

Migrant children who are subjected to forms of exploitation that may be considered acceptable in their communities of origin, such as child labour, may not recognise that they are being exploited. In some cases, **children may accept being in a situation of exploitation when they anticipate a benefit and their alternative choices are limited.** For example, migrant children may accept exploitative or abusive working conditions at infor-

"'Smuggling is when they smuggle weapons or such things. Yet, trafficking is about selling and buying people and organs.'"

Eritrean boy, 17-year-old

mal mining sites in Egypt and Sudan, in order to earn an income and continue their journey, as explained during a focus group led in Tunisia with five Sudanese boys between 14 and 17 years old. These decisions are often taken under severe constraints and it should be stressed that children's consent to their own exploitation is inconsequential under anti-trafficking laws. Their consent results from a combination of risk-taking, lack of opportunities, and the denial of one's own victimhood as a coping mechanism.

The ability of child migrants to put in place mitigation measures is impacted by their ability to recognise their situation as exploitative. It has been argued in the literature on this topic that, 'what is often framed as exploitation by protection agencies often constitutes conscious and willing acts on the part of 'victims' to facilitate their own mobility and improve their quality of life.'[79] This study's data indicates that migrant children (more so than their families) are indeed willing to take high risks before embarking on migration journeys, but their knowledge and ability to judge such risks is often limited. This is largely due to insufficient preparation before the journey and a weak protective ecosystem around them. During a focus group discussion in Egypt, a 17-year-old Sudanese boy, who was introduced to his smugglers by his neighbours, said:
'I usually hear that people are arrested in the streets after they arrive (in Egypt). I was not feeling safe during the whole trip (from Sudan to Egypt) because I was coming through smuggling.'

The role of communities in facilitating smuggling

In the East of Africa and the Horn of Africa, smuggling is often viewed as a way to leverage community help and support, rather than as an illicit activity. In the words of a Sudanese mother interviewed in Egypt:
'A good smuggler is someone who tries to protect migrants from traffickers and bandits, driving them to a safe place.'

In the initial segments of a child migrant's journey, smugglers are often members of their community. Smuggling activities are largely perceived as normal and rely on shared moral values, a multitude of actors, complex transport infrastructure, money transfer systems, and socio-cultural ties stretching across national borders.[80],[81] The different actors who operate in the smuggling business may have other occupations as transport-

“
'I usually hear that people are arrested in the streets after they arrive (in Egypt). I was not feeling safe during the whole trip (from Sudan to Egypt) because I was coming through smuggling.'”

Sudanese boy, 17-year-old

Especially these Africans, they are unfamiliar with our [Tunisian] characteristics. Consequently, the smugglers say, "so what if I deceived him! I will not meet him in Ivory Coast or Nigeria. Goodbye!"

Tunisian smuggler

ers, herders, farmers, soldiers, shop keepers, etc. As described by a key informant, families approach smugglers from their community through their existing networks and word of mouth. Smugglers build their reputation through their track record. Families select them based on price, success stories, the number of children smuggled to their intended destination, and knowing which smuggler is able to facilitate children's journeys across the border at a given time:

'Trust is very important here… sometimes a smuggler would be a family member, a family friend or a friend of friends, usually you can't approach a stranger. Sometimes a smuggler's name would be suggested by a friend or relative who has already reached their destination.'

A sense of morality and trust is attached to activities that would legally be regarded as smuggling. However, the smugglers' social embeddedness and client-smuggling relationship are often more nuanced than these narratives would suggest. The sense of righteousness surrounding smuggling operations may serve the interest of smugglers who wish to paint themselves as honest service providers, but who act contrary to local notions of what constitutes morality. For example, a Sudanese boy interviewed in Tunisia regretted being persuaded by a smuggler to steal money from his family in order to fund his journey. A Tunisian smuggler described how some of his peers justify deceiving clients by taking advantage of their unfamiliarity with their local context and perceived cultural differences:

'Especially these Africans, they are unfamiliar with our [Tunisian] characteristics. Consequently, the smugglers say, "so what if I deceived him! I will not meet him in Ivory Coast or Nigeria. Goodbye!"'

The bond of trust between smugglers and their clients - migrant children and their families - can break down. This study found multiple instances of children who felt deceived by their smugglers. According to key informants and children's accounts, smugglers tend to downplay the risks of the journey, creating false expectations about the possibility of reaching Europe.

This is more likely to happen when smuggling arrangements are entirely negotiated by children without family support, but also when such arrangements are made by families without consulting and adequately informing their child. A returnee girl, who was interviewed in Metemma,[82] explained:
'The facilitator misled and deceived us about the safety of the journey. I faced unexpected risks and challenges, especially when we were crossing the desert, being raped, and being physically exploited.'

As children move along the route, smuggling ceases to be a trust-based relationship between members of the same community. Child migrants must establish new connections with facilitators, while maintaining a low profile and overcoming language and cultural barriers. They do so with the help of fellow migrants and acquaintances encountered during the journey. **During transit, migrant children become more vulnerable to being recruited by abusive smugglers and traffickers.** Talking about his experience during transit in Sudan, an Ethiopian boy explained that: *'There were brokers whose job was to approach us, ask us about our dreams and plans, and then lure us into moving out and finding a better life abroad. Being so young and inexperienced, we took the bait and accepted their offer.'*

"The facilitator misled and deceived us about the safety of the journey. I faced unexpected risks and challenges, especially when we were crossing the desert, being raped, and being physically exploited."

Returnee girl

BOX 1. SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ALONG THE CMR

The social embeddedness of smuggling and trafficking is significant in all countries along the CMR. This includes Libya, where children from marginalised and impoverished communities have reportedly facilitated migrants' journeys in order to generate income, although this area is still under-researched.

On the Sudanese-Ethiopian border between Metemma (Ethiopia) and Galabat (Sudan), smuggling is facilitated by **local actors capitalising on their ethnic, religious and economic connections along the border region.** The profits of smuggling are shared with marginalised local communities in exchange for their support for smuggling activities. This spurs the creation of smuggling economies, where local communities, rather than external criminal organisations, facilitate cross-border mobility through informal money transfer practices, transport and communication infrastructures.

Eastern Sudan has often been identified as a hotbed for human trafficking, which has thrived due to a high degree of **'societal shielding of perpetrators',** reflecting 'a new culture of ethnic intolerance that feeds on the growth of tribal politics and poverty'. The cross-border presence of tribes (such as the Beja, Beni Amir, Habab, Hadendawa, Shukriya, Tabo and Rashaida) between Sudan and Eritrea has facilitated the expansion of smuggling and trafficking networks, although other groups and even law enforcement actors have been involved in smuggling and trafficking.

The **active recruitment of migrant children into smuggling, and potentially trafficking, is more structural in locations that host large numbers of children in situations of extreme vulnerability**, such as Sudanese reception centres and camps hosting Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. A key informant explained that smugglers operating in Sudan start recruitment of migrant children *'even inside the reception centre before the children are registered by the UNHCR or government agencies.'* The vulnerability of refugee children in Shagarab and other settlements in the regions of Kassala and Gedaref is well known and long-standing, leading another informant to observe that '*children disappear from the camps*' - a situation that is occurring more often since the start of the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia.

Community attitudes towards child migration as a viable coping mechanism are becoming less favourable as a result of higher risk awareness, a slowly emerging shift in attitudes towards smuggling, and economic factors. Higher smuggling fees, more awareness of the risks, and longer journeys have significantly increased the economic cost of child migration, while the benefits have reduced as opportunities in traditional destination countries have become more limited. Focus groups held with parents suggest that some families in East Africa and the Horn of Africa have become less supportive of child migration, seeing it as a cost rather than an investment. Yet migration remains an attractive prospect for many children and as a result, more are deciding to migrate without informing their families. According to a key informant:

'Sometimes, children's migration deteriorates their families' living standards. So, previously families were sending the children [to migrate], nowadays the trend is changing. Now, many child migrants do not inform the families, even sometimes at the border points.'

3.3 Tipping points from smuggling to trafficking

Stricter law enforcement and movement restrictions and border closures due to COVID-19 have significantly driven up smuggling fees. Child migrants face longer and more dangerous journeys, involuntary immobility, and reduced access to services, support networks, and opportunities - leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and potentially trafficking.

According to the children who participated in this study, the key tipping points when smuggling turns into trafficking are:

1. **The transfer or sale of child migrants** between smuggling groups, or from smugglers to traffickers, usually after a border crossing (most frequently upon entry to Libya)
2. **Kidnappings** along remote and ungoverned stretches of the route or in areas around refugee camps
3. **When abusive smugglers engage in opportunistic behaviours.** For example, on the final section of the CMR (entering North Africa), most smuggling is carried out by organised networks and professional smugglers. If the child migrant is unable to pay their fee, these smugglers tend to become opportunistic and may turn to exploitation.

"Sometimes, children's migration deteriorates their families' living standards. So, previously families were sending the children [to migrate], nowadays the trend is changing. Now, many child migrants do not inform the families, even sometimes at the border points."

Key informant

In some cases, these events occur at the start of a child migrant's journey, if they are recruited into trafficking within their own country and then transferred across international borders (notably from Ethiopia into Sudan). But **risks become more frequent and more severe as child migrants** cross borders, seas and deserts, and move closer to their destination.

Key hotspots

- **Ethiopia-Sudan border crossings:** Migrant children using smugglers to cross the border are transferred from Ethiopian to Sudanese smugglers and moved to Khartoum. Some are sold to trafficking networks that operate in eastern Sudan and held in houses or other locations until their family pays a ransom.83 The crossings at Metemma84 and Humera are less active due to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia. Migrants are forced to take longer and more costly routes (e.g. detour through Moyale).
- **Eritrea-Sudan and Eritrea-Ethiopia-Sudan crossings:** In January 2017 and December 2019, UNHCR recorded over 630 cases of trafficked refugees and asylum-seekers, with 200 women and girl survivors of SGBV.[85]
- **Sudan-Egypt segment:** Migrants are exposed to high risks of physical and gender-based violence. There are a relatively high number of kidnappings for ransom, with most GBV, kidnapping incidents and detention cases reported in Aswan.[86]
- **Sudan-Libya desert crossing:** The desert crossing from Dongola (Sudan) to Ajdabiya (Libya) takes one week, passing through extremely isolated areas where there is a risk of interception by armed groups.[87] Most deaths in the desert were reported to be caused by factors such as dehydration, starvation, lack of shelter, lack of medical care, and vehicle accidents.[88]
- **Libya:** A key country along the CMR since the fall of the Ghaddafi regime in 2011. Mixed migration routes through Libya have been associated with extreme risks of ill-treatment, trafficking and exploitation, loss of life, physical and sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions.
- **Tunisia:** The most vulnerable groups to human trafficking and smuggling are refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, single mothers, and migrants rescued at sea after departing from Libya[89].

- **Sea crossings from Libya, Tunisia and Egypt:** The Mediterranean crossing remains one of the most dangerous segments of the CMR for migrants. Sea arrivals in southern Europe - and reported incidents - are returning to pre-pandemic levels. 134 people were reported to have died or gone missing while attempting the sea journey in the third quarter of 2021.[90] Tunisia's north coast (Bizerte, Grand Tunis) and east coast (Sfax, Sousse) have become the main departure points for migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean.
- **Arrival in Europe:** The main country of arrival along the CMR is Italy. In Europe, 1 in 4 victims of human trafficking is a minor. Western and southern Europe had the highest number of confirmed child trafficking cases globally in 2020, with 4,168 child victims in 2020.[91] Between 2015 and 2016, more than half of the 20,500 registered victims of trafficking (56%) were trafficked for sexual exploitation.[92] The number of UASC reaching Europe has grown in recent years; the identification of victims of trafficking among these children is challenging and the statistics available do not reflect the actual scale of the phenomenon.[93]

Transfer to traffickers

Along the route, migrant children are transferred between different actors or networks, usually upon crossing an international border. **Border crossings are a particularly high-risk point, where it becomes more likely that smuggling will turn into trafficking.** An Ethiopian girl explained how she and her fellow migrants faced no issues when travelling with guides from Harar up to Metemma.[94] However, *'right after we crossed the border and when Sudanese took us over, that is the point where things started getting ugly for us'.*

According to some informants, on the route between Sudan and Libya an influential group tied to the Sudanese military smuggles migrants up to the Libyan border and then 'sells' them to Libyan networks and armed groups. In other cases, different traffickers and armed groups who operate within Libya compete to 'buy' or capture arriving migrants. Transfers of migrant children to traffickers across the Libyan border have been described by many research participants as a crucial moment when facilitation, however abusive, clearly turns into exploitation. A 16-year-old Eritrean child interviewed in Tunisia recounted:

> "Right after we crossed the border and when Sudanese took us over, that is the point where things started getting ugly for us."
>
> Ethiopian girl

'I agreed to pay USD 2,000 to the [Sudanese] smuggler [once we arrived at the border]. I trusted him, my friends who moved before me gave this smuggler's number. But when I arrived in Libya, he sold me to the Libyans. I was detained for four months and paid a ransom of USD 5,000 to be released. My father sent the money.'

