

Policy Brief

Children on the Move: A Rapid Assessment and Policy Issues for Bangladesh

Prepared for



General Economic Division (GED),
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Introduction

The ever-growing phenomenon of children on the move has become a matter of concern across the world. Most of these children are deprived of their rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Although there exist definitional divergences, these children are generally those who are international or internal migrants or internally displaced or asylum-seeking or refugees.¹ It is estimated that around 50 million children are on the move worldwide (UNICEF, 2016). This figure is likely to be a hugely underestimated one, as it considers only those children who have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced within their own countries due to violence and conflict, and does not take into consideration other contributing factors in the movement of children.

Bangladesh is in a situation where children are on the move due to various internal developments as well as the influx of Rohingya children who fled persecution in their own country. Initiatives to address the issues and challenges faced by these children have been undertaken by both the government and non-governmental organisations but there is scope for improvement. The policy brief draws on the findings of report titled, 'Children on the Move: A Rapid Assessment and Policy Issues for Bangladesh', to highlight some of the major issues and the related policy implications for Bangladesh.

Children on the Move: An Analytical Framework

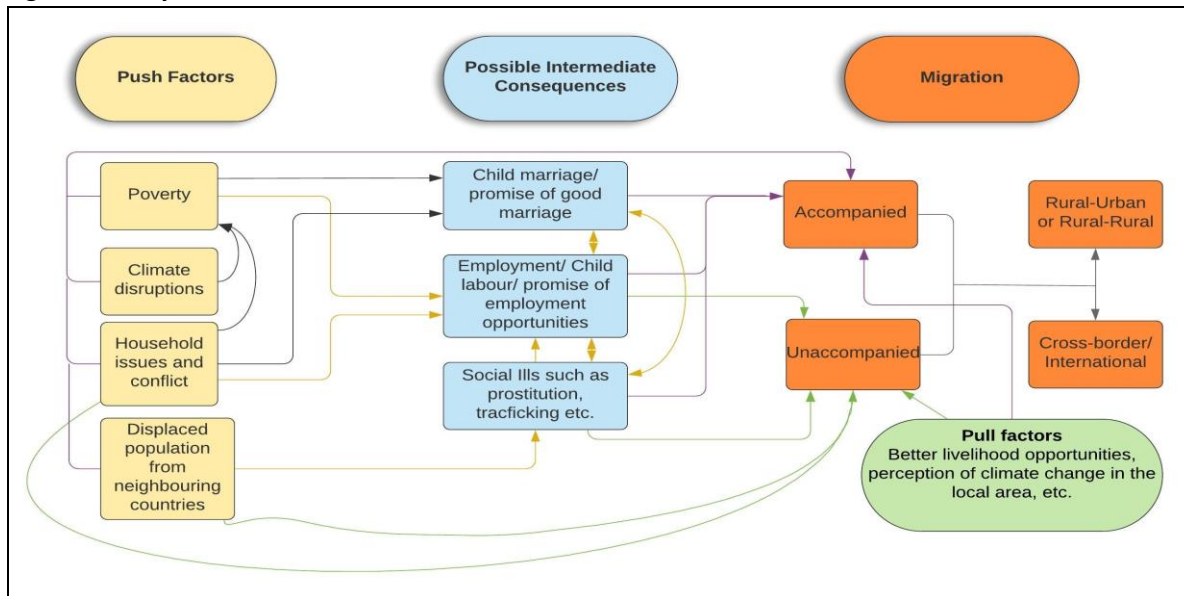
Multitude of causes can interact in triggering the children to move and they are often interlinked (Figure 1). The causes can generally be divided into two categories—push factors and pull factors. Poverty is generally regarded as the biggest push factor which forces people to seek for better livelihood opportunities and in that process migration to different locations takes place. In most cases, poverty-triggered migration occurs from rural to urban areas, as the latter is widely perceived to provide better economic prospects. Migration can involve movement of the whole family in which children accompany their parents and carers. However, the phenomenon of children's moving either their own or accompanied by third parties or children's being trafficked are also quite widespread.

