Child Migrants Along the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor (CORAL) – a Child Protection Programme in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria

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CORAL’s core purpose is to strengthen child protection services for migrant children and children affected by migration, including increasing access to those services, reinforcing existing services, creating new ones, and stimulating synergies between the formal and the informal actors. This research brief is based on a baseline study carried out in the first phase of the project to help identify situated approaches to implementation, drawing evidence from all five countries but aiming for locally specific actions and solutions.

BASELINE STUDY

Rapid appraisal of contexts in which child migrants and children of migrants live, learn and work was undertaken in eight sites across the five programme countries. Our sites were major markets (Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou and Lagos) and border points (Noé, Aflao and Seme-Krake), as these vibrant economies attract many migrants, including children, who are trying to make a living. They are also major sites of vulnerability and exploitation and nodes in migrant networks.

The research centred on children’s and youths’ perspectives and engaged a total of 552 children and young people and 46 adults, all either protection actors or employers. Qualitative participatory methods were used to bring these perspectives into light in a short span of time, as we only had three days in each site. Drawing and role plays about vulnerabilities, safety and well-being, and aspirations for the future were used in conjunction with focus group discussions. Photovoice followed by individual interviews offered insights into young migrants’ day-to-day lives and their hopes for the near future. Semi-structured in-depth interviews provided examples of fuller life stories and perspectives on how families and significant relatives shape children and youths’ pathways. Group and individual interviews with adults involved in different forms of child protection exposed local ideas about childhood, provision and protection. Finally, we trained a small number of child research assistants to help with qualitative research and to work as enumerators in simple surveys. The latter aimed to pilot child-centred participatory monitoring and evaluation processes.

FLOWS OF MIGRANTS WITHIN WEST AFRICA

Migration data show that both Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria are important but disconnected destinations for migrants within West Africa. Transport links along the Abidjan-Lagos corridor have resulted in limited migrant settlement. Most child migrants follow the flows of adult migrants and we found examples of historical networks that were important pathways for placing children with employers and skilled masters. In addition to the cross-border regional flows, many of our participants were internal migrants.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

In West Africa, adolescent ‘children’ under the age of 18 often take on social responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings and their own children or earning a wage to contribute to family wellbeing.

These contributions are important both to their own socio-cultural and emotional development, and to the wellbeing of their communities. They are critical for understanding children’s work and mobility, as well as their experiences of vulnerability. In this respect, it is notable that the average age of child migrants documented in the pilot survey in Ghana was 15 years, which is very much the age at which a young person will be transitioning towards social adulthood and independence in the region.

Migrant narratives reflected this. Many adolescents migrate temporarily for work, including to earn money to pay for school fees, and their motivations go beyond economic need to include the desire to grow, learn, being adventurous and contribute to their families. They take pride in overcoming or surviving adversity.

Vulnerability and support

Children are not vulnerable uniquely because they are migrants or because of their young age. Vulnerability is the outcome of intersecting issues.

Severe poverty and families’ consequent inability to feed, care for members and educate their children was frequently
referred to by adolescents as a reason for leaving home, as
was loss of one or both parents and intra-familial conflict.
These causes sometimes intertwined and increased the
vulnerability of young migrants, as was the case of some of
the young migrants whose siblings had spread across multiple
locations with long term consequences for their relationships.
Those who had experienced violence within their family or
had run away often found themselves in positions of
vulnerability because they lacked familial support.

However, this was not always the case. A large number of
young migrants contributed to and benefitted from practices
of solidarity and mutual assistance among siblings. Younger
migrants supported older siblings by providing childcare or
pooling (part of) their income, and both older and younger
siblings helped pay school fees.

Practices of childcare within the extended family are
common and quite a number of younger child migrants were
accommodated by a grandparent, an aunt or an uncle or by a
sibling. In one research site, these practices have been
formalised through neighbourhood authorities to include
young vulnerable children beyond the extended family.

The baseline study recommends that local, often
informal, initiatives are supported and complemented with
initiatives for adolescent migrants who often fall outside their
remit. Sensitisation and incentives to broaden the target group
of local initiatives should be sought, keeping in mind that
some adolescents need help to attain social adulthood more
than care within a family context.

Placement for work and skills acquisition
Despite the years of anti-trafficking sensitisation efforts across
West Africa, old and well-consolidated placement channels
are still used to secure work for migrant children.

In this brief research, we heard several positive and negative
experiences of placement but got deeper insights into the
practice in Côte d'Ivoire. Placements were organised by men
(and some women) who had networks in Togo and Côte
d'Ivoire.

Brokers recruit children in response to requests from
employers but also on the request for help finding work or
an apprenticeship abroad from children or their parents.

The remuneration for the young migrants’ work is borne
by the employer. It is usually paid both in kind
(accommodation, food, care, sometimes schooling, literacy,
apprenticeships) and in cash, in principle on an annual basis.
Often, money is paid to the broker, who is responsible for
forwarding it to the child’s parents or saving it on behalf of
the child until the end of his or her ‘contract’ of several years. The
vulnerability of children placed in work is strongly linked to
their dual dependence on the broker’s authority and that of the
boss or guardian. The risk of exploitation and abuse is high,
especially for the youngest children, because of the blurry
boundary between family-like relations and employment
relations.

Adolescents are also placed in apprenticeships, which
remain one of the most desired routes out of poverty
for children and their families. When they work, apprenticeships
are an excellent mechanism for skills transfer and can enable
children to transition into a stable future profession. However,
at times these arrangements can stray into exploitation, with
children denied their “liberation” if they fail to pay the required
fees. The vulnerabilities of apprentices are general and not
per se linked with placement practices.

Anti-trafficking programmes and social change have
reduced the use of placement channels but have also
obscured the remaining ones. Based on the interest among
Togolese community leaders in Côte d’Ivoire, we believe that
forms of regulation could be put in place. Thus, we
recommend the setting up of a collective multi-stakeholder
forum to discuss these practices and find ways of improving
them, if not eradicating them. The central objective should be
better protection of children in care, and future-oriented
education/training opportunities.

Choices of abode and identity

“There are NGOs that have room for you if you want to
stay but I don’t ... I’d like to learn something. I like
schooling, but it’s not every day they give you that. For
now, I just want some money to start up business. I do
small-small trading but would like to sell my own goods”
(Street girl, Accra, September 2017).

Not all of the young migrants wish to conform to the rules of
families or formal child protection institutions. For reasons of
age and experience they seek social adulthood
and independence. The child and youth migrants who identify as
street children are in a similar situation as non-migrants.
Some visit their family from time to time, others do not.
Generally, they all live in economically very constrained
situations and they are vulnerable to theft and violence where they sleep.

Differences across research sites reveal that inspiration
for solutions can be drawn within the programme countries. In
Accra, for example, sleeping in public spaces is relatively
institutionalised with paid access to toilets and shower
facilities. Police harassment is gendered and primarily
targeted at street boys. In Benin and Togo, the correlation
between street-sleeping and experiences of difficulty or abuse
is very high. In addition to hard-handed policing, street
children noted that theft by older street youths was a major
impediment to their ability to get by and to save up.

While access to shelters and health services should be
part of the solution, especially for those identifying as street
children, opening up for savings opportunities should be a
priority. In Ghana, many young migrants use mobile banking;
extending access to younger and undocumented migrants
across all five countries would be welcome. Other options
should be discussed and developed with the young users.

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