Kidnapping for ransom

Kidnapping along the route is well documented, particularly along the Eritrean-Sudanese border.[95] According to the literature, the cross-border presence of marginalised ethnic groups (such as the Beja, Beni Amir, Habab, Hadendawa, Kaluha, Shukriya, Tabo and Rashaida) between Sudan and Eritrea has facilitated the expansion of smuggling and trafficking networks, although other groups and even law enforcement actors have also reportedly been involved in smuggling and trafficking.[96] Such groups operate in ungoverned border areas. According to a key informant, their operations involve intercepting those who cross the Eritrea-Sudan border in an irregular way, especially children and young people; holding them hostage; and demanding a ransom from their parents or relatives. An Eritrean teacher with many years' experience working in refugee camps in Eastern Sudan, described the trafficking risks that refugee children are constantly exposed to:

'Most of the things I saw in refugee camps [in Eastern Sudan] were really horrifying. Children fell into the hands of human traffickers who would get them to Sudan and sell them to other human traffickers. I saw this in Humera [Ethiopia] and Hamdayet [Sudan], where the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Sudanese borders meet. That's where refugees are most at risk of trafficking ... Traffickers will see that a person is civilian, and suddenly snatch you off the streets.'

I agreed to pay USD 2,000 to the [Sudanese] smuggler [once we arrived at the border]. I trusted him, my friends who moved before me gave this smuggler's number. But when I arrived in Libya, he sold me to the Libyans. I was detained for four months and paid a ransom of USD 5,000 to be released. My father sent the money.”

16-year-old Eritrean child

Opportunism by abusive smugglers

The child migrants who participated in this study **described smugglers as both facilitators and exploiters.** Smugglers were cited as both the main providers of support and as the perpetrators of physical abuse during their journey on the CMR.[97]

The relationship between smugglers and migrants is complex. Smuggling can range from altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends, to a commercial service provider relationship, through to exploitation by criminals.[98] Migrants tend to judge smugglers on the quality of their services rather than the cost of the contract[99] and do not generally perceive smugglers to be exploiters.[100] Key informants to this study - including some self-described 'facilitators' - confirmed that migrants are more likely to criticise restrictive border policies and the lack of safe, regular migration channels and opportunities than smugglers. Yet smugglers can engage in immoral behaviour, for example when they take migrants' money for non-existent visas or jobs.[101]

A number of studies have described the **strong bond of trust that ties smugglers and migrants together** in different contexts across the world.[102] Previous empirical research explains that trust and cooperation seem to be the rule in interactions between smugglers and migrants that go beyond the existence of economic interests and rest on deep social ties.[103] For example, a key informant interviewed in Ethiopia confirmed the importance of trust and that, *'sometimes a smuggler would be a family member or a family friend, a friend of a friend… [or] sometimes a smuggler's name would be suggested by a person who has already arrived at the destination country.'*

These social ties are based on ethnic solidarities spanning across countries, **a 'chain of trust' that tends to fade the further migrants are away from their country of origin.**[104] On the CMR, migrant children are likely to use several smugglers in a 'chain of trust'[105] to reach their destination. This refers to the fact that, 'the first smuggler usually was a friend of a friend and therefore a relatively 'safe' contact'[106] but the farther away a child migrant gets from their country of origin, 'the greater the chance of travelling with an anonymous smuggler and being exploited.'[107]

When migrants must rely on smugglers they do not know personally, they base their decision on the smuggler's reputation using information from other migrants who travelled in a similar way. Smugglers who depend on a community to find their clients are not inclined to deliberately abuse migrants - contrary to smugglers in transit points, who have a more profit-oriented attitude, as they are working with many potential clients from various countries.[108] Moreover, 'when border controls intensi-

"Sometimes a smuggler would be a family member or a family friend, a friend of a friend... [or] sometimes a smuggler's name would be suggested by a person who has already arrived at the destination country."

Key informant

fy and channels of legal entry diminish, migrants' likelihood of being abused and exploited increase precisely within these ties of kinship and ethnicity.'[109]

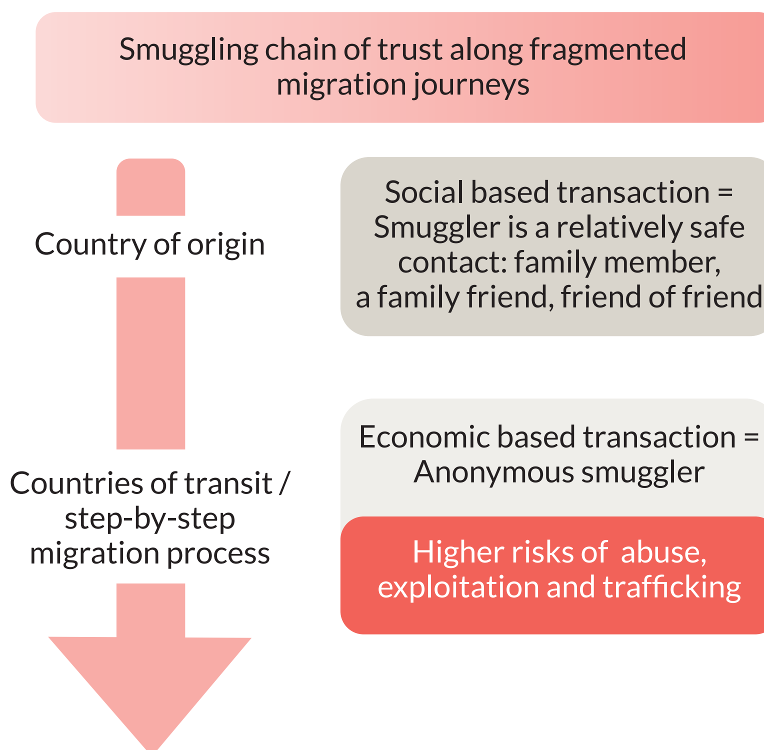

Figure 10 - Smuggling 'chain of trust' along fragmented migration journeys

The vast majority of child migrants in this study, who used smugglers on their journey, experienced some form of abuse, such as mistreatment during border crossings; denial of water, food and healthcare; confiscation of goods; and the arbitrary increase of fees. This occurs significantly more frequently when child migrants negotiate directly with their smugglers, without the mediation of trusted adults – which often happens when child migrants move closer to their destination. **In some cases, the abuse that children experience at the hands of smugglers becomes trafficking.** For example, in cases where migrant children who are heavily in debt are exploited by smugglers in their farms or houses.

The accounts of migrant children are replete with stories of smugglers downplaying the dangers of the journey, providing false or incomplete information, selling them into trafficking and engaging in violent behaviour. A Sudanese child migrant in Tunisia described his own experience by stating that:
'Before getting on board [the vehicle], we knew that the smuggler (turned trafficker) sold us. He didn't smuggle us to Europe and sold us to border patrol agents.'

A Tunisian smuggler who took part in this study highlighted the opportunistic trade of child migrants who find themselves in positions of extreme vulnerability:
'God knows, sometimes you get scammed. I'm not misshaping or blemishing [other smugglers] and portraying myself as a hero. However, it depends on your choice [as a smuggler]. Sometimes, smugglers exploit other people's conditions and their thirst to emigrate, and you know poor people… they have no choices, and they get blinded.'

However, according to this smuggler, and previous research with migrants,[110] the feeling of deception that many child migrants have can sometimes be the result of responsible decisions made by the smuggler, such as cancelling the journey when the police are on the route or when sea conditions are too dangerous. These decisions create dissatisfaction among migrants, and sometimes *'[clients] would come to your home in a pickup truck, convinced that they have been deceived, while it is not the case'*.

A self-described facilitator operating in Shalateen, on the border between Egypt and Sudan, was aware that 'migrant children suffer from very bad economic situations, social problems, family problems, death of parents, and a bad situation in their own country', which makes them vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, including arbitrary demands for higher fees and transfers to traffickers. In this facilitator's view, unaccompanied children and non-Arabic speakers are particularly at risk, as well as those who do not thoroughly plan their journey: ***'Sudanese migrants usually leave everything to God and they do not make any specific arrangements.'*** This makes them vulnerable to trafficking, as evidenced by the experience of a Sudanese boy who was unprepared for the journey and fell into the hands of an abusive smuggler:

"Before getting on board [the vehicle], we knew that the smuggler (turned trafficker) sold us. He didn't smuggle us to Europe and sold us to border patrol agents."

Sudanese child migrant

‘My friend did not tell me about the dangers we may encounter on the way. When we reached Shalateen, a driver who was loading merchandise told us “the car is yours, get in.” We rode the car for a while, then the driver stopped and asked us for money. He threatened to hand us over to the police. Migrants in the group who had money, paid; the driver then seized our mobile phones and other belongings, and left [us] in the middle of the road.’

Varied payment arrangements and smuggling services

Child migrants on the CMR may be required to pay for smuggling services in advance, on arrival, in stages, or some other arrangement, depending on factors such as the proximity and trust between migrant and smuggler at each stage of the journey. Each payment arrangement carries different levels of risk for the smuggler and the migrant:[111]

- **Payment upon arrival** is high risk for the smuggler, as the migrant might run away or be apprehended on the journey before they have paid anything.
- **Payment in advance** is high risk for the migrant, as the smuggler may fail to show up or abandon them along the way - so they may not get the service they have paid for. It creates a relationship of financial dependence.
- **Travelling on credit** using a loan from the smuggler, puts migrants in a very vulnerable situation. The debt increases their risk of being exploited or trafficked.
- **Step-by-step payment by instalments** was the most common arrangement for the migrant children interviewed as part of this study. Such arrangements lead migrants to either travel with lots of cash, exposing them to the risk of robbery, or to work along the route to pay for the next step of their journey, exposing them to exploitation. These arrangements can increase the duration of journeys and transform smuggling relationships into trafficking, if children or their families are unable to pay the next instalment.

Informants spoke of migrants paying smugglers in cash or more frequently through hawala money transfers. They also described specific risks for migrant children along the CMR. For example, smuggling arrangements where the smuggler is paid upon arrival to a predetermined location, also called ‘go now, pay later’ arrangements, rely on mobile technologies such as WhatsApp for

“My friend did not tell me about the dangers we may encounter on the way. When we reached Shalateen, a driver who was loading merchandise told us “the car is yours, get in.” We rode the car for a while, then the driver stopped and asked us for money. He threatened to hand us over to the police. Migrants in the group who had money, paid; the driver then seized our mobile phones and other belongings, and left [us] in the middle of the road.”

Sudanese boy

communication with families and to process payments through the hawala system. But t**hese same mobile technologies are also used to contact families for ransom and to arbitrarily increase smuggling fees**. A smuggling arrangement that may in principle reduce risks can end up making migrant children more vulnerable, as they begin the journey with a debt that becomes larger along the route and that they (and their families) may not be able to repay, resulting in higher risks of trafficking and exploitation.

BOX 2. WHO ARE THE SMUGGLERS ALONG THE CMR?

- **Individuals from the community**: These include family members, drivers, transporters, hotel owners, traders, pastoralists and community and religious leaders. Many do not see themselves as smugglers and are not perceived by their community as such. These actors operate at the lowest level of the smuggling pyramid and operate at the beginning of the migrant's journey along the CMR. They share the same language (and generally the same nationality) as smuggled children and are trusted by their community. In some cases (for example, Somalia), there are specialised agencies/consultants that facilitate irregular migration under a legal cover. In North Africa, these actors are described as professional smugglers. In Tunisia, they build their credibility as 'good' smugglers in communities through their track record crossing the Mediterranean.
- **Opportunistic groups or individuals**: Often the same nationality as the migrants that they smuggle, these actors operate in transit countries where they have lived for long enough to know how to facilitate onward migration.
- **Criminal groups and networks**: As the route moves towards North Africa and Europe, where law enforcement is stricter and state capacities stronger, smugglers become more organised. They may collaborate with community leaders to recruit potential victims or obtain ransoms, either directly or through other facilitators. In Libya, groups that are involved in child smuggling and trafficking are also parties to the conflict and are likely involved in other criminal activities. In this respect, Libya is a special case in North Africa, as the level of organisation of criminal groups is less a consequence of a functioning state, than the product of instability and conflict within the country.
- **Children**: They may be involved in smuggling operations, notably as recruiters or as guides along dangerous border crossings. The use of children as guides is common on the Eritrea-Sudan border. Smugglers may offer discounted fees to children who recruit other peers.
- **State or government actors**: These include army generals, policemen, border officials, military groups who patrol borders, and in some cases, former government officials who have been fired for misconduct. Border authorities may collude with smugglers, for example on the Eritrea-Sudan border.

Interaction and overlaps between these actors can blur the line between smuggling and trafficking.