The distinction between push and pull factors is not always straightforward. Migration decisions could be influenced by both. For instance, the decision to migrate based on poverty and deprivation in individuals' native locations can be reinforced by the perception of improved economic opportunities elsewhere. In other cases, opportunities for better education, employment, social amenities, etc. act as the driving force and are thus the underlying decisions are dominated by pull factors. Various push and pull factors themselves can be interlinked. Better employment, education, and health facilities can all work together as prominent attracting features generally associated with urban areas in developing countries. On the other hand, the inter-linkage between the push factors is quite apparent in the case of the poverty-climate nexus. For example, natural disasters like floods can destroy homes and directly displace people, but they can also destroy farmlands which adversely affect the livelihood of people pushing them into poverty, ultimately forcing them to migrate and seek better economic opportunities. Similarly, issues such as eviction from original home and household issues (e.g., parents' divorce or separation) might directly trigger displacement or indirectly cause it through poverty.

¹ According to the Save the Children, these children include those who have been trafficked, children who migrate (either to pursue life and livelihood opportunities, or to escape exploitative or abusive situations at home, or because of other protection needs), children displaced by conflict and natural disasters and children who live and work on the streets.

The international source of children on the move emanates from the displaced children from neighbouring or even distant countries who flee civil wars, persecutions, ethnic-cleansing drives, etc., in their native countries. In every situation, children could be accompanied by their family members or caregivers or could be unaccompanied. It is generally considered that unaccompanied children are more exposed to vulnerabilities.

Figure 1: Analytical framework for children on the move



Push factors are more likely to cause such unfavourable incidences of child labour, child marriage, trafficking, prostitution, etc. These are some of the most serious intermediate consequences faced by children on the move. There are numerous reports of parents often marrying their children off and children’s getting engaged in employment to support their families. Impoverished children are more exposed to exploitation and trafficking. Therefore, intermediate consequences might feed off from one another, creating a vicious cycle for children on the move.

Evidence of Children on the Move in Bangladesh

Climate disruptions

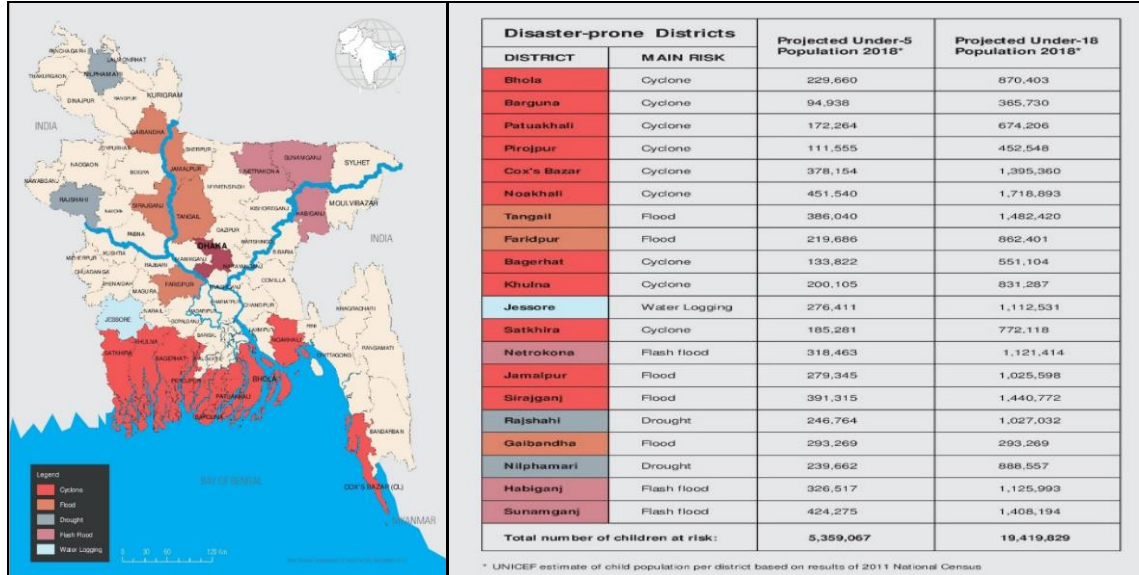
Bangladesh has had more than a fair share of climate disruptions such as river erosion, floods, cyclones, and saltwater intrusion. During 1990–2018, riverine floods and cyclones caused over 150,000 deaths, affected more than 150 million people, and caused over \$12 billion worth of damages in Bangladesh (Eskander & Steele, 2019). That would imply 60,000 child deaths, and around 60 million children being affected in that period.² As per the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) data, it is estimated that about 7 million people (about 3 million children) have been displaced during the period 2008–2018 in Bangladesh.³

² Assuming 40% of the population are children. The rest of the document refers to this as assumption A1.

