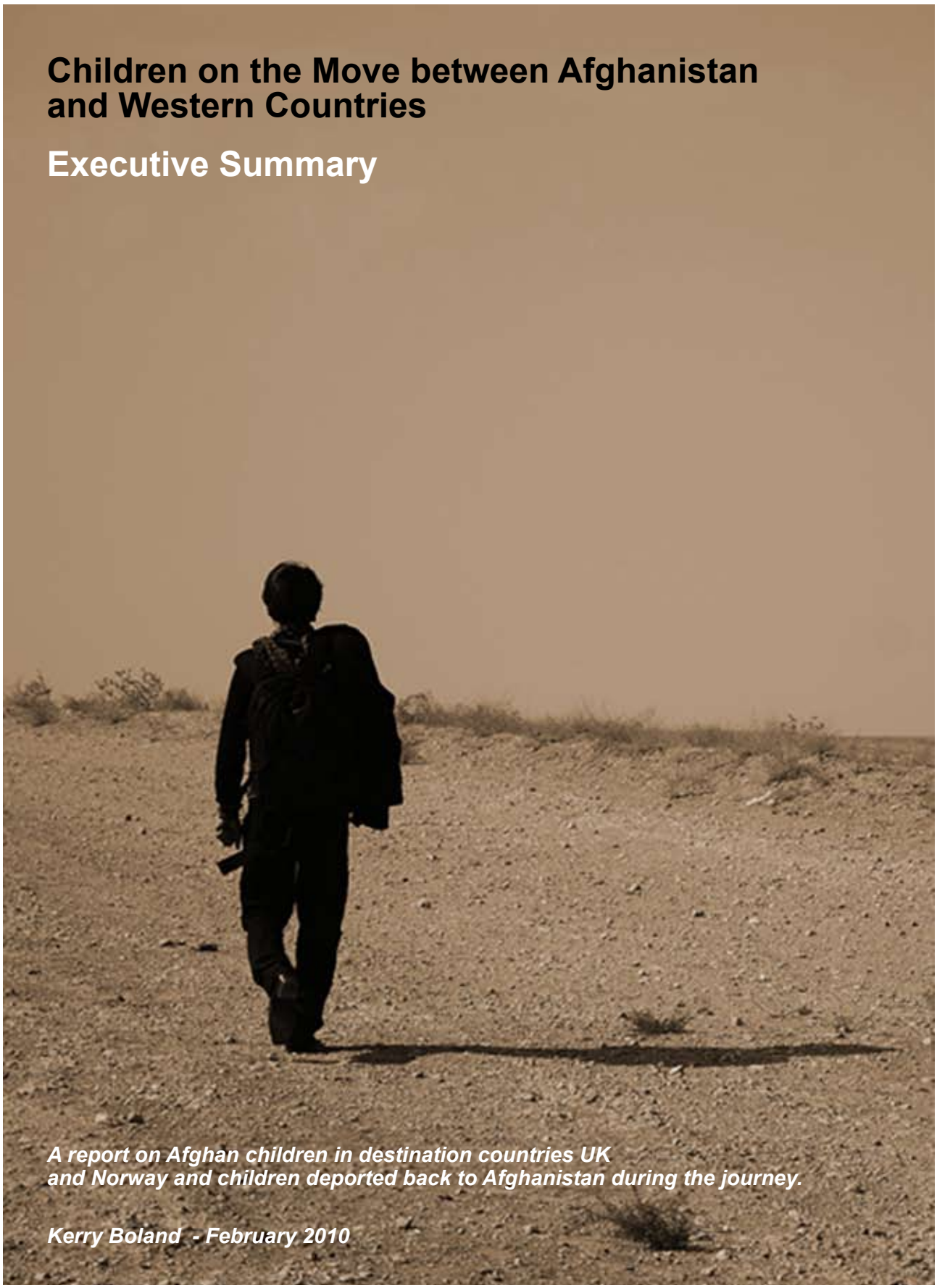
Children on the Move between Afghanistan and Western Countries

Executive Summary



A report on Afghan children in destination countries UK and Norway and children deported back to Afghanistan during the journey.

Kerry Boland - February 2010

unite for children

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"I have taken the journey,
I have adapted to their culture,
there are a lot of facilities,
and they tell me to look forward.
I cannot go back to my village -
I am a different person now."

There are strong push and pull factors at play, resulting in a significant increase in children of Afghan origin on the move to western countries.

The situation in Afghanistan continues to be characterized as one of an intensifying armed conflict accompanied by serious and widespread targeted human rights violations. Children are reportedly being killed, exploited and ill-treated in ever-increasing numbers as the violence across the country worsens.

The ongoing instability from the conflict has resulted in limited access to education and this is a serious issue for children and youth in the country.

These children and their families do not see prospects of a secure future in Afghanistan with reasonable education and employment opportunities.