In a similar vein, this study found several examples of migrant children who were led into forced labour or sexual exploitation to pay debts to smugglers or third parties who acted as guarantors. One informant mentioned how migrant children (mainly boys) were 'flocking' to 6th of October City on the outskirts of Cairo to work in small factories for meagre salaries despite dangerous working conditions and constant 'insults and provocations' by employers.

Moreover, migration journeys are not fully planned from the onset. Family, and in some cases children, are usually in contact with the first person in the smuggling process, often a trusted person from the community who is seen as a helper or service provider. But along the route, children (especially if unaccompanied and with limited family contact or support back home) have to manage relationships with smugglers more directly. The **diminishing presence and support of families and communities of origin is an additional risk factor in the transition from smuggling to trafficking** along the route.

Different types of services offered by smugglers also influence the evolution of migration journeys and subsequent exposure to exploitation and trafficking. Distinctions can be made between 'the service type, the directive type, and the negotiable type' of smuggling.[112] In 'service type' smuggling, migrants know precisely which destination they want to reach and the smuggler is a simple facilitator. **In 'directive type' smuggling, the destination is primarily based on the smuggler's decision with little agency left to the migrant, which can lead to negative outcomes.** In 'negotiating type' smuggling, migrants usually travel step by step, and access to trustworthy information is essential for them to choose between different options offered by the smugglers.[113]

The study identified an **emerging trend of 'self-smuggling'** in Ethiopia, where children are required to complete dangerous segments of the journey on their own based on instructions received by the smuggler, to minimise contact and reduce the risk of interception. Instructions are given over the phone using code words:

'If a broker calls you and tells you "get online," it would mean 'take the bus'... and then you'd take a bus and then smuggle yourself to the next destination, say Moyale. And they'd give you the phone

number of the contact person in Moyale. And you wouldn't even meet contact persons in the place of arrival, but they'll call you and tell you, "get into this line, or take this bajaj [three-wheeler vehicle] and go to this place..."'

3.4 Harmful coping strategies adopted by child migrants

The level of family and community involvement in children's decisions to migrate plays a crucial role in their exposure to exploitation and trafficking. **Families play a major role in shaping child migration choices when they deem migration to be in their child's best interest** (see Box 3) and according to our study, children are excluded from the decision-making process when there is a serious threat to their life that their family feels unable to protect them against. However, focus group discussions and case studies with migrant children and family members indicate that in other circumstances, children - especially older children - usually have a say in whether and how to migrate, how to use information at their disposal, and which risk mitigation strategies to adopt.

"'If a broker calls you and tells you "get online," it would mean 'take the bus'... and then you'd take a bus and then smuggle yourself to the next destination, say Moyale. And they'd give you the phone number of the contact person in Moyale. And you wouldn't even meet contact persons in the place of arrival, but they'll call you and tell you, "get into this line, or take this bajaj [three-wheeler vehicle] and go to this place..."'"

Key informant

BOX 3. CHILD MIGRATION DRIVERS

Data collected by this study shows that families play a major role in shaping child migration choices. They may see migration as a coping strategy for children who lack educational and livelihood opportunities, or who are experiencing conflict or violence in their own countries, while adults remain behind. **In some instances, children feel coerced to migrate by their families**, who perceive it to be in their children's best interest.

According to this view, **families have a responsibility to save their children from extreme hardship by facilitating their journey abroad**. A 52-year-old Sudanese father, interviewed in Egypt explained: *'If you are on a sinking boat and you have a child, what are you going to do first? You'll send your child out before you save yourself.'* This view was reflected in the accounts of numerous parents and children who took part in this study, with no significant differences by nationality or gender.

The study found several instances of children fleeing their families because of abuse or the denial of essential services and opportunities by parents, **mainly denial of access to education**. This was frequently the case for children (both boys and girls) from rural areas in Ethiopia or Somalia, whose families had no means to fund their schooling. For these children, higher education represented the main route to a better future and, in the case of Eritrean children, a means to avoid or delay mandatory military service - so they resorted to migration as the only remaining way out of hardship.

Forced and early marriages emerged as another major factor underpinning child migration decisions. In this case, girls are much more affected than boys. According to a Sudanese girl interviewed in Cairo, *'in our country, once a girl starts having her period her family forces her to get married'*. Forced marriages are interwoven with socio-cultural norms and practices relating to the role of children, their transition to adulthood, and what is perceived as being in their best interest.

In conflict settings, **children who are separated from their family due to armed violence and insecurity are more likely to make migration decisions independently**. According to key informants, this is frequently observed in protracted crises, notably in Darfur, but the same phenomenon is emerging in the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia.

Children sometimes migrate without consulting their family. Such decisions are rarely the result of deliberate planning and in these cases, the child cannot rely on family-facilitated smuggling, financial or logistical arrangements. This can increase the risk of trafficking or exploitation. Children who migrate independently often inform their families and seek their support only when they reach border points or when they enter transit countries. In these situations, the ability of families to provide meaningful support is limited by a lack of preparation and a lack of immediately available resources. In the best cases, families can mobilise community support, transfer money to their child, or put them in contact with trusted smugglers and members of the diaspora, but this usually takes time to arrange.

A child migrant's protective ecosystem **diminishes as they move further away from their community of origin**. The key actors that surround them during their journey can be both sources of protection and sources of risk. The main coping strategies adopted by migrant children who are travelling without their family include:

1. Seeking support from, or travelling with other migrant children or trusted adults
2. Seeking support from local communities.

However, the support obtained by these strategies can be fragile, short-lived or conditional on limited resources.

Fragile support or lack of help from adults and peers

Interactions with peers shape children's migration decisions and act as an essential coping strategy during the journey. According to the children interviewed for this study, **migration is a frequent discussion topic among groups of friends, schoolmates or siblings** in all target countries, and is generally framed as an aspiration without involving adult relatives. The two main reasons for this are their relatives' increasing scepticism towards child migration as a viable coping strategy (see section 3.2) and the fact that some of the children in our study intended to flee from abusive family situations.

Groups of children sometimes take abrupt migration decisions, with little preparation and planning. This is exemplified in the account of an Eritrean girl, who was interviewed in Ethiopia: *'My neighbour came and told me, "I'm leaving, would you go with me?" It was a sudden decision. I was wearing sandals and I only had 100 Nakfa [approximately USD 6.50]. She told me I must buy plastic sandals and that they're good for hiking, I bought a pair with 75 Nakfa and I only had 25 Nakfa when I left.'*

According to key informants, the trend of children migrating in groups without informing adult relatives of their intentions is increasing. This has a cascading effect: when prospective child migrants learn that others before them migrated as a group, they tend to be more likely to do the same. Some children spoke of being motivated to overcome their fear of migration when they saw their peers at a bus station, purchasing a ticket to migrate. According to one informant: *'Most children's migration decisions are based on a long process of communication with local facilitators, family members and friends, but some of them made a sudden decision when they learned about other children who started their journey.'*

Another informant added that, *'In Southern Ethiopia, children sometimes just leave in groups and never come back. So some schools are becoming empty in [Ethiopia's] southern region.'* These examples show that many children continue to see migration as a pathway to a better future, and that this perception is reinforced by their peers.

During the journey, fellow child migrants are a significant source of effective and moral support, especially for child migrants who cannot count on accompanying adults. Going together through the difficult circumstances of the journey binds migrant children together. These bonds often transcend nationality and cultural barriers. **Child migrants seek strength from their peers in order to endure the hardships and abuse they experience during their journey.** They also can obtain information, link up with smugglers, and most of all find a source of comfort and psychosocial support.

Our data indicates that the bonds between migrant children are also fragile, since groups of children are likely to break up due to the circumstances of the journey. This happens when migrant children are travelling to different destinations, or when they can no longer

"My neighbour came and told me, "I'm leaving, would you go with me?" It was a sudden decision. I was wearing sandals and I only had 100 Nakfa [approximately USD 6.50]. She told me I must buy plastic sandals and that they're good for hiking, I bought a pair with 75 Nakfa and I only had 25 Nakfa when I left."

Eritrean girl

travel together because some of them have depleted their resources. This type of relationship, both deep and transient at the same time, was described by an Eritrean child migrant in Tunisia: *'When [my friend] was down, I lifted him up, and when I felt tired, he helped me to rest till we reached Tripoli. There, each of us went on his way.'*

Travelling with unrelated but trusted adults, such as neighbours or family friends, is another mitigation strategy adopted by some child migrants, usually with their families' endorsement. In these cases, the child migrant and the accompanying adult have a mutually beneficial agreement. The child gets protection, while the adult increases their odds of being admitted to the destination country. As explained by a social worker in Tunisia: *'I saw a pregnant girl migrating with her neighbour. She didn't have a relationship with him. Yet, she represents for him a passport of passage and he, in turn, provides for her a certain protection'.*

These transactions make children feel safer during the journey, but they also **cast migrant children as commodities or assets for adults who are pursuing their own migration project**. In extreme cases, this strategy leads adult migrants to take children with them against their will and expose them to hardships and risks, in order to mobilise more support from the diaspora and reduce the risks of non-admission at borders. In such situations, travelling with adults exposes children to additional risks.

It might be assumed that when children are travelling with parents or caregivers, they have a reliable source of information, support and protection that reduces the risk of trafficking. However, our data indicates that this is not always the case. While families are a major source of support in migrant children's ecosystem (see section 1.1), they may also become a source of risk during transit.

- Under conditions of extreme stress and hardship, parents cannot be assumed to be capable of providing meaningful protection to their children. Extreme vulnerability and past trauma may mean they are unable to care for their children. Cases of parental neglect were frequently reported by social workers who assist migrants in Egypt and Tunisia, including a social worker in Tunisia who described an example of a mother who could not understand for several days that her infant had a broken arm, and did not seek medical attention.

"When [my friend] was down, I lifted him up, and when I felt tired, he helped me to rest till we reached Tripoli. There, each of us went on his way."

Eritrean child

- Accompanying adults may conceal key information from migrant children (such as information about contact persons, transit points or risks) to avoid exposing migrant children to stress. However, this puts migrant children at risk in cases of unanticipated family separation. An informant in Tunisia described the situation of migrant children who relied on accompanying family members but were separated from them during the journey. The children were 'completely lost, not even knowing in which country they were, and therefore more exposed to risks of forced labour and prostitution.'

When migrant children are not travelling with parents or caregivers, in many cases they seek to **maintain contact with members of their family and diaspora remotely**. However, this is sometimes hindered by practical challenges, such as the high costs of phone and internet services, poor network coverage on the most dangerous segments of the journey, and difficulties obtaining local SIM cards for undocumented child migrants. Moreover, abusive smugglers and traffickers often deny children the possibility to contact their families on their own initiative. This deprives children of an important support and increases their vulnerability and trafficking risks.

Short-lived support from local communities

Migrant children can benefit from support offered by local communities, such as information, meals, or temporary accommodation. **However, this support is generally short-lived and conditional on the often-limited resources that can be mobilised locally**. In some cases, access to local support depends on casual encounters. An Ethiopian girl exploited as a domestic labourer in Sudan talked about how a neighbour assisted her in escaping exploitation by detailing the times when her boss was not at home. Thanks to this information, she managed to flee from a highly abusive situation and continue her journey.

However, these forms of support are **fragile and spontaneous**. They depend on the presence of community members who are sensitive to the plight of migrant children; their knowledge of migrant children at risk of trafficking or exploitation in their neighbourhood; their ability to make con-

tact with these migrant children in order to help them; and migrant children's ability to seize the opportunity. This chain of events is rare, given the tendency of migrant children to remain out of the public eye, both as a coping mechanism and as a result of exploitation and trafficking.

When migrant children have connections with members of their extended family or diaspora in transit and destination countries, access to local support is more effective. Our data indicates that this often depends on two conditions:

1. How much support (money, information, moral support) migrant children receive from their family or diaspora.
2. The presence of organised diaspora groups in transit and destination countries, with functioning networks and recognised leaders. This is particularly useful for some of the most vulnerable child migrants, who have fled family abuse and cannot count on support from their family.

A Sudanese boy who was interviewed in Egypt, described his encounter with a Sudanese diaspora leader in Cairo:
'People told me, "go to them, they're Sudanese." So I went to El-Sadiq [Sudanese community leader]. He hosted me for a week and searched for a job until he found my current work [as a cleaner]'.

In general, community support becomes more infrequent when children proceed with their journey. Child migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are frequently subjected to discrimination along the CMR due to cultural, linguistic and religious differences. Community actors and formal institutions along the route cannot replace the protective role of families and communities of origin. Therefore, **children must often navigate the daily challenges of migration with the limited support of their fellow migrants (children and adults) and their smugglers**. In some cases, migrant children may try to disguise their nationality to avoid being subject to discrimination. Research participants and informants talked about how Eritrean children who can speak fluent Arabic conceal their nationality, for example by trying to pass as Sudanese, in order to access more support and reduce the risk of being trafficked for ransom. An Eritrean boy interviewed in Tunisia explained:

"'People told me, "go to them, they're Sudanese." So I went to El-Sadiq [Sudanese community leader]. He hosted me for a week and searched for a job until he found my current work [as a cleaner]'."