³ Assumption A1 has been used to estimate the number of displaced children.

People living in coastal areas and river embankments are the most vulnerable as they face a host of different climate disasters. Furthermore, approximately 12 million people in coastal areas live in poverty (Dasgupta et al., 2014). Poor households tend to have more children and one-third of the children live in the 20 most disaster-prone districts of Bangladesh (Figure 2) (UNICEF, 2019).

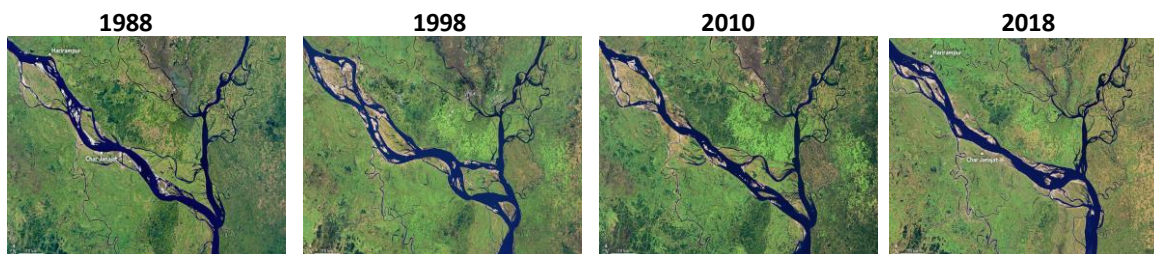
Figure 2: Twenty most disaster-prone districts in Bangladesh



Source: UNICEF (2019).

According to statistics provided by the UN, in the period 1973–2017, Bangladesh’s three major rivers—the Padma, the Meghna, and the Jamuna— eroded more than 1,600 km² of land, which is roughly five times the land mass of the country’s capital (Anas, 2019, August 29). The Padma continuously changes its course, leading to the severe erosion of its riverbanks (Figure 3). Between 1973 and 2015, erosion and accretion along the Jamuna was around 880 km² and 160 km², respectively (Sarker & Rahman, 2016). A prime example of the erosion caused by this river is Teota Union—a riverine area in Shibalaya Upazila of Manikganj District. An analysis of the satellite images of the union from 1988 to 2014, reveal that much of the union has been affected by the erosion (highlighted in light pink and blue in Figure 3) with the residents experiencing multiple displacements (Sarker & Rahman, 2016). These people get caught in a vicious cycle of displacement and settlement (Figure 5).

Figure 3: The Padma River’s changing course, causing displacement of communities 1988–2018



Source: The Earth Observatory.

Poverty and other issues

There have been limited research on the determinants of child displacement in Bangladesh. The few available studies show that poverty and lack of employment opportunities are strong push factors for households to move their living places. Household issues such as violence against children also have been found as a potential source of displacement. Streets and slums are two of the most visible evidence of rural–urban migration of children, especially triggered by poverty.

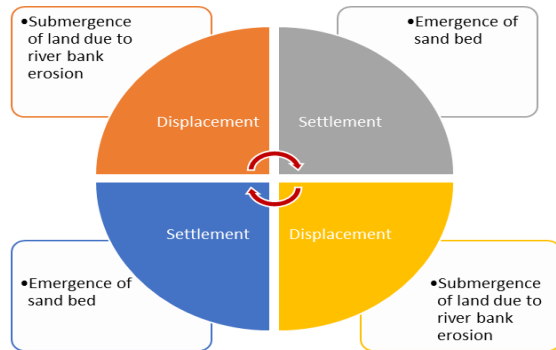
Four million people are estimated to live in around 5,000 urban slums in Dhaka city (UNICEF, 2015). Numerous studies show that the appalling state of children on the streets and in slums. The combination of overcrowding and limited resources and services results in unhealthy living conditions in the slums. The Child Wellbeing Survey in Urban Areas 2016 (CWS 2016) reveals that slums, in general, are way behind their non-slum counterparts in terms of nutrition, health, water and sanitation, and education indicators (Figure 6).

