Keeping the Promise: Leave No One Behind!

Social Protection Responses to Forcibly Displaced Children.

Armed conflicts, climate change, poverty, violation of human rights and other crises continue to drive people away from their homes. The global refugee population has more than doubled in the last decade, with children making up almost half of the total.

Forcibly displaced children and families are a particularly vulnerable population. Most of these children, today, will spend their entire childhoods in displacement; they are more likely to live in poverty, experience violence, including gender-based violence, exploitation, and abuse, also in the richest cities. Experiences of childhood poverty can last a lifetime, and the effects of deprivations, such as poor education, can be intergenerational.

Short-term humanitarian programs are not well suited to protect displaced children from the risks they are facing in protracted contexts.

There is strong evidence from around the world that a comprehensive social protection package - from child benefits and school feeding programs, to social insurance including health insurance, to parental and caregiver leave benefits, affordable, quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and social welfare services - is crucial to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle. Additionally, child sensitive social protection is fundamental in preventing or mitigating child labor and forced child labor.

There is also evidence that comprehensive social protection for displaced children and families has the potential to increase opportunities, and foster resilience, as well as support social cohesion by reducing tensions that may exist between displaced and host communities.
Widely ratified international commitments – such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child – provide the legal basis for the right to social protection without discrimination based on place of origin or nationality. Child protection policies and programs by Member States and UN Agencies need to be geared to and guided by the best interests of the child in line with the Guidance note of the Secretary-General on Child Rights Mainstreaming (2023).

Regrettably, at present, there are major gaps in the coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of national social protection systems, while it is clear that urgent responses are needed to the high and growing levels of poverty and vulnerability faced by populations affected by displacement worldwide.

Particularly at risk are the youngest children, disproportionately impacted by displacement. Prolonged and repeated adverse experiences in the earliest years of life and even before birth inhibit children’s optimal brain development, compromising their potential as individuals and contributing members of society.

ECEC programs, using also digital media and new technologies, are particularly beneficial for children living in crisis situations where danger, instability, and insecurity affect individuals, families, communities and societies.

Quality and culturally-sensitive ECEC in crisis settings offers preventive care, mental health and psychosocial support for caregivers, who are often traumatized by their experiences, rebuilding their capacity to provide nurturing care to their young children.

Moreover, powerful evidence indicates that ECEC services that support both host and displaced children and families can encourage the formation of positive social relationships with families and communities, strengthening social cohesion and building peace and development in society.

Overcoming inequalities is fundamental for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and for the enjoyment of human rights from birth; a critical step in this direction is to strengthen inclusive social protection, including ECEC, for forcibly displaced children and their families.