There has been a steep increase in the number of separated and unaccompanied children of Afghan origin applying for asylum in Europe over the past two years. Since 2007 the number of unaccompanied children from Afghanistan arriving in Norway alone has increased almost 30 fold from 89 to 2,500 by the end of 2009. The number of unaccompanied children of Afghan origin arriving annually in the UK has also risen sharply from 984 in 2007 to a projected 1,750 in 2009. In 2009 69 percent of all unaccompanied children registered in Norway and 50 percent in the UK were from Afghanistan.

This study is a small snapshot of individual stories of children of Afghan origin on the move to western countries. The study focuses on the stories of 20 unaccompanied children of Afghan origin who have applied for asylum in Norway and the UK, improving our understanding of the circumstances of children on the move from Afghanistan to selected western countries. Within Afghanistan a further five deported children and three families with a child on the move in a western country were also interviewed. Most of the respondents did not see a future for themselves in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged. The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan in the latter part of 2009 reduced the time available and access to different categories of children on the move[1]. It is possible that the study sample represents the more skilled and well cared for children, those who have been registered with the relevant authorities in western countries and does not typify the majority of children on the move in host countries. The study findings present only a partial picture of the problem of children on the move, and point to the need to obtain more comprehensive information in order to respond to the protection needs of children on the move who are not registered with relevant authorities and sought asylum in western countries. The same applies in Afghanistan where further research is needed to respond to the needs of children who are deported or planning to become children on the move.

The aim of this study is to assist UNICEF in mapping an initial picture of the 'Children on the Move' population. Insights from the case studies provided here will assist in planning of interventions that are in the best interests of children on the move and inform further research needs. Additional research and understanding is necessary to guide practical interventions that will improve child protection mechanisms for these children. Governments and UN agencies need to develop a better knowledge of the problem.

This study has simply scratched the surface of a complex issue. The challenge is to identify and respond to the protection needs of these children in a way that is relevant to their own thinking and ensures that their rights are respected. Information presented to these children has to be relevant and compatible with what they want to hear about their future. An information campaign about return is not recommended. Information presented to these children has to take into account their experiences, present situation and plans for the future. The focus of any intervention must be on what is ahead and how it will address their needs.

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"If you have no problem stay in Afghanistan,

if you really have problems then plan your journey very well.

My message is - if you think it will be fun; it is not a good idea.

They should know difficulty of the journey, there are many problems.

There should be information about the dangers on radio and in the newspaper.

I have some friends who go on the internet and they chat and hear music.

They should tell Afghan boys in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan who want to make the journey… that there are many dangers and you could die."

Key Recommendations

This study points to the following key recommendations:

Further research

There is a lot of anecdotal information about children on the move: who they are, how and why they move. A clearer picture is required to better understand, from a child rights perspective, the triggers that lead to the movement of these children, their circumstances in transit and destination countries and their future prospects. There is a dearth of factual information about children deported back to Afghanistan, their treatment when apprehended in host countries and circumstances in Afghanistan. This report should be used to identify questions for future research.

Governments and UN agencies need to generate additional knowledge to inform interventions to protect the children on the move.

There is a need for additional research into the following aspects of the children on the move phenomena:

- ***Children in Afghanistan who are planning to be children on the move.***
  Further analysis of these children's circumstances before migration and identification of the triggers that lead to the child's migration is required;
- ***Children on the move who are in transit countries.***
  More analysis and critique needs to be done of governments who violate the rights of migrant children in transit, the impact on these children and how to prevent;
- ***Children on the move who are not registered with relevant authorities and have not sought asylum in western countries.***
  These children have been identified as a particular group about which there is little knowledge and have significant protection needs. How are they being exploited and how should this be addressed;
- ***Children on the move who are deported.***
  Further information and analysis of these children's circumstances before migration, protection risks during the journey and when they are deported back to Afghanistan is needed. Are there ways of supporting them in Afghanistan so that they do not return to the same circumstances of being children on the move.

This report identifies an urgent need for practical interventions in Afghanistan and along the migratory routes where these children congregate. Children and their families should be aware of the protection concerns that the child may face prior to making the journey. The journey is hazardous and children on the move are faced with life threatening situations. Any response to the growing number of children on the move must be realistic and guided by the principle of the best interests of the child.
These interventions must be informed by additional research and

revised as further information and understanding of children on the move is available. Despite the limitations of this study and the need for further research there is an immediate need to address these protection issues.

"Families should know about the dangers before they send their boy on the journey – but who will tell them?"

Before journey

• In Afghanistan, there is a need for accurate and unbiased information to enable families and children who are contemplating the journey to make an informed decision. This information needs to alert them about the dangers of becoming a child on the move. Involvement of children and their families in the decision making process is a necessary precondition for effective interventions. The Child Protection Action Network (CPAN)[2] and Youth Information Contact Centres (YICCs)[3] provide a local vehicle through which young people and their families could access information if it was available.