Figure 4: Erosion status map of Teota Union



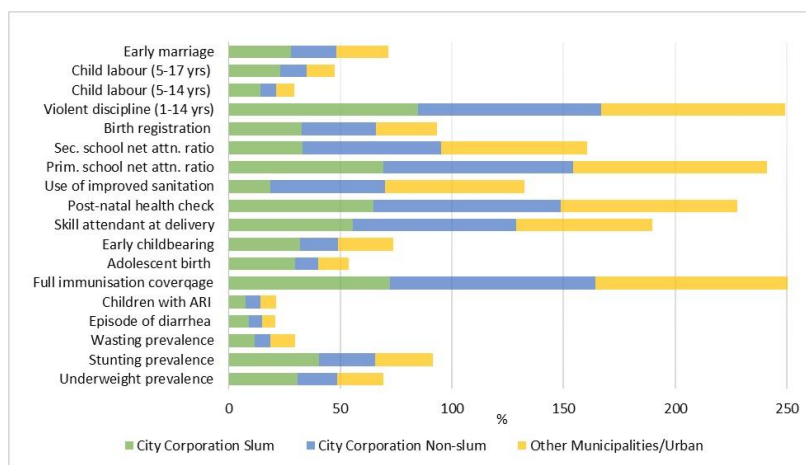
Source: Sarker & Rahman (2016).

Figure 5: Vicious cycle of displacement due to riverbank erosion



Source: Das et al. (2014).

Figure 6: Indicators on nutrition, health, water and sanitation, education, and protection (CWS 2016)



Source: Authors' presentation from Child Wellbeing Survey in Urban Areas 2016 data.

Displaced population from neighbouring countries

Bangladesh hosts around one million Rohingyas (ReliefWeb, 2019, December 30). Children, under the age of 18, comprise 55 per cent of the Rohingya refugees (Strategic Executive Group and partners, 2018). These children are considered as refugees and their basic rights to health, education, and social security are being compromised because of the current socio-political and physical environments in which they are currently in. This contradicts the basic principles of the UNCRC as all children are viewed equally in the convention. These children are also very vulnerable to issues such as prostitution and trafficking (ReliefWeb, 2020, January 12). However, the Bangladesh government has recently announced that it will be offering schooling and skills training opportunities to the Rohingya children (Amnesty International, 2020, January 28). As per the government's plans, Rohingya children will get school education, through the provision of Myanmar curriculum, up to the age of 14, and children older than 14 will get skills training. A pilot project led by UNICEF and the Bangladesh government will involve 10,000 children from grades six to nine (UNICEF, 2020, February 10). The scheme will then be expanded to other grades in a phased manner. The camps are in rugged and hilly regions, and are susceptible to flooding and landslides, particularly during the rainy monsoon season. This has made life challenging for refugees and has humanitarians providing assistance. Overcrowding has increased the chances of spread of infectious diseases. Although, several steps have been taken to mitigate challenges.

Field visits

Some rapid assessments—comprising field visits, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs)—conducted in Dhaka Khulna, Satkhira, and Sirajganj districts provide some insights into the dynamics of the children on the move phenomenon. It is found that both unaccompanied and accompanied, rural–urban and rural–rural migration of children are prevalent. The main push factors are poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities, and climate disruptions. The findings of field visits extend support to the generally perceived ideas such as:

- Rural–rural migration is taking place in most cases when migrating people did not find it feasible to move to urban areas.
- Children migrate to engage in employment, especially due to lack of livelihood opportunities of adult members in their families. Some of them face poor working conditions.
- In many instances, social ills such as prostitution and trafficking—domestic and cross-border—are also associated with the phenomenon of children on the move.
- Displaced children living on the streets and the slums do not have access to healthcare and education.
- Slum children, on the other hand, do tend to some access to healthcare and education services. However, they usually drop out from school to provide financial support to their families.
- Displaced children, especially the street children, tend to not have birth certificates and other relevant documents that could hinder them from availing education and healthcare.
- Government and non-government activities are present but are limited in many areas.