Sudanese boy

'When I was in Libya, I told [the traffickers] that I was Sudanese. I saved my neck by saying that [...] Traffickers beat and tortured Eritrean migrants who didn't speak Arabic well [and therefore couldn't conceal their nationality].'

BOX 4. TENSIONS BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND THE HOST COMMUNITY IN TUNISIA

Negative relations with the migrant's hosting community can put child migrants in serious danger and deprive them of much-needed assistance. A key informant in Tunisia reported that in October 2021, a group of adult and child migrants from East Africa, mostly Eritreans and Sudanese, were expelled from a reception centre in Zarzis that was managed by the Tunisian Refugee Council (CTR). This was allegedly due to tensions with the host community, which arose because of the way that some of the migrant group (predominantly male) approached local women.

Tensions quickly escalated and were amplified by presumed cultural and religious differences between the host community and the migrants. The expelled migrants, among whom were potential victims of trafficking, asylum seekers and refugees, staged protests against the local authorities and the UNHCR, demanding protection and assistance.[114] Some moved to an informal settlement in nearby Medenine.

According to an Eritrean child migrant who was interviewed in Medenine:
'[Local communities in Zarzis] protested against our presence there and demanded our immediate expulsion. They threw stones at us and poured water on us while we were sitting. Then, the police came and held us in the building, preventing us from going outside. Following that, they opted for bringing young migrants to Medenine and asking adult migrants to work or to go back to Libya'.

During migration, child migrants' interactions with their family and community of origin become more sporadic, and their ability to obtain support through their ecosystem shrinks. This deprives child migrants of an essential layer of protection, leaving them more exposed to abuse and exploitation along the route. A 17-year-old Sudanese boy explained:
'Travelling separates me from my father and mother, their care cannot be compensated with anything else. Sometimes, a person is forced to travel and leave behind people he loves, in order to live a better life.'

"Travelling separates me from my father and mother, their care cannot be compensated with anything else. Sometimes, a person is forced to travel and leave behind people he loves, in order to live a better life."

Sudanese boy, 17-year-old

At destination, child migrants rely primarily on the diaspora as a source of information and support. The accessibility and quality of services provided by formal actors is highly variable and depends on a range of factors such as eligibility criteria, child migrants' trust or mistrust in formal institutions, and the acceptance or hostility of local communities. Therefore, formal agencies and service providers are often a marginal actor in the children's ecosystem, except in countries where services and referral networks are better established, such as Tunisia and Italy.

Child migrant's ecosystems are crucial for accessing information and support. The diminution of their protective ecosystem during migration and at destination (outlined in Table 5) results in a protection and support gap that is not compensated by service provision through formal actors such as international agencies, NGOs and governments. This increases child migrant's reliance on smugglers and traffickers to access services they need.

Table 5 - Child migrants' ecosystem

	Pre-migration	During migration	At destination
Microsystem (family, peers, diaspora and other immediate interactions)	Family and peers connect children with sources of information and facilitators. Families raise funds to pay fees.	Family and peers are the main and sometimes only source of support during migration (financial, psychosocial).	Child migrants rely on diasporas to access opportunities and services at destination.
Mesosystem (community actors such as elders, religious leaders, etc.)	Community actors are a vector of information and support for planning migration journeys. Smugglers are often community members.	Children have limited interactions with communities around them and cannot count on local communities as a source of support.	Child migrants often experience discrimination and the local community is rarely a provider of protection.
Exosystem (external actors along the journey, such as service providers, smugglers and traffickers)	In places of origin, children have limited interactions with service providers and formal institutions.	Limited access to service providers, growing relations with smugglers and traffickers. Smugglers are key providers of information.	Access to services is limited by challenges identifying child victims of trafficking. Reaching their destination does not decrease trafficking risks.
Macrosystem (broader political, economic, and social environment)	Migration is accepted as the main way out of hardships caused by conflict, instability and lack of opportunities. Migrating is a step on the transition to adulthood.	Restrictive migration policies result in higher smuggling fees and increased trafficking and exploitation risks during transit.	The socio-economic context, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, affect trafficking risks and child migrants' prospects in destination countries.

Gendered coping strategies

Boys and girls on the move face different risks and resort to different coping mechanisms. Boys have better access to informal labour markets and more opportunities to earn an income while in transit, as some informal labour activities are mostly or exclusively reserved for boys (such as construction, farming or mining). This increases boys' ability to raise funds to continue their journeys, but it may also expose them to labour exploitation, including forms of forced labour that they may not recognise as such. In addition, boys are more likely to take risks along the journey, such as travelling alone, travelling on foot in harsh environmental conditions, and sleeping on the street. These actions allow them to cope with negative events – for example, escaping from exploitation and detention in Libya often requires migrant children to walk in unforgiving environments for hours or even days. However, these actions may also expose them to risks of violence, including SGBV, and health risks.

Girls' access to coping strategies is influenced by gender norms. Such norms restrict what girls can do – which work activities they can engage in, and where and how they can move. In some cases, gender norms establish a protective shield around migrant girls – for example, some girls reported that they received more help than migrant boys during dangerous desert crossings, such as additional water or a more compassionate attitude from smugglers. However, in most cases, gender norms restrict the coping mechanisms that are available to girls and expose them to heightened risks along the route, especially SGBV risks including sexual exploitation.

Girls cope with the risks they face by preventing them from occurring and by mitigating the consequences. Their prevention strategy consists primarily of travelling with trusted adults, maintaining close contact with their family and diaspora, and blending in with the local population, in order to be less visible and avoid the risk of becoming a target for violence and exploitation.[115] These strategies are often deployed by girls in their communities of origin, especially in cultural contexts where it is not customary for girls to move alone. Therefore, they can be considered as pre-existing coping mechanisms that are rooted in gender norms and mobilised during migration.

> "When I started the journey, one of my relatives advised me to use birth control for a long time to avoid unwanted children, which may have resulted from rape. This advice was helpful to me since I had been raped numerous times, and it stopped me from becoming pregnant."
>
> Ethiopian girl

Some migrant girls anticipate negative events and plan ahead in order to mitigate unwanted consequences. Numerous participants in this study highlighted how migrant girls anticipate risks of sexual assault and rape during their journey and reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies by taking contraceptives. In the words of an Ethiopian girl:

'When I started the journey, one of my relatives advised me to use birth control for a long time to avoid unwanted children, which may have resulted from rape. This advice was helpful to me since I had been raped numerous times, and it stopped me from becoming pregnant.'

This strategy indicates that girls' migration decisions are underpinned by extremely high levels of risk-taking. It also suggests that migrant **girls, arguably more than boys, consider the long-term consequences of the risks that they face.** In many contexts, childbirth during migration, especially when as a consequence of rape, results in significant social stigma and it becomes near impossible for migrant girls who have become pregnant to fulfil their migration aspirations, or to return and be reintegrated in their communities of origin. Birth control and emergency contraception are a means to limit some of the long-term repercussions of SGBV during migration, but they can do little to address other immediate healthcare concerns or longer-term psychological impacts arising from such violence.

4. LEGAL & POLICY FRAMEWORKS, RESPONSES & GAPS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **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 due to the lack of specialised services that they could otherwise have potentially accessed. Moreover, complex status-based eligibility criteria and challenges identifying child VoTs lead to dysfunctional referral mechanisms.

The identification of child VoTs is consistently reported as a major challenge in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, as well as along the CMR, not least because migrant children prefer to avoid authorities due to fear of being deported, detained, mistreated, or prevented from continuing their journey. In addition, identification is difficult because processes have been shaped from the perspective of criminal proceedings, are often conditional on the collaboration of survivors with the law enforcement authorities, and do not take into account the vulnerability of trafficked persons based on personal circumstances.[116]

Identification of a child as a victim of trafficking does not end their suffering; **they require long-term support and assistance that is often unavailable**, including legal guardianship, safe shelter (but not a 'closed shelter' that restricts their personal freedoms),[117] psychosocial support, healthcare, education, the restoration of family links, legal redress, and arrangements for legal residency, voluntary return and reintegration.[118]

Despite growing attention to the needs of migrant children both globally and in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, this study's analysis indicates that 'the experience of being on the move for children and young people in this region is still extremely hazardous, and characterised by violence and abuse.'[119] This is partly because there is a **fragmentary international legal framework based on migration containment, border control and status-based entitlements**, which does not accord sufficient priority to the protection of potential victims[120] and fails to recognise that migrant children are first and foremost children whose rights should be upheld as such.[121]

Therefore, 'in the absence of safe and regular migration channels, as well as permanent and accessible mechanisms for children and their families to access long-term, regular migration status or residence permits, **children are forced to search for precarious alternatives** that increase their exposure to risks of sale, trafficking and other forms of exploitation.'[122]

This section outlines the main **strengths and gaps** in the development, adoption and implementation of international and national legislation and policies, as well as available support services for child migrants on the CMR. Annex 1 provides a more detailed overview of relevant laws and policies in Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia as of March 2022.

4.1 Siloed international legislative frameworks

Child trafficking is regulated and influenced by a patchwork of different frameworks and 'siloed legislative frameworks fail to cover the lived circumstances of most child migrants and are therefore radically incomplete.'[123] Besides the regulatory approach adopted by most migration policies and the criminalising approach followed in the Palermo Protocols, child trafficking

and exploitation are also addressed through legislation - although to a minor degree - from a human rights perspective. The main international instruments are: (i) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989, and its three Optional Protocols: the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children (OPSC), and the Optional Protocol on a Communication Procedure; and (ii) ILO Conventions on the Minimum Age, 1973 (No. 138), the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999 (No. 182), and Forced Labour, 1930 (No. 29).

- **The CRC is one of only two contemporary international human rights treaties to refer explicitly to child trafficking** (alongside the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), although both do so to a minor degree. However, the CRC's provisions are limited by unclear scope of application, as the terms 'abduction,' 'sale,' and 'trafficking' are not defined, and smuggling is not explicitly addressed.[124]
- **Trafficking was defined in the Trafficking Protocol, a non-child specific, international legal instrument, in 2000.** The definition has three well-known elements: acts, means (not required for child victims), and exploitative purpose. The protocol provides an extensive description of what constitutes exploitation, but trafficking for adoption and forced marriages are notably excluded. It has been observed that the legal framework established by the CRC and the Trafficking Protocol, 'inadvertently strips children of their autonomy, justified by a powerful, morally loaded and protectionist stance'.[125]
- **The ILO has identified four elements of forced child labour, which is a possible outcome of child trafficking.** These are: forced or deceptive recruitment, duress, impossibility to leave the employer, and coercion.[126] Forms of child labour that occur within the household or under kinship arrangements, including child marriage, are notably absent from the ILO definition.

Table 6 - Main international instruments

Instruments	Relevant provisions on child trafficking
Convention on the Rights of the Child	**Provisions on trafficking:** Protection from economic exploitation (art. 32), from sexual exploitation, prostitution and pornographic activities (art. 34), and all forms of exploitation (art. 36). Protection and assistance measures 'to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim.' (art. 39). **Specific provisions on children:** Child specific instrument, human rights perspective.
Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict	**Provisions on trafficking:** Protection of children from recruitment and use in hostilities. **Specific provisions on children:** Child specific instrument, human rights perspective.
Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children	**Provisions on trafficking:** Protection of children from all forms of sexual exploitation. **Specific provisions on children:** Child specific instrument, human rights perspective.
Optional Protocol on a Communication Procedure[127]	**Provisions on trafficking:** Right of children to appeal to a child-specific international mechanism when national mechanisms fail to address violations effectively. **Specific provisions on children:** Child specific instrument, human rights perspective.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	**Provisions on trafficking:** Protection of women against all forms of trafficking and exploitation of prostitution (art. 6) **Specific provisions on children:** No child-specific provisions, human rights perspective.
ILO Convention on the Minimum Age No. 138	**Provisions on trafficking:** Abolition of child labour, which is 'work that is hazardous to children's health, safety or morals, work that interferes with compulsory education or for which they are simply too young.'[128] Specific provisions on children: Child-specific instrument. Requires countries to establish a minimum age for entry into work and to establish national policies for the elimination of child labour. Human rights perspective.

ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour No. 182	**Provisions on trafficking:** Prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, which comprises (art. 3): a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. **Specific provisions on children:** Child specific instrument, human rights perspective.
ILO Convention on Forced Labour, No. 29	**Provisions on trafficking:** Suppression of the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms (art. 1), which is 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily' (art. 2). **Specific provisions on children:** No child-specific provisions, human rights perspective.
UNODC Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons	**Provisions on trafficking:** Prevention and combating of all forms of trafficking in persons and protection and assistance to survivors, with a special attention to women and children (art. 2); international definition of trafficking in persons (art. 3 (a)). **Specific provisions on children:** Specific definition of trafficking in persons applied to children (art. 3 (c)) and special needs of children (art. 6.4) should be taken into account for assistance and protection of survivors.