• The focus needs to be on the provinces that generate significant outflows of children on the move and the population centres located near major border crossings.

During journey

• During the journey an outreach program should be established in transport hubs where children on the move congregate along the major migratory routes, such as bus, train and truck stations.

• Indicators for protection of children on the move need to be identified and several strategies used to connect with these children.

• Messages to pass on to the children would include maintaining contact with family, how to deal with debt; avoid being exploited or trafficked and options for return if they do not want to continue the journey.

• Outreach and information hubs should be used to provide impartial and practical information in a confidential setting, without promoting a particular course of action.

• Any response to the growing number of children on the move must be realistic and guided by child rights principles. Involvement of children and their families in the decision making process is a necessary precondition for effective interventions.

• Information provided to children and their families must be impartial and not promote a particular course of action. Strategies must ensure information and support is provided in a way that youth understand, to build a bridge between where the child is now and the choices they are faced with making when they become children on the move. The national actions undertaken in various European countries as part of the Council of Europe's "Life Projects" initiative is a practice model that should be adopted in this regard[4]. This approach should be taken at both the policy and practice levels.

• Several cross-cutting strategies must be considered to ensure greater understanding, information and action to support and protect children on the move. There must be co-operation between organizations at different ends of the children on the move chain.

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Decision to Move
The decision to move was made by children and family members. In one third of the cases it was the child who initiated the decision to move. This corresponds with comments made by members of the Child Protection Action Networks (CPAN)[6] in the provinces - nowadays children talk amongst themselves and decide that they will go to the west. With the exception of one case, children participated and agreed with the decision that they would make the journey. In all cases the children had little or no information about the journey, where they would travel or how they would be cared for. Their own desire for a more secure future employment opportunities was an important motivation behind the decision to make the journey. Children said that unless that they were personally motivated to make this journey themselves, it would not be possible to do so.

Emerging Profile of Children on the Move

The children interviewed for this study do not come from the poorest families. They are predominantly male, are being assessed by immigration authorities in destination countries to be older than their stated age, have experienced considerable hardship on the journey and have a strong desire for a better future. The children see their future life in a western country and are prepared to risk their health and safety to reach the destination country.

Children interviewed in destination countries (UK and Norway) gave similar and in several cases identical accounts of their reasons for leaving Afghanistan – their father had been associated with the Taliban, was in jail, deceased or whereabouts unknown. The child was at risk of forcible recruitment by the Taliban or serious harm from government agents. Arrangements for their departure in several cases were made by their maternal uncle. The maternal uncle contacted an agent or smuggler, made the agreement and raised the funds. The child lived with his mother and siblings in the maternal uncle's house. The claim that the maternal uncle supported the family and arranged the child's journey contrasts with the customary practice, especially in Pashtun culture where typically it would be the paternal uncle taking over family responsibility in the absence of the father.

Before leaving Afghanistan the children said they had had little or no education. Their stated age of 14 to 17 years was subject to an age assessment test in the destination country. The age assessment test is based on a social work assessment in the UK and dental and medical examination in Norway. Age assessment measures can only assess an age range. An assessment that combines social and medical aspects may provide a more accurate result and should be in line with the Separated Children in Europe Program (SCEP) Statement of Good Practice[5].

Children had contact with family or a link person during the journey to arrange payment to a smuggler. Since their arrival in the destination country most of the children had not been in contact with family. Three children were orphans. Several of the Hazara children had lived for varying periods of time in Iran before starting their journey to the west.

It was not clear from the interviews how long the journey had taken, some children referred to weeks, others to months and others more than a year. It is possible that these children have lived for extended periods in Iran, Pakistan, Greece and other countries en route to the destination country. Children and families interviewed in Afghanistan presented a different picture. Children were living with their parents at time of departure, apart from one boy who had been working in a neighbouring country. The reason for their departure was to seek a better future, the general insecurity and lack of opportunity in Afghanistan.

The sample of children who had been deported was limited to four families involving seven children. It included a boy whose brother had died on the journey. In this case the mother made the arrangements and did not involve the father. In two cases

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Destination Country
The destination country was not always decided at time of departure. In half the cases the agreed destination before departure was a specific country: UK, Norway and Italy and in others it was identified as 'a western country' or 'Europe' or 'another country'. Some children sought advice during the journey from other children on the move about options for final destination. Several children referred to making contact with a smuggler at various destination points to arrange the journey, for example, from Greece to Italy and France to destination country and a family member would then arrange payment for that leg of the journey. Other children said that they arrived in Greece on a boat from Turkey and were met by a smuggler at the docks; the smuggler checked their name off a list and made arrangements for their forward journey. The smuggler was actively involved in making the decision about which destination country for many of these children.

the father had made the decision that the child would move to a western country, he made the necessary arrangements and raised the money. The children had agreed with the decision that they should go. In the other case, two children had made the decision and convinced their parents to agree. Three of these children were making plans to start the journey again, and the other three had decided to remain in Afghanistan.