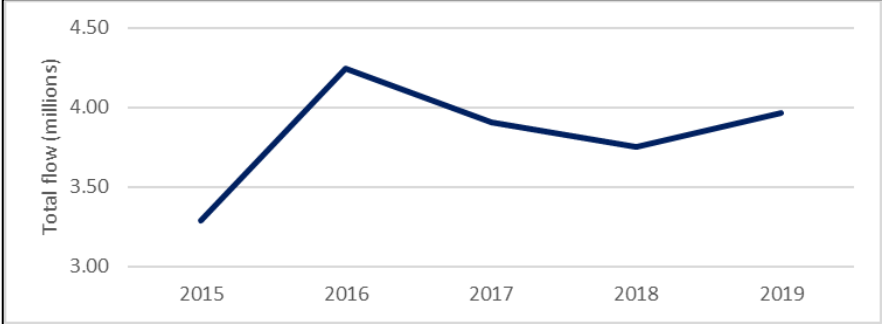
Estimates for the Stock and Flow of Children on the Move in Bangladesh

Data on internal migration from the Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) reports (2015–2018) can be used to provide an estimate of the flow (Figure 7 and 8) and stock of children on the move in Bangladesh. Rural–urban and rural–rural migration have been considered for the estimation. Data for the age groups—0–4, 5–9, 10–14, and 15–19 years—were used to estimate the flow. Adjustments were made to the flow for

the age group 15–19 years to get the estimate for the age group 15–17 years for each year in the period 2015–2018. As internal migration data is unavailable for the year 2019, estimation of flow for the year was made by taking the average of the flows of the past three years (2016–2018). The average flow of children on the move during 2015–2019 has been estimated to be 3.8 million. The age group with the highest average flow is 15–17 years with a figure of 1.1 million. The average share of flow of children on the move in the total internal migration (i.e., internal migration for all ages) has been estimated to be around 17 per cent.

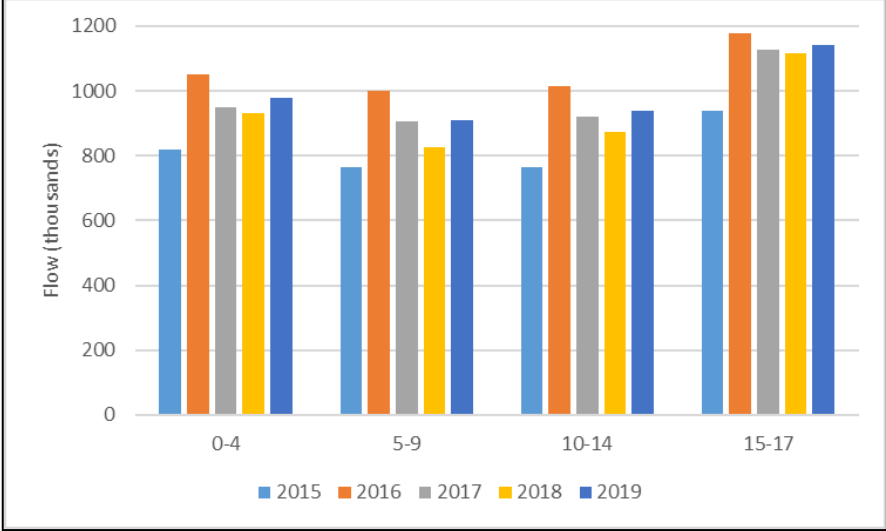
The 5-year stock (2015–2019) of children on the move is calculated by summing up the adjusted flows which is estimated to be 15.8 million. Adjustments such as the following were made to the flows for the estimation of the stock: no one from the flow in the age group 15–17 years in 2015 remains a child in 2019, so they are omitted from the stock. It is possible that one or more individuals have migrated more than once in the mentioned period. Several migration scenarios were considered for the estimation of 5-year stock of children on the move. A range of 11–15.8 million children is estimated for the stock (Table 1).

Figure 7: Yearly flow of children on the move in Bangladesh, 2015–2019



Source: Authors’ calculation using data from various SVRS reports.

Figure 8: Yearly flow of children on the move in Bangladesh by age group, 2015–2019



Source: Authors’ calculation using data from various SVRS reports.

Table 1: 5-year stock (2015-2019) of children on the move in Bangladesh

Percentage contribution of multiple migrations by same individuals to the stock	5-year stock (2015-2019) of children on the move in Bangladesh (millions)
0%	15.8
10%	14.2
20%	12.6
30%	11.0

Source: Authors' calculation using data from various SVRS reports.