Table 7 – Ratification of key international conventions and protocols

International conventions and protocols	Egypt	Ethiopia	Sudan	Tunisia
Convention on the Rights of the Child,[129] and its optional protocols[130],[131]	✓	✓	✓	✓
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women[132]	✓	✓	-	✓
ILO Convention on the Minimum Age No. 138 (minimum age indicated in brackets)	✓ (15)	✓ (14)	✓ (14)	✓ (16)
ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour No. 182	✓	✓	✓	✓
ILO Convention on Forced Labour No. 29	✓	✓	✓	✓
UNODC Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons[133]	✓	✓	✓	✓
UNODC Palermo Protocol on Smuggling of migrants[134]	✓	✓	✓	✓

'Despite the existence of a myriad of migration dialogue and inter-State cooperation mechanisms on the [African] continent there is not much by way of active, ongoing cooperation and information-sharing between countries on migration'.[135] Legislation and programmes intended to safeguard unaccompanied migrant children usually lack efficacy in enforcement and implementation, and many states prioritise national and border security above the protection of migrants' human rights and unaccompanied migrant children.[136] Moreover, **smuggling and trafficking policy initiatives and processes are rife with contradictions**: in general, African organisations (such as the African Union and IGAD) are more inclined to call for rights-based approaches, while EU institutions (which disburse most migration funding in the region) and national governments prioritise migration management or containment and border security. It is therefore important to consider the regional and cross-regional element of the broader policy landscape.

The Khartoum Process exemplifies the prioritisation of migration management and border security over protection of persons. Launched at the Regional Conference for Combating Trafficking in Khartoum in 2014 and conceived in the mould of the Rabat Process, the Khartoum Process fails to acknowledge

that restrictive migration policies, coupled with the absence of sufficient safe and legal ways for people to reach Europe, risk providing a space for trafficking networks.[137] Thus, according to a recent study in the region, smuggling activities have gradually turned into 'thriving trafficking businesses, involving the exploitation of migrants and asylum seekers, and the trade of narcotic drugs.'[138] Moreover, the responsibility to control border areas is sometimes conferred to militia and paramilitary actors, who are reported to have committed serious human rights violations, namely in Sudan).[139]

This indicates that EU policies have at least partly achieved their objective of reducing migration flows, but have not reached their stated objective of disrupting smuggling and trafficking networks and reducing risks along migratory routes.[140] In other words, **reductions in migration flows towards Europe do not reduce the presence of smuggling and trafficking networks**. A similar correlation between smuggling and migration policies can be observed at regional level: it has been observed that compared to West Africa, refugees and migrants travelling in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, where freedom of movement frameworks do not exist, are far more reliant on smugglers to cross borders and face higher risks along their journeys.[141]

According to an expert, 'the Khartoum Process established a platform for cooperation between Europe and Africa, but its design and operation is problematic in a number of ways. It focuses too much on states and not enough on people; it sees migration as a local or regional problem, rather than a global responsibility; and – most problematically – it **fails to address the root causes and political drivers of undocumented migration.**'[142]

BOX 5. EURO-AFRICA COOPERATION AND DIALOGUE

European and African states cooperate on issues related to migration, border control and human trafficking, and devise coordinated policy responses. Two key milestones of this ongoing process are:

- **The Ouagadougou Action Plan** to combat trafficking in human beings, especially women and children, adopted by the AU-EU Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development held in Tripoli in 2006. The action plan, 'takes a holistic human rights approach and includes measures also to protect the victims and prosecute the traffickers.' It is divided into four sections: 1) prevention and awareness raising; 2) victim protection and assistance; 3) legislative framework, policy development and law enforcement; and 4) cooperation and coordination. In this sense, the plan is in line with the '4Ps' objectives from the Palermo Protocol: prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. A draft report evaluating the implementation status of the Ouagadougou Action Plan was published by the African Union in 2019. This found that the Action Plan had several weaknesses, including the lack of indicators and timelines, the absence of a regional structure for oversight and implementation, and low awareness among AU member states. Moreover, human trafficking has evolved greatly since the action plan was adopted, due to the impact of restrictive migration regimes on the exposure of vulnerable migrants to trafficking risks.
- **The Khartoum Process, launched in 2014 in the mould of the Rabat Process**, is a regional dialogue for cooperation on trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants along the Horn of Africa-Europe Migration Route. Member states of the Khartoum Process work to: 1) create a framework for policy and dialogue; 2) share knowledge and experiences to strengthen cooperation with the support of international organisations like the ICMPD, IOM, UNHCR, and UNODC; and 3) seek funding opportunities and facilitate resource mobilisation to support concrete projects. This cross-regional dialogue stream merged into the Valletta Political Declaration and Joint Action Plan of November 2015 (JVAP). The JVAP coalesced the consensus among European and African States around five priority domains, including preventing and fighting irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. To this end, the Valletta Summit launched the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) of 2.8 billion euros, extended until 2021. In preparation for the EUTF's end in December 2021, the EU adopted a new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe), with a budget of EUR 79.5 billion for the 2021-2027 period. The NDICI merged former EU financing instruments to support developing countries across multiple thematic areas, including migration and anti-trafficking.

According to experts, **the increasing risks of trafficking along the CMR are a consequence of policy changes**. The control of vast ungoverned areas between Sudan, Egypt and Libya is conferred to unaccountable military and paramilitary groups who participate in smuggling and trafficking operations, resulting in increased risks for child migrants. Militarised border control actors have been described by a key informant as 'taxation actors'. They allegedly impose illegal taxes on smugglers and traffickers at checkpoints, arrest those who cannot pay, and sometimes sell migrants to groups across the border. This militarisation of borders has driven out pre-existing smuggling practices, which were based to a large extent on loose networks and some form of trust between smugglers and migrants, and replaced them with more exploitative practices often veering towards trafficking.

Moreover, the accounts of migrant children regarding treatment by **formal security actors** in Libya (coast guards, detention authorities, police), consistently indicate that such actors **subject children to the same exploitative practices and extreme violations perpetrated by non-state groups**. Migrant children who transited through Libya described detention for ransom by formal actors and non-state groups in the same way. The higher risks linked to militarisation of borders are not limited to the three-border region between Sudan, Libya and Egypt; they have also been increasingly observed on the Ethiopia-Sudan border, especially since the start of the conflict in Northern Ethiopia.

BOX 6. REGIONAL INSTRUMENTS

In 2006, the AU adopted the **Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA)** to address migration challenges on the continent, charting a first then a second Plan of Action for the period 2018-2030. The revised MPFA acknowledges that, 'with more restrictive migration policies, irregular migration is on the rise, which involves human trafficking and the criminal networks associated with it.' The instrument calls for the improvement of identification of trafficked persons, particularly children, to grant them protection and assistance. Recommended strategies on human trafficking include the alignment of member states' laws and policies with international instruments; prevention through awareness-raising; service delivery; survivor protection; prosecutions; and international cooperation and partnerships. Regarding the smuggling of migrant, the MPFA recognises that migrants move irregularly for a range of reasons, 'including the need for international protection and increased barriers to regular migration', and that smuggled migrants may become VoTs during their journeys. The MPFA identifies 'migration, children, adolescents, and youths' as a cross-cutting issue that requires targeted prevention campaigns, training of authorities, prosecution of traffickers, and protection and assistance services for survivors.

The **AU-Horn of Africa Initiative on trafficking and migrant smuggling (AU HoAI)** is a consultative process that launched in 2014. The establishment of the AU HoAI is in line with the African Union's commitment to combating human trafficking and smuggling of migrants since the Ouagadougou Action Plan, and the awareness-raising activities carried out under the **AU.COMMIT (African Union Commission Initiative against Trafficking**). This initiative includes 10 AU member states, including this study's target countries, and six observer states from other regions. It aims to support the effective implementation of the MPFA and the Ouagadougou Action Plan, promote regular dialogue, and enhance inter-state cooperation. Similar to the Khartoum Process, this initiative links policies and strategies for combating human trafficking with those that aim to combat the smuggling of migrants, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the policies on human trafficking to prevent the phenomenon and protect survivors.

4.2. Strengths and gaps in national legislation and services

At a national level, legal and policy frameworks in the countries of research have evolved considerably over the past decade, often under the impetus of EU policies and international organisations. The only exception is Eritrea, which has not acceded to the Palermo Protocols and has not established any protection mechanism for survivors of trafficking. However, the frameworks are affected by several structural weaknesses - most notably the **conflation of trafficking and smuggling**.

1. **In Egypt**, the 2016 law on combating smuggling established a National Coordination Committee on Combating and Preventing Illegal Migration and Trafficking in Persons (NCCCPIM & TIP). However priority goals listed on the committee's website are oriented towards combating smuggling and illegal migration rather than anti-trafficking specifically.[143]
2. **In Ethiopia**, Proclamation No. 1178/2020 on the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, failed to address the main gap from the texts it was replacing, which was defining trafficking in persons in compliance with the international legal framework.[144] The issue has been resolved since the government approved corrigendum 11/2013 under proclamation 1229/2020. However, it has been reported that officials tend to conflate trafficking and smuggling and treat irregular migration as trafficking.[145] According to an informant, the renaming of the anti-trafficking task force as the 'National Partnership Coalition on migration' risks passing the message that trafficking is only related to transnational - and not domestic - migration.
3. **In Sudan**, no standalone legislation on smuggling has been adopted, resulting in the conflation between migrant smuggling and human trafficking.

National laws and policies do not offer adequate protections to child VoTs. The main gaps are described in Table 8 below.

Table 8 - Main gaps identified in national laws and policies on protection of child VoTs

Country	Main gaps identified in national laws and policies on protection of child VoTs
Egypt	Egypt's framework does not provide specific protections to child victims of trafficking (VoTs). Moreover, national laws do not protect domestic workers,[146] resulting in unaddressed risks of exploitation and major vulnerabilities to trafficking. A national fund to protect victims of trafficking has not yet been established and the government co-ordinates with civil society organisations to fill the gap. Moreover, the VoT status does not confer a right of temporary or permanent residence for foreign victims. The protection framework is based on the return of foreign VoTs to countries of origin as the primary goal. NGOs have continued to report that the referral mechanism is 'ineffective and underutilised, and various government stakeholders were unaware that it existed.'[147] Egypt is currently drafting an asylum law.
Ethiopia	Ethiopia has not yet introduced an anti-trafficking action plan. Its legislation does not align with international standards when it comes to protecting children in labour exploitation contexts, and it does not adequately consider the specific needs of child victims in terms of protection, support and assistance services.
Eritrea	Eritrea's Penal Code includes several anti-trafficking provisions, including the prohibition of trafficking women and infants and the prohibition of enslavement. However, this study could find no evidence of any victims' protection mechanisms.
Sudan	Sudan has attracted criticism for not defining in its national laws what constitutes sexual exploitation, leaving it open to judicial interpretation, and for failing to criminalise sex trafficking of children in the absence of coercion.[148] The 2018 SOPs on identification of child trafficking victims have not been disseminated and the inconsistent screening of victims by authorities results in the arrest and detention of victims.
Tunisia	Tunisia has a comparatively stronger legal framework on anti-trafficking. However, assistance to child VoTs is hampered by significant fines for illegal stays, a lack of provisions on specific residence permits for victims of trafficking and resulting uncertainties concerning their status, and a lack of clarity on the status of UASCs at the end of legal proceedings.

In terms of services, authorities and organisations provide several types of essential services to migrant children at risk of being exploited and/or trafficked: registration, prevention, protection through shelters and education, return and reintegration. However, these are often limited or inadequate to the situation or needs of the children, as detailed below.

Registration services

Many of the children who participated in this study were survivors of trafficking, asylum seekers or refugees. For them, registration is an essential protection tool. A Sudanese boy travelling with smugglers was arrested for illegal entry in Tunisia. He explained that *'at that time, we already contacted the UNHCR and they gave us cards. We reached out to them. And they released us from prison.'*

Despite the crucial role of registration as a first step to obtain the protection of the law, according to the accounts of research participants, **children's registration experiences are usually negative.** This is due to children's misplaced expectations and to agencies' inability to follow up with adequate service provision. An Eritrean girl in Ethiopia describes her registration experience, after one year trying to access the UNHCR office in vain: *'I went [to UNHCR] for almost a whole year, but they never accepted me. When I finally managed to go [to UNHCR] to register, I told them my story and the person replied, "I have registered it into your data."... That's it, that's the only thing he told me, and I had been trying to go there for so long, but they never heard me out.'*

According to informants, **migrant children act strategically when narrating their story during registration and status determination processes.** They may misrepresent their age or nationality to increase their odds of being granted international protection, access to specialised services or resettlement opportunities. These behaviours are linked to misplaced expectations concerning resettlement to Europe. A UNHCR official remarked: *'I must explain to [migrant children] that resettlement has procedures, and children get frustrated because of what was told to them before arrival in Egypt. They had hopes and dreams and they are surprised that these hopes and dreams do not exist in reality.'*

"I went [to UNHCR] for almost a whole year, but they never accepted me. When I finally managed to go [to UNHCR] to register, I told them my story and the person replied, "I have registered it into your data."...That's it, that's the only thing he told me, and I had been trying to go there for so long, but they never heard me out."