An amount of between $USD7,000 and $USD20,000 was reportedly paid for the journey; it was not clear how the money was raised or when it is paid and it is likely that the actual amount was considerably less. Apart from selling some family land and the child earning some of the money to pay for the journey, most children did not know how the money was raised. The children were committed to repaying the debt incurred and financially supporting their family in Afghanistan. The most common routes were through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy, France to UK or Norway and from northern Afghanistan to Uzbekistan and Russia to Scandinavian countries.

Families and in particular, adolescent boys aged 16 to 17 years see moving to a western country as a means to a secure future. They do not see a future for themselves in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries. Children said that the lack of security and existing education and employment opportunities open to them in Afghanistan were limited or non-existent. Until these needs are meet young people and their families will make the decision to have a child on the move to a western country.

Hardships Endured on the Journey

Most of the children openly discussed the journey while others did not want to recall the hardships. They experienced difficult and dangerous journeys to arrive in the destination country. They described their journey as hazardous and, in many cases, life-threatening. Most boys had experienced significant physical and emotional hardships – smugglers and some law enforcement agents were cruel and inhumane. Many children were detained without charge in countries such as Turkey and Greece. Some were subsequently deported to Afghanistan after their parents paid the flight cost. Alternatively, others were released and simply continued their journey. Iran routinely deports children back to Afghanistan over the border at Zaranj and Islam Quala. Children said that they did not disclose the fear and dangers they experienced to family and friends in Afghanistan. Children who have arrived in the western country are seen as successful through having made the journey. They would like to warn boys contemplating the journey to be aware of these dangers. However, they believe it is unlikely that children contemplating the journey would heed such warnings.

"It is all dangerous. Because we would not be allowed to sleep during the night time we were very tired and kept falling over. I was always scared and frightened. The whole trip was dangerous, there was nothing in particular. [One of his companions] they just left him in the forest. Most probably he died; he was not able to keep pace with the others. We were supposed to run."

Adjusting to the New Environment

One of the consequences of their experience is that they may not have trusted anyone, especially adults, while on the journey. This is an important consideration when workers in agencies are trying to establish rapport with these children.

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"You have no visa and live in a constant state of insecurity – this surrounds your status in this country."

Children expressed a strong desire to live in an environment where they feel secure and can plan their future. They want to learn and obtain employment. All the children interviewed were actively engaged in learning the language of the destination country and pursuing their education. They had adopted western dress and appeared to be enjoying the relative freedom of living in semi or independent accommodation. The uncertainty attached to their future – whether the host government will accept their stated age, extend their Temporary Leave application, and grant them asylum status - weighs heavily.

Footnotes

[1] *There are three broad categories of unaccompanied "children on the move": (a) children who migrate in search of opportunities but without prior authorization to enter the destination country; (b) children who are exploited in the context of migration, particularly through trafficking; and (c) children who flee dangerous situation and seek asylum. Children on the Move Draft Framework for Advocacy Considerations for UNICEF's Advocacy in Industrialised Countries in Favour of Unaccompanied Child Asylum-Seekers, Migrants and Victims of Trafficking, DRAFT 18-07-2008 p 1.*

[2] *Child Protection Action Networks (CPAN) is a national child protection mechanism operating in the provinces in Afghanistan to advocate for child rights and respond to child protection issues. It is led by the Department of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (DoLSMD). ReliefWeb » Document » Afghanistan: The Youth Information and ... The YICC were inspired by the Afghan NGO Social Volunteer Foundation [SVF] which in turn is part of the Child Protection Action Networks [CPAN]. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/LSGZ-7UUD9H?OpenDocument*

[3] *Youth Information Contact Centres (YICC) operate in the provinces and work to empower young people to make informed decisions and actively participate in the decision-making process of their community. ibid*

[4] *The Council of Europe's concept of life projects is set out in the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)9 to member states on life projects for unaccompanied migrant minors. Life projects aim to develop the capacities of minors allowing them to acquire and strengthen the skills necessary to become independent, responsible and active in society. They are individual tools, based on a joint undertaking between the unaccompanied migrant minor and the competent authorities for a limited duration, and seek to promote the social integration of the child and his or her personal and cultural development, as well as to open access to housing, health, studies, vocational training and employment. Recommendation Rec(2007)9 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 12 July 2007 and explanatory memorandum. Council of Europe, 2008.*

[5] *Separated Children in Europe Programme - Statement of Good Practice, D5 Age Assessment p38, 4th edition 2009.*

[6] *Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) ibid*