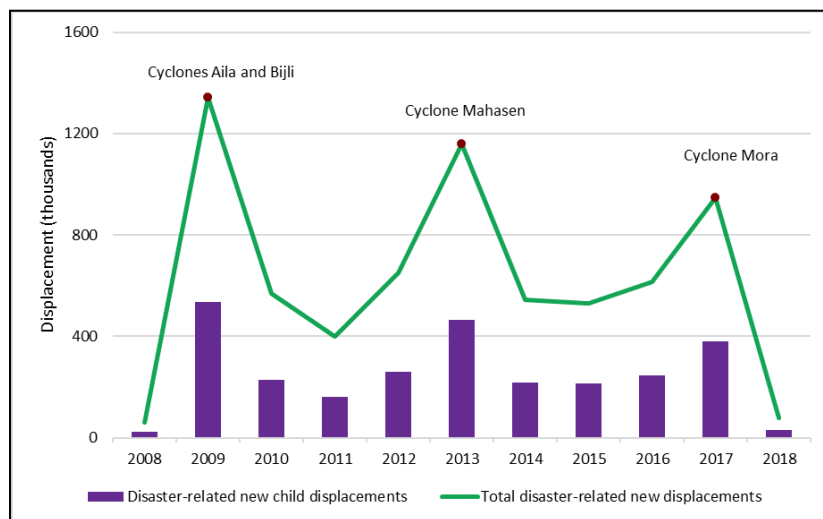
An estimate for the stock of vulnerable children on the move

All the children in the previously mentioned stock of children on the move, 11–15.8 million, are not likely to be equally vulnerable. Data on vulnerable children on the move is not available but the limited information available on children engaged in employment and disaster-induced displacements might provide some clues to the stock of vulnerable children. Data or derived data on displacements resulting from climate disruptions (2008–2019), conflicts, children engaging in employment, and refugee population can be used to provide an estimate for vulnerable children on the move.⁴ This estimate should be considered as conservative as all sources of displacements have not been possible to consider (e.g., unavailability of data on trafficked children), and a lot of displacements go unreported for pockets/sources for which data exist. With those caveats in place, a conservative estimate of the stock of vulnerable children on the move is estimated to be around 3.3 million.

Displacement due to climate disruptions is found to be the main contributor to the estimated stock of vulnerable children on the move. Flooding, river erosion, and monsoonal rainfall are the primary causes of disaster-induced displacements (Figure 9), while major cyclones are significant contributing factors.

⁴ Data Source: Climate disruptions—Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/bangladesh-rivers-overflow-force-400000-their-homes>; Conflict—IDMC; Engagement in work—Child Labour Force Survey (CLFS) 2013; Displaced children from neighbouring countries (Rohingya children)—ReliefWeb. Calculation of displaced children due to engagement in work: At first figures of the 'floating or no place of work' and 'domestic workers' categories from CLFS 2013 are added. The number of 'working children' in CLFS 2002-2003 is used to estimate rate of change in 'working children' for the period 2003–2013 and applied the same rate to the figure obtained from adding the two categories to get an estimate for 2019.

Figure 9: Displacements due to climate disruptions



Source: Authors’ calculations and presentation using Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre data.

Government Initiatives

Budget

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been publishing the child budget (i.e. budgetary allocations that are mainly spent on children welfare issues) since 2015–16. In the FY20 budget, the government allocated about Tk 802 billion for child-focused expenditure purposes. This is approximately 15.33 per cent of the national budget—a 1.2 percentage points increase from the previous fiscal year. Although the regular publication of the child budget is a welcome initiative, there is scope for improvement. The budget provides information on the allocation for child-focused activities in 15 ministries and divisions but information on the allocation for specific programmes are not mentioned. Furthermore, no assessment on the implementation rate of the child budget has been conducted, and hence, it is difficult to ascertain effectiveness of the budgetary provisioning.

Government acts, policy documents, and development plans

To ensure rights of children and deal with such issues as child labour and child marriage, the GoB has introduced several legal provisions. These include the Children Act, 2013; Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017; Domestic Worker’s Protection Policy, 2015; Labour Act, 2006; and National Child Labour Elimination Policy (NCEP) – 2010.

Further policy documents that intend to address the issue of children on the move directly are the National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDM 2016–2021) and Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), 2010. These are clearly strategy guidelines for tackling disaster with implications for disaster-induced child displacement. Policy documents that do not explicitly mention children on the move as such but cover issues related to displaced children are the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP–2009), Perspective Plan 2010–2021, and the Seventh Five-Year Plan. Although these are major and well-thought-out strategies, their implementation remains a challenge. Indeed, effective implementation of the acts and policy documents is one key determinant of addressing undesirable child migration and its adverse effects.