Eritrean girl

“I don’t personally think that there is an information gap. I know that children have information about the risk and how dangerous the journey could be, but they want to go anyway.”

Key informant

Registration processes are usually cumbersome, especially when children have no personal ID documents. In these cases, UNHCR procedures take longer for asylum seekers and refugees, as explained by a key informant. In Egypt, IOM only registers and assists migrants, including child migrants, who have been in the country for at least six months. This leaves them more exposed to risks at a crucial phase in their migration journey.

Children may become adults during these lengthy processes and lose their access to services and resettlement opportunities. A key informant in Tunisia described the situation of children registered by UNHCR in Tunisia, and then interviewed months later in the context of status determination proceedings. When these children turn 18 in the intervening time, ‘they lose their priority, as UNHCR does not consider the age at registration, but the age at the time of the interview’.

Prevention services

‘That very reply broke my spirit.’ - Eritrean boy, upon learning from a Tunisian social worker that he had no possibility to proceed to Europe.

Activities that aim to prevent trafficking are generally based on top-down awareness-raising campaigns in refugee camps and in areas that experience high levels of outmigration. These initiatives do not appear to alter the way in which children approach migration decisions. The reasons for this are manifold. First, children count on their peers, family, diaspora and community as primary sources of reliable information. Government agencies and, to a lesser extent, international NGOs and UN actors are perceived as distant and are therefore less trusted.

Second, the **sources of information on which children rely downplay the risks of the journey** and overemphasise successful migration stories. Third, children (and families) who see no future in their country of origin are inclined to take high risks to chase better prospects, whatever the dangers they may encounter along the route as irregular migrants. According to a key informant: *‘I don’t personally think that there is an information gap. I know that children have information about the risk and how dangerous the journey could be, but they want to go anyway’.*

As they proceed with their journey, **it becomes increasingly difficult for children to come to terms with reality** and accept that their migration aspirations and dreams are shattered. A social worker in Egypt shared the case of a 16-year-old child migrant who expected to embark on a boat to Italy immediately after entering Egypt: *'I made him aware that this is called illegal immigration, and that it is dangerous and may expose him to drowning, or if he is caught, he may be deported back to his country, and he was shocked.'*

This may lead to dangerous and irrational decisions. For example, a boy interviewed in Tunisia explained how, after being informed that he had no chance of proceeding to Europe legally, decided to go back to Libya. Only when he realised the extreme danger of crossing the Mediterranean from Libya did he decide to return to Tunisia. Other children reacted more aggressively, like this Eritrean boy in Tunisia:
'What advice! They are the ones who need advice! A member of the [Tunisian government] agency told me straight to my face that I might stay here for 8 or 10 years. It didn't even bother them to destroy a child's dreams. What prospects would I have [in Tunisia]? It is as if they are imprisoning me.'

These examples indicate that the way in which information is usually conveyed to children is not only ineffective, but also potentially harmful.

Moreover, **awareness-raising interventions are conditioned by the leeway that agencies can negotiate with their donors.** For example, according to key informants, providing accurate information on services available along the route and suggested risk mitigation measures could be perceived by some governments as encouraging migration. This would attract criticism from donors and potentially result in a reduction of funding. This gap could, however, be filled by humanitarian actors such as Save the Children.

"What advice! They are the ones who need advice! A member of the [Tunisian government] agency told me straight to my face that I might stay here for 8 or 10 years. It didn't even bother them to destroy a child's dreams. What prospects would I have [in Tunisia]? It is as if they are imprisoning me."

Eritrean boy

Protection services: shelter and education

Safe shelter, encompassing emergency and long-term solutions, safe houses and reception centres, is a key gap along the CMR. In Tunisia, where some services are available but agencies cannot keep up with increasing needs, this creates competition between national and migrant children for access to shelter. According to a social worker: *'There are fights... the local children are favoured, so we proposed to open a special centre for migrant children, but this would raise issues of discrimination based on ethnicity and nationality.'* These tensions occasionally erupt among children who share the same centre, some of whom suffer the consequences of trauma.

In Sudan, children are moved in and out of shelters without a thorough assessment of their best interest. According to an informant, children who are recognised as VoTs are kept in reception centres for the duration of criminal proceedings against the alleged traffickers, so that they can participate in court sessions. These children are released from the centre at the end of criminal proceedings, with no follow-up. In addition, there are concerns regarding government-managed transit and reception centres in Sudan. The Khartoum alien monitoring department, where deported migrants are transferred for assessment after being temporarily held in police stations at border areas, has been described by an informant as 'basically a detention centre'. Moreover, community-managed centres are not a viable alternative. An informant provided the example of a 'guest house' run by the Ethiopian association in Khartoum to protect Ethiopian women and girls, including VoTs. However, many women and girls avoid using this facility due to risks of being associated with the Ethiopian government and identified as an illegal migrant, which could lead to deportation by Sudanese authorities.

Shelter is another sector where children may act strategically to pursue their migration plans. A social worker in Egypt shared the example of children seeking conflict with foster families in order to be offered alternative solutions, including resettlement abroad: *'they listen to rumours saying that if they mention that the foster family mistreat them, this will accelerate their file in the UNHCR, and they would be able to travel quickly.'* While such coping mechanisms do not constitute the norm, it does display the degrees to which children may go in order to achieve their

migratory goals. Additionally, foster family abuse is not unheard of, hence the importance of approaching such complaints with the utmost care so as to avoid a bias against potential child victims. The role of these foster families remains pivotal in any case, as there are no operational shelters in Egypt at present.

Pursuing education is often cited by children as one of the reasons they chose to migrate. However, **children's access to education during transit is limited** due to administrative, language and financial barriers. Most data on education access was collected in Egypt, where child migrants cannot register in local schools due to lack of ID documents, and enrolment procedures are described as complicated and opaque. Some schools communicate to the guardians of child migrants that they only accept Egyptian nationals. Most child migrants cannot afford to pay the fees of community schools (such as Sudanese schools). Similar access barriers were also reported in Egypt's healthcare sector.

Return and reintegration services: lack of durable solutions

'When I saw lots of children who died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea, I changed my mind and went to the IOM. I told them that I wanted to go to my home country. They registered me and facilitated my return. They even gave me around 5000 birrs [approximately USD 100] after they brought me here.' - Child returnee in Ethiopia

Return and reintegration is an option for children who do not want to continue their journey, or who are unable to continue their journey due to lack of funds. This study found a few examples of child migrants who had recently returned through IOM programmes, including an Ethiopian child who reported his abusive facilitator to the police after returning. However, most child research participants preferred to proceed with their journey regardless of the risk – a behaviour that has been described as 'entrapment' (see section 2.2).

Moreover, **return and reintegration may not be an option for children who fled abusive family situations**, for whom the family and community of origin is not a protective factor, but a source of risk. This is frequently the case for girls who migrated to avoid early marriage. Migrant girls who survived rape are re-

portedly more unwillingly to return due to the stigma that they may face in their communities of origin, even more so if they gave birth during the journey as a consequence of rape. Moreover, they could be exposed to trafficking again.

In addition, families may not be willing to accept returning child migrants who did not meet family expectations and could not provide a lifeline through remittances. Many child migrants have experienced trauma, exploitation and detention, and local communities are generally unprepared to welcome their return. According to an informant, *'[agencies] force refugees and migrants to reintegrate into society, but society excludes them.'*

The viability of return and reintegration as a 'solution' for child VoTs is therefore limited to particular cases and needs to be underpinned by rigorous best interest determination processes, protection safeguards, and comprehensive reintegration support upon return. While resettlement could constitute a durable solution for VoTs, the procedure is complex, particularly when the survivor is a child.

Table 9 - Strengths and gaps of services at national level

Country	Strengths	Gaps
Egypt	Existence of well-established actors providing specialised services to migrant children as well as community-based organisations providing services and acting as frontline support.	Major service gaps in remote areas, especially along the Sudanese border. Challenging access to border locations, places of detention and informal mines. Long-term support and education services are lacking. Risks of criminalisation of smuggled children. Security considerations remain a priority.
Ethiopia	Services to child migrants, including returnees, are provided through networks of community-based and religious organisations, NGOs and government actors.	Insufficient delivery of education, legal assistance and reintegration services (including mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and income generating activity).

Sudan	Key partners are present in the capital and in the refugee-hosting areas. Red Crescent VoT centre in Kassala and emergency assistance along migration routes in the northern states.	Insufficient availability of specialised services throughout the country. The few available services are concentrated in the capital and in refugee-hosting areas, leaving large swathes of the country almost completely uncovered along the routes to/from Egypt and Libya (Northern State, River Nile, Red Sea). Referral networks are fragmented and not always functional. Service delivery depends entirely on donor funding. Lack of long-term support. Lack of monitoring of forced return cases. Security considerations are prioritised over victims' assistance.
Tunisia	Good quality of social services and referral networks compared to other countries in the African continent. Police and border officials are also more effective in identifying and referring potential VoTs.	Services cannot keep up with growing needs. There is a lack of safe shelters for UASCs, forcing children to sleep in the streets. Many children reach Tunisia after surviving extreme human rights violations in Libya and require specialised services that are often unavailable.
Italy	Wide range of services including healthcare, MHPSS, education and vocational training, housing, legal assistance, local integration and recreational initiatives, and long-term support. Temporary stay and protection provisions for child migrants.	The identification of child VoTs remains a major challenge. Service delivery is hampered by a scarcity of social workers and cultural mediators. Potential gaps and interruptions in service delivery when children turn 18. National authorities operate with an emergency mind-set.

4.3. Gaps in responses along the CMR

'You get protection from relatives, the extended family and neighbours. Such kinds of assets and good practices need to be considered when we talk about child protection.' - Social worker in Ethiopia

The availability, quality and accessibility of services for children on the move and child victims of trafficking varies significantly across target countries, as well as within countries. This creates a highly fragmented environment, where **migrant children are left without support during the most dangerous segments of their journeys**. The main obstacles to quality service delivery identified by this study are:

- Identification challenges
- Lack of specialised services for child victims of trafficking, especially in Sudan and Ethiopia
- Concentration of providers in urban areas and camps, leaving hard-to-access locations almost entirely uncovered.
- Inadequate coordination both within countries and across borders
- Lack of trust in authorities.

The impact of the risks that migrant children experience during their journey is exacerbated by **inadequate access to the services they need, especially specialised services**. The most significant gaps have been observed in the areas of (1) medical assistance, psychosocial care and support; (2) legal assistance; and (3) safe accommodation for women and children.[149] This is due to a variety of factors, including lack of familiarity with available services in countries of transit and destination; administrative, linguistic and financial barriers; poor availability of services especially in remote and underdeveloped areas; and specific barriers facing migrant children.[150]

The number of structures that exist to assist victims of trafficking is extremely low. For example, Sudan has only one specialised safe house (in Kassala), which is funded by UNHCR and managed by Sudanese Red Crescent, and no specialised structures seem to exist in Khartoum or other major cities.[151]

Identification challenges

As noted at the start of this section, **the identification of child victims is consistently reported as a major challenge in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, and along the CMR**, not least because migrant children prefer to avoid contact with authorities due to their fear of being deported, detained, mistreated, or prevented from continuing their journey. In addition, identification is made difficult because processes have been shaped from the perspective of criminal proceedings, are often conditional on the collaboration of survivors with the law enforcement authorities, and do not take into account the vulnerability of trafficked persons based on personal circumstances.[152] For example, according to key informants, third-country nationals (including children) who are identified as victims of trafficking in Sudan are held in administrative detention for illegal entry to the country and receive minimal protection assistance.

Law enforcement and border control authorities are often children's first point of contact when they enter a new country. These actors are rarely integrated in national referral mechanisms and do not consistently identify and refer potential victims. This is seen in Sudan and even more in Libya, where a heavily funded coast guard allegedly operates without regard for migrants' fundamental rights. The experience of a Sudanese boy is revealing:
'The coast guard's agents in Libya caught three boats. One of the boats cracked and the engine shut off. Some people were sinking. You could hear them screaming and calling for help, but [the coast guard] didn't save them. They literally said, "let them perish."'

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Sudanese boy

By contrast, the accounts of research participants indicate that border agents in Tunisia are better integrated in the national referral mechanism, and are capable of identifying vulnerable children and potential victims of trafficking by referring them to the IOM and UNHCR as well as other competent agencies and service providers. However, **children's negative experiences with formal institutions in their countries of origin and transit makes identification challenging in all target countries.**

In many cases, the establishment of a trust-based relation between service providers and migrant children who have experienced exploitation and abuse is the outcome of a long process that leverages

multiple areas of expertise, such as MHPSS and language interpretation, which are not available in all contexts. Capacity building of relevant border security personnel and the formalisation of a referral mechanism must be considered across the board.

Lack of specialised services

Identification of a child as a victim of trafficking does not end their suffering. They require long-term support and assistance including legal guardianship, safe shelter (but not a 'closed shelter' that restricts their personal freedoms),[153] psychosocial support, healthcare, education, the restoration of family links, legal redress, and arrangements for legal residency, voluntary return and reintegration.[154] Such **long-term, comprehensive, and child-tailored services are rarely available.**

Service delivery in Sudan and Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent in Tunisia and Egypt, focuses predominantly on meeting urgent humanitarian needs. The **long-term needs of migrant children, including child victims of trafficking (VoTs), are rarely addressed**. In some cases, access to services is hindered by administrative barriers. For example, several child migrants interviewed in Egypt reported that they could not access schools because available places were restricted to Egyptian nationals.

Large portions of territories that are traversed by child migration routes are chronically underserved by services. These are underpopulated desert areas, where children are exposed to extreme risks and have no recourse to protection and assistance services. When state actors are present in such areas, it is usually in the form of militarised border control agencies who have little regard for children's and migrants' rights. Formal actors, NGOs and international agencies are almost completely absent, with the notable and partial exception of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, which are comparatively better positioned to provide emergency aid in hard-to-reach locations but do not specifically cater for child migrants' long-term needs.

The most underserved areas are located at the borders between Sudan, Libya and Egypt. The absence of humanitarian actors in these areas makes it impossible to assist and protect child migrants along the route and to follow up on deportation cases from Libya and Egypt. In these locations, human trafficking and exploitation

thrive. Moreover, lack of services in these vast border regions exposes child migrants to major environmental risks (see Box 8).

Lack of coordination between services

In Sudan and Ethiopia, national actors are concentrated in humanitarian hotspots and integrated in the humanitarian architecture established by UN agencies. Child protection services are often only available in these areas. This constitutes an access barrier, as migrant children who need protection and support but find themselves in other parts of the country cannot count on referral networks extending beyond the scope of emergency-oriented humanitarian operations in a few hotspots. The mode of service delivery is highly location-dependent. As a consequence, children face risks trying to access essential services. For example, Eritrean refugee children who have moved to the Sudanese capital must return to camps in order to collect ID documents, which they need to avoid being deported. According to a key informant, this exposes them to risks along the journey, including risks at checkpoints and risks of interception and kidnapping for ransom.

BOX 7. GOOD CHILD PROTECTION AND REFERRAL PRACTICES

Effective referral networks are essential to address the needs of child victims of trafficking (VoTs). Referral networks work best when they are constituted by **small interdisciplinary groups of agencies and stakeholders with a strong local presence and strong commitment**. This enables them to provide good quality services in a coordinated manner and to identify and address gaps.

An expert interviewed for this study described what works well in East African Migration Routes (EAMR) countries:

‘What worked quite well was structures referred to as ‘task forces’. Roughly speaking, they are small multidisciplinary teams but at a local level, which will involve the school, child protection and the police or justice sector. They discuss the cases and identify response measures. So, I really think that creating these spaces for interdisciplinary or multi-actor cooperation is good. Afterwards, of course, we need facilities which are often badly lacking, such as reception centres and foster families.’

When government agencies are involved, informants indicate that the federal structures of Ethiopia and Sudan are not conducive to the set-up of effective referral systems that function across state lines. Egypt, and more so Tunisia, have better functioning coordination mechanisms. But these rely on the good will of NGOs that are largely dependent on external funding and do not have unimpeded access throughout the state territory.

Experts and practitioners interviewed for this study reported that **cross-border coordination between agencies and service providers along the CMR is almost non-existent**. National authorities occasionally coordinate in the context of joint border patrols, for example between Egypt and Sudan, but these efforts do not prioritise child protection. NGOs and agencies have not established mechanisms for cross-border coordination for information sharing, responses or referrals. This compromises the continuity of care for children who need long-term support.

BOX 8. ENVIRONMENTAL HARDSHIPS IN UNDERSERVED AREAS.

Hardship along migration routes is partly a **consequence of long journeys in an extremely hostile environment**. The hardships that child migrant's face increase their overall vulnerability as they proceed with their journey.

According to the children who took part in this study, **desert crossings from Sudan to Egypt and Libya, and movement within Libya, are the most challenging segments of the CMR**. During these segments, migrant children get sick, dehydrated and lack adequate food. Dehydration and starvation during desert crossings were estimated to cause 36% of migrant deaths in 2019, followed by sickness and lack of healthcare facilities (30%), vehicle accidents (15%) and high temperatures (9%).

For migrant children, especially younger migrant children, these **environmental factors can be lethal or even fatal**. When not fatal, prolonged exposure to the harsh desert environment can lead to long-term medical consequences. As explained by an Ethiopian child returnee: *'I developed renal illness because of the difficult journey and lack of water in the desert'.*

Environmental hardships increase and multiply the risks that child migrants face along the route, and increase their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. In remote desert areas, for example, smugglers are child migrants' only contact with the outside world and they risk being abandoned along the journey. Desert crossings have medical and psychosocial consequences, but specialised support is unavailable during transit, and only scarcely available in destination areas and North African migration hubs. Additionally, migrant children have limited recourse to **coping strategies**. Research participants referred to the practice of drinking water from unsafe sources, or finding creative solutions with limited means, such as repairing one's shoes with material found on the road to avoid walking barefoot.

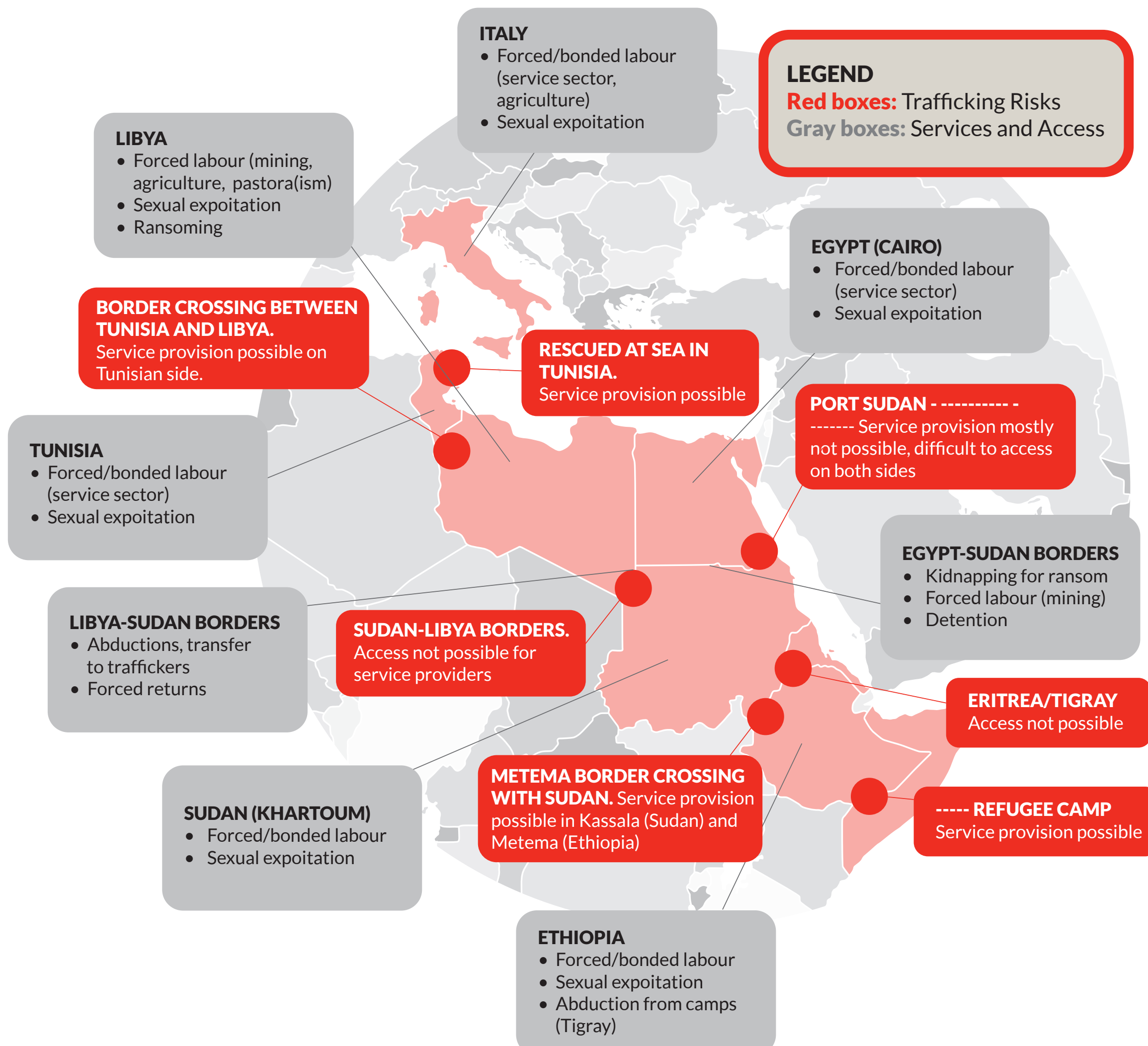
5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Tens of thousands of child migrants from East Africa and the Horn of Africa travel along the Central Mediterranean Route each year, in an attempt to reach Europe. Along the way, personal, situational and contextual risk factors accumulate in a chain-of-risk that leaves them highly vulnerable to trafficking, child labour, and sexual and other forms of exploitation.

Risks are particularly acute at border, desert and sea crossings. However, there are a lack of entry points for stakeholders in these high-risk areas and identification of victims and potential victims of child trafficking remains challenging. The embedded culture of smuggling along the CMR and hidden trafficking networks only add to these challenges.

Furthermore, legal and policy frameworks that prioritise border control over migrant protection and conflate smuggling and trafficking, as well as a lack of access to protection and essential services at certain points along the route, leaves child migrants at the mercy of smugglers and traffickers.

Figure 11 – Trafficking risks and access to services along the CMR



The success of a route-based approach must be implemented in line with the local situation, context, geography and culture supported by national actors and local communities with the necessary tools and know-how to identify and prevent smuggling becoming trafficking.

Programme and policy 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 on the following pages. Recommendations have been developed as guidance for both the EAMR project and broader civil society and government actors. Where opportunities have been identified for the EAMR in particular, these have been specified.

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**

- **Both humanitarian and development agencies and specialised child protection organisations must commit to, develop and/or refine referral pathways and SOPs with improved vulnerability assessment criteria. To enable agencies to:**

- Ensure effective, long-term outreach and protection services (fixed or mobile drop in or community centres) are available and accessible at key locations along the CMR, beyond the main humanitarian hubs in Sudan and Egypt.
- Assess, identify and assist children who are in situations of abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect, with a particular focus on victims of trafficking (VoT) and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), and unaccompanied and separated children (UASC).
- Prevent (the risk of) abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect, by identifying actions that will bring children to safety without compromising their or their families' protection.

- **Donors should implement sustained funding for protection responses along migration routes to respond to these challenges including family unity, longer-term care, child protection systems and support for returnees.**

Responsible: humanitarian and development agencies, child protection organisations, donors, national child protection services

Key border areas where this approach could be piloted through EAMR (subject to accessibility):
- Ethiopia-Sudan border, especially from Metemma[155] and Humera, to Kassala and Gedaref.
- Sudan-Egypt border, from Port Sudan to Shalateen and from Wadi Halfa to Aswan,
- Sudan-Libya border, at Dongola and Al-Dabbah.

Other underserved areas:
- Northern regions of Sudan
- Port cities where migrants rescued at sea disembark in Tunisia (shelters)

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

- **Governments, humanitarian and development agencies should:**
  - Develop links with official information management systems and existing data collection systems, and support the establishment of official information management systems

across borders, working closely with advocacy teams to enhance the chances of implementation.

- Engage with community actors, facilitators and smugglers, to increase understanding of migration trends and types of abuse and exploitation on the CMR.
- Ensure children are well-informed about the data collection process and their perspectives are incorporated.
- As far as possible, develop harmonised monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning indicators across official information management systems both within and across countries.

- **EAMR outreach teams should:**
  - Be leveraged to strengthen child protection information management (CPIM) systems, and develop mechanisms for data-sharing across organisations, borders and contexts, for the identification, referral and support of VoTs; tracing and tracking of children along the route; monitoring of trends; and peer to peer learning. Any data-sharing will be in accordance with relevant child protection, safeguarding and data confidentiality policies. This will prevent operational gridlocks caused by inter-agency or transnational information asymmetries.
  - Continue regular data collection at a community level and triangulation of data along migratory routes to ensure community level data collection tools and evidence to inform child migration programming.
  - Conduct information sharing and awareness raising activities such as but not limited to face to face interactions, use of context appropriate media tools, FGDs and regular events & campaigns.