Government activities: Amongst others,

- The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) has started allocating funds, especially for child victims of natural (or other) disasters.
- The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) has built 12 Sheikh Russell Training and Rehabilitation Centres for street children, with more under construction, and six safe homes for women and socially abused girls in six divisions.
- The Department of Social Services (DSS), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), is running 85 Sarkari Shishu Paribars (State Children Homes) all over the country with a capacity of 10,300 orphans. A total number of 51,342 orphans have been rehabilitated through this programme till to date. The department has also implemented a national child helpline project which has achieved noteworthy success.

Some NGO Initiatives

Some noteworthy non-government initiatives include, amongst others:

- *Rights Jessore* emphasises on the protection and promotion of human rights, prevention of human trafficking, and providing service to the victims, including children, of human trafficking. Its provisions include support for victim rescue, repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation. It also provides services such as psychosocial counselling.
- *Ahsania Mission* works on the rehabilitation of and provision of support to the helpless, poor, and distressed street children of urban city centres.
- *Save the Children (Bangladesh)* runs programmes for vulnerable groups such as children of sex workers and trafficked children. They help these children to get access to health, education, and protection services.
- NGOs such as *BRAC* have been running successful poverty alleviation programmes in the rural areas of Bangladesh. As poverty appears to be a major push factor for the children on the move, such programmes helps to stem the undesirable child migrations.
- A host of local NGOs, international NGOs, UN bodies and other international organisations are providing services helping the Rohingya children. These support measures are, however, grossly inadequate given the nature of the crisis and the children's need.

Policy Recommendations

The following measures could be taken to address the issue of children on the move in Bangladesh:

- **Credible data on children on the move are needed for generating informed policy advice.** Currently, there exists very little information on children on the move or such phenomena of child labour, children in dangerous occupations/situations, etc. Undertaking nationally representative surveys often cannot capture the nature and dynamics of this particular problem. Therefore, a more pragmatic approach will be to undertake carefully designed and customised surveys at timely intervals in the pockets or hotspots of the phenomenon. For example, regions affected by climate disruptions; regions hosting vulnerable population groups; and regions

comprising urban informal employment sectors that accommodate displaced children are such areas where regular surveys and analyses can be undertaken to generate information needed to ascertain the trends and dynamics of the children on the move.

- **Poverty and deprivation appears to be a major cause of children on the move and thus tackling it could reduce undesirable child migration.** While economic growth, employment generation and reduced income inequality – call can contribute to poor and vulnerable groups’ improved economic and welfare situations, bolstering direct bottom-up approaches targeting their needs and vulnerabilities will be complimentary benefiting the children in disadvantaged regions and households.
- **Strengthening of the Social Security Programmes (SSPs) would help alleviate the poverty situation.** An effective implementation of the National Social Security Strategy would greatly tackle poverty and vulnerability situations in the country while promoting children’s welfare. SSPs also need to be expanded to the urban poor and already displaced children, such as street and slum children, to lift them out of deprivation and help them develop their potentials.
- **Strengthening climate-related preparation and response could help mitigate the detrimental effects—child displacements and its related adverse issues—of climate disruptions.** Infrastructural development could be promoted to build resilience against climate disruptions. This might help reduce climate-induced displacements. Child-and-gender-sensitive climate mitigation and adaptation measures must be developed to protect the rights and interests of the children.
- **Increased policy support and practical on-the-ground well-managed initiatives targeting vulnerable children, e.g., children subject to household violence, orphans, school dropouts, children engaged in employment, etc. are inevitable to contain the undesirable aspects of children on the move.** Relevant government ministries and departments such as MoDMR, MoSW, and DSS should expand their support programmes for the vulnerable children with increased support from development partners such as UNICEF. Likewise, NGOs could also expand their activities related to these children.
- **Effective monitoring and assessment of effectiveness of the child budget are required to achieve the desired results of the budget.** The budget needs to be more transparent on the allocation to specific programmes. This will create the space for monitoring of public spending and thus will contribute to improving accountability. This would also help assess the capacity of the institutions to bring about fruitful results. Furthermore, the budget could be improved if targeted allocations are made to specific deprived/vulnerable geographic areas.

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