Responsible: governments, institutions responsible for information management systems, humanitarian and development agencies, organisations that carry out community-based monitoring

3. **Strengthen cross-border and international partnerships across agencies**

- **Humanitarian and development agencies, national authorities and service providers should:**
  - Develop and test a cross-border, child-sensitive case management system to ensure a case-by-case focus on each child, the services they have received, and the risks they continue to

face. Cross-border case management will ensure that children understand the rights of victims of trafficking (although they may not identify in this way). It is recognised that actors will be operating within challenging contexts to achieve this and will require Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with governments. The EAMR project should develop and pilot initial MoUs with government as part of case management activities. The South Sudan regional information management sharing protocol could be used as a template.

  - Draw on existing models from countries with well-established cross-border mechanisms and international partnerships to identify good practice for those at the beginning of the process.

- **Donors should facilitate cross-border coordination through flexible funding mechanisms. Funding should include provisions for investment in cross-border mobility and durable solutions as well as the creation of fora at the strategic, technical and community levels to harmonise policies across borders.**
- **All states on the CMR should adhere to maritime legal obligations and coordination of sea rescues should involve all relevant authorities. Currently, there is a disproportionate focus on having migrants embark in Tunisia even after the vessel has entered Italian waters.**

Responsible: humanitarian and development agencies, service providers, authorities involved in sea rescues and donor entities

Specific operational contexts:

- Cross-border and regional approach, covering all operational contexts: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia
- Italy, in relation to sea rescues

4. Build partnerships with and upskill trusted local actors

- **Humanitarian and development agencies and officials must build partnerships with, and upskill, community-based actors who can establish trust-based relations with migrant children; provide effective child protection at a local level; and gain children's consent to receive community-based and other services.**

- **The EAMR project can support this by mapping local, trusted community actors; providing tools or approaches for authorities and local CSOs; holding ad hoc consultations and community meetings; and planning awareness-raising sessions to manage expectations of children who are determined to migrate and combat the information asymmetry that puts child migrants at risk. These sessions are already in place through EAMR's community mobilisers and in collaboration with local authorities and INGOs, and can be expanded through capacity building at a local level.**

Responsible: government officials, service providers, local CSOs and community-based organisations, humanitarian and development agencies, community actors (e.g., teachers, religious leaders, social media personalities)

Specific operational contexts:
- Countries of origin (Ethiopia, Sudan) and countries experiencing long-term transits of migrant children (Tunisia, Egypt)
- Particularly relevant in Egypt, which hosts a large Sudanese diaspora

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

- **Humanitarian and development agencies and service providers:**
  - Should undertake regular mapping of multidisciplinary child protection services available for migrant children at national and sub-national level (which may include doctors, psychologists, social workers, legal experts, educators and others), to identify any gaps and to ensure providers can identify, assist and refer children who are victims of aggravated smuggling, exploitation or trafficking.
  - Must ensure that the systems used for service mapping are up-to-date and can identify any gaps between referrals and assistance provided, including to mitigate any discrimination challenges. This should also be leveraged for advocacy purposes to address some of the deep-seated discrimination triggers at national level.
  - Promote community participation in service mapping to understand gaps in access, and identify informal service providers and community actors.

- Must provide capacity-building support to relevant actors in order for them to provide better-quality, long-term assistance and specialised services for such children.

- **EAMR country offices should build on existing networks to provide capacity build support for better-quality, long-term assistance and specialised services and to identify additional partners in the community.**
- **EAMR project should undertake mapping of child protection services available at national and sub-national levels.**

Responsible: humanitarian and development agencies, service providers, donors

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.**

- **Service providers must ensure:**
  - That essential services such as shelter, placement in alternative care, MHPSS and education, are provided to all children (including migrants, survivors of trafficking, and those at risk of trafficking or exploitation) on a needs-basis, whatever their status or nationality.
  - That registration for services is as quick and straightforward as possible, to ensure that no migrant children fall through the cracks.
- **EAMR should seek to develop a set of principles or code of conduct for actors to adhere to when carrying out EAMR activities (and more broadly) to, among other things, support governments and service providers to improve levels of trust with migrant children.**

Responsible: governments, service providers, humanitarian and development agencies

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

- **Humanitarian and development agencies should:**
  - Ensure that returns only take place when long-term reintegration can be assured; and when they take into consideration the child's specific needs.

- Incorporate VoT specific risks (e.g., risk of re-trafficking, risks relating to child witnesses or survivors of trafficking who are in conflict with the justice system) in returns assessments and ensure support upon return.
- Integrate post-return procedures to assess children's longer-term wellbeing into case management systems.
- Ensure access to long-term reintegration support through MHPSS, healthcare, education, vocational training, and income-generating activities, among other interventions.
- EAMR project should incorporate VoT risks into Best Interest Procedures (BIP) which take into consideration children's backgrounds, views/preferences, (in consideration of their age, maturity and evolving capacities), vulnerabilities, protection needs, protective factors and family environment in the country of origin.

Responsible: Humanitarian and development agencies managing and monitoring return and reintegration; governments and child protection systems

Specific operational contexts:
- All: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia
- Particularly relevant for countries experiencing a large number of returns: Sudan and Ethiopia

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

- **In the absence of guaranteed and safe humanitarian access to border points, humanitarian and development agencies should work with border security personnel to identify capacity gaps and build their capacity to deliver child protection services – while also advocating for the expansion of safe humanitarian access along the route.**
- **Border officials should receive basic, specialised and refresher child protection training to enable them to identify, refer and protect victims of trafficking (VOTs). This could be in the form of protocols or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for how to best respond in partnership with ministerial counterparts and with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). States should not redeploy border officials who have received this training to areas outside migration hubs**

and key border crossings to avoid loss of intellectual capital. To mitigate this, proper engagement and assessment tools are required to monitor numbers of trained staff to areas outside migration hubs and key border crossings to avoid loss of intellectual capital. To mitigate this, proper engagement and assessment tools are required to monitor numbers of trained staff.

- **Humanitarian and development agencies should carry out other child protection capacity building activities with front-line workers and border security personnel.**
- **EAMR project should define and deliver a training package initially targeting border officials. The package should include the Save the Children's course on combating human trafficking and smuggling of migrants, and other key components such as psychological first aid and caring for child survivors of gender-based violence.**

Responsible: humanitarian agencies, and development agencies, child protection organisations, border officials, government ministries, official institutions

Specific operational contexts: Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia's Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions.

Policy recommendations:

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

- **States should establish and expand safe and regular pathways so that children can move safely, building on regional authorities' frameworks such as the African Union Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018-2030), which includes objectives and actions on mobility for education and labour migration.**
- **States should establish procedures to obtain civil and travel documents in their countries of origin more accessible.**
- **Destination countries and countries of long-term transit should expand opportunities for children to move with their families, and accelerate status determination, document provision, family reunification and resettlement procedures.**

- **Humanitarian and development agencies should work together with states to advocate for the safe and regular migration of children, access to documentation and durable solutions.**

Responsible: government authorities, intergovernmental institutions, humanitarian and development agencies, donor entities

Specific operational contexts:
- Cross-border and regional approach across all: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tunisia
- Specifically in Sudan and Ethiopia, on procedures to obtain civil and travel documents
- Specifically in Tunisia and Egypt, both destination or long-term transit countries, on facilitation of the refugee status determination and associated procedures

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

- **Humanitarian and development agencies (in conjunction with international organisations and UN agencies) must advocate that:**
  - States shall not condition access to services to children's nationality, migration status, or other discrimination grounds.
  - Non-national child VoTs should access the same level of services as national VoTs, including in contexts where social services are oversubscribed and under strain. This also requires advocating for strengthened capacity of these services, both in numbers and in skills.
  - States should grant access to protection and assistance to children who suffered abusive and aggravated forms of smuggling that may not reach the threshold of trafficking.
  - Migrant children should be protected at the same level as national children. They should receive immediate and adequate services, after a proper assessment of their vulnerability and needs by trained staff of service providers.
  - Establish fast track processes for child migrants and firewalls between child protection services, migration enforcement and judicial proceedings. This will require new national coordination mechanisms to acknowledge and protect child victims of trafficking.

Responsible: humanitarian and development agencies, government institutions

Specific operational contexts:
- All: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Tunisia
- Particularly relevant in Sudan and Ethiopia, where law enforcement is prioritised over support for survivors, and in Tunisia where social services are oversubscribed

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

- **Humanitarian and development agencies should advocate for states to address gaps in their anti-trafficking laws, improve alignment with international standards, and create and implement action plans to combat child trafficking.**
- **Authorities should not conflate child trafficking and child smuggling and should shift their focus from criminalisation to victimisation. The establishment of dedicated and regular training sessions for relevant personnel is a good solution along with broader capacity building and advocacy.**
- **States should adopt, implement and monitor comprehensive action plans to implement their legal and policy commitments on the protection of child VoTs.**
- **Authorities should recognise that child VoTs do not always consider trafficking to be exploitative, and shift their focus from criminalisation to victimisation. Comprehensive survivor protection should be central to anti-trafficking policies. Tunisia has policies and tools focused on the protection of survivors, which can serve as a model for other countries in the region (although implementation in Tunisia is hindered by limited resources and major gaps between the capital and the province).**
- **Comprehensive survivor protection should be central to anti-trafficking policies, and ensure better access to regular pathways for the prosecution of traffickers.**
- **EAMR project should support delivery of tailored training sessions for relevant personnel on combating child trafficking to ensure protection of VoTs.**

Responsible: government authorities, intergovernmental institutions, humanitarian and development agencies

Specific operational contexts:

- In Egypt: expand protection services and shelters to all survivors, including non-national children.
- In Ethiopia: adopt and implement a comprehensive national action plan.
- In Sudan: draft and adopt standalone legislation on smuggling, to avoid conflation between migrant smuggling and human trafficking in terms of perpetrator's prosecution and survivor's protection.
- In Tunisia: enhance application of the 2016 anti-trafficking law outside of Tunis, both in terms of perpetrator's prosecution and survivors' protection.
- Ethiopia and Sudan are federal states, so it is essential to ensure that state laws and policies align with federal frameworks.

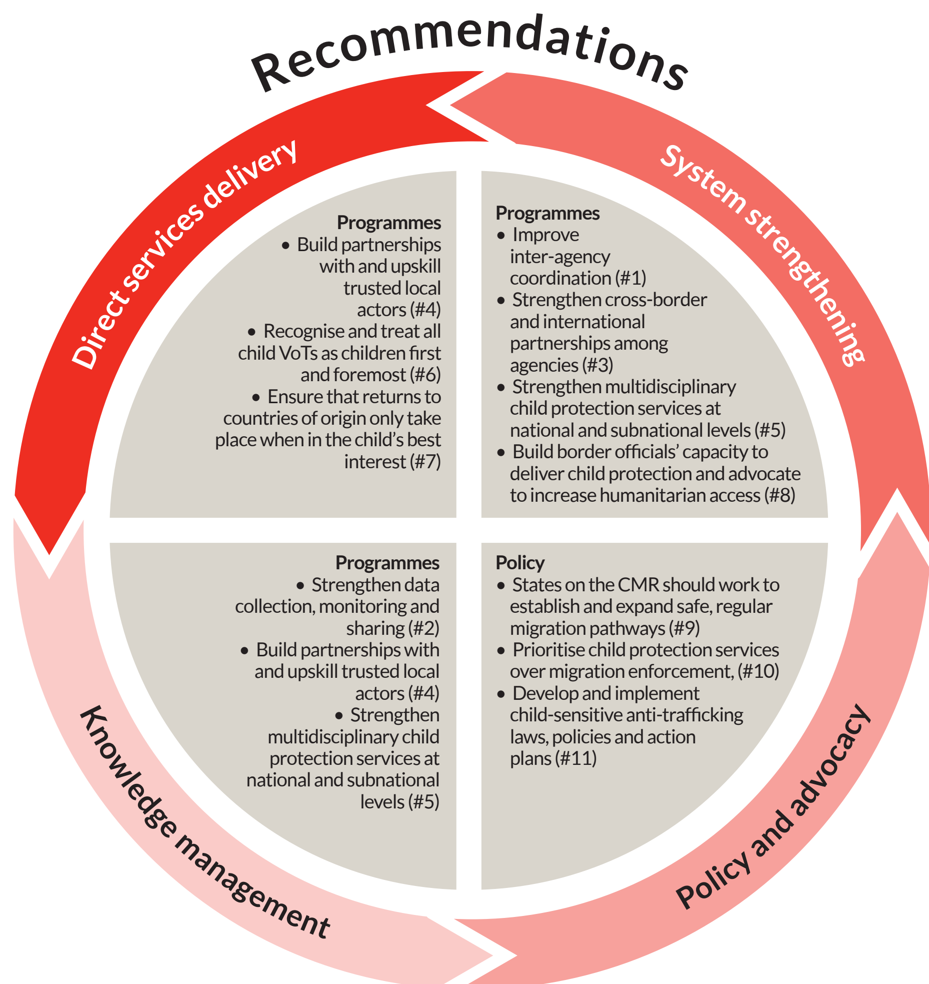


Figure 12 – Recommendations under EAMR's approach

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131 None of the target countries ratified the third Optional Protocol on communications.

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