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Leaving and Returning "Home": The Elusive Quest for Belonging and Adulthood among African Adolescents on the Move

ABSTRACT

Draconian contemporary border exclusion policies have had a devastating impact on migrants worldwide, eliciting vigorous expressions of public outrage around the world. Yet, despite growing evidence of human rights abuses as a result of these policies, States and policy makers continue to recommend more restrictive frameworks, doubling down on exclusion. Promoting a renewed "return package", they encourage buffer and transit states to undertake "swift returns" of unauthorized entrants, promoting voluntary return as the preferred solution to the unwanted presence of migrants. This article discusses the consequences and implications of these policies for children. In particular, it probes the reality of distress migration for African adolescents trapped in Libya.

Keywords:
returns, children on the move, Libya, best interests, migration policies

INTRODUCTION

News revelations about the buying and selling of African migrants at auction in Libya in 2017 sparked international outrage (NYT, 2017). They drew attention to the plight of stranded forced migrants marooned in buffer zones outside their chosen migration destinations, but also to the human toll of draconian and inhumane contemporary border exclusion policies. The price of fortifying Europe against unwanted "outsiders", irrespective of the validity of asylum seekers' claims to

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international protection, became increasingly apparent. Harsh measures enacted in other destination states – the United States and Australia for example – have also generated widely condemned and gross human rights abuses (WOLA Defense Oversight Research Database, 2018, p. 2; Human Rights Watch, 2018a, 2018b; Refugee Council, 2018, p. 3). The vigorous expressions of public outrage have failed to soften the policies in question or their devastating human impact.

Within the EU context, instead of reversing course, European policy makers have instituted increasingly restrictive measures, doubling down on exclusion. With a renewed "return package", the EU has encouraged buffer and transit states to undertake "swift returns" of migrants, including children, and to promote the return to their countries of origin as the preferred solution to their unwanted presence. This article explores the consequences and implications of these policies for children. In particular, it probes the reality of distress migration for African adolescents trapped in Libya, as an attempted solution to unbearable life challenges, as a strategy for seeking belonging and "home" in ways that had been unavailable prior to migration, and as an enduring child protection challenge.

"OUT OF PLACE" IN TRANSIT

Since 2017, 3,000 children whose migration plans were blocked after their arrival in Libya have agreed to return to their home countries in Africa. This decision, made in a context where no better options were available, also affected 12,646 distress child migrants who managed to reach Europe but had no prospects of securing a legal immigration status there (IOM, 2017). In both cases, the dream of a new life to replace the untenable circumstances driving exit in the first place, vanished, replaced by the stark reality of *de facto* return back home. The "choice" to abandon the migration project was in reality an obligation to confront the failure of this part of the migration strategy. Adolescent ambition and drive had to give way to a return to "waithood", to use Honwana's evocative phrase about the state of African adolescents, a decision facilitated by the offer of financial and logistical assistance in executing the return home (Vacchiano, 2018, p. 94; Honwana, 2014, p. 28).

European Union exclusion policy has proved effective in denying access to a generation of ambitious but indigent African adolescents in search of a rights-respecting life, a new life where education, health care and rewarding employment could replace destitution and despair (Treiber, 2018, p. 68; Timéra, 2018, p. 50). Policy makers have welcomed the voluntary return approach, arguing it provided migrant children an organized and humane strategy for escaping the abuse, exploita-

tion, and mistreatment that would inevitably dominate their life as undocumented migrants in Europe or North Africa. However, the classification of these returns as meaningfully "voluntary", though widely accepted in the context of migration (Warner, 1994, p. 160), triggers long standing concerns about the best interests of child migrants, and challenges to the view that "return home" always promotes such interests (Bhabha & Dottridge, 2017; Senovilla Hernández, 2011, p. 153). The following quote illustrates the complexity surrounding the notion of voluntariness:

> I'm here for one year. I've been detained, beaten, exploited. I spent days in a cell, starving and freezing. I let people exploit me because I thought they would help me. I want to continue moving but I don't have that option anymore. If I stay here, I will continue to suffer. But if I go home I'll suffer as well. Maybe it is better for now to return home. Between the two evils, I suppose I have to choose the lesser one[2].

The dichotomies between "choice" and "coercion", or "voluntary" and "forced", map poorly onto situations where options are limited and rights are under attack. Though the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child codifies not only the primacy of the best interests principle in matters concerning children as well as the importance of attending to a child's views and opinions, current practice consistently violates these binding obligations (CRC, Art. 3 & Art. 12). Particularly in cases where the option to return home is an option of last resort, under what conditions could it be in the best interests of the child to proceed with the facilitation of return? And how do returning or receiving countries interpret and implement children's best interests?

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: ABUSE AND MISTREATMENT VERSUS "VOLUNTARY RETURN"

As they navigate the challenges of prioritizing migrant exclusion while responding to the pressing needs of vulnerable migrant children, many States have resorted to solutions that one can fairly characterize as abusive. They have implemented policies that facilitate the exclusion of migrant children from protection systems, promoting instead prolonged detention in ill-equipped reception centers, with little or no access to healthcare or educational opportunity (Senovilla Hernández, 2011, p. 160).

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2   Nigerian male, age 17. Testimony shared with the authors during field research in Athens, Greece in late 2016.

A cursory examination of countries centrally implicated in the large scale distress European migration flows that occurred between 2014 and 2017 reveals numerous examples of the diffusion of these types of institutional mistreatment. For instance, in Libya, a major site of migrant transit, where over 50,000 migrant children have been stranded in recent years (UNICEF, 2017b), applicable domestic law (Article 11 of Law No. 19) requires all undocumented migrants on the territory, including children, to be detained. News reports describe a dense web of hundreds of Libyan migrant detention centers where situations of extreme overcrowding, starvation and serious abuse are rampant. In Greece, the March 2016 EU-Turkey agreement (Bhabha & Digidiki, 2016) has led to the containment of 3,000 migrant children in overcrowded, under-resourced and sometimes life-threatening detention facilities. In one particularly egregious migrant camp, Moria camp on the island of Lesvos, children are commingled with adults and deteriorating mental health and wellbeing outcomes, including suicide attempts among children, are repeatedly documented (BBC News, 2018; IRC, 2018, p. 2). In Italy, as recently as 2018, 134 migrant children crossing the sea from Libya were denied entry and forced to endure prolonged and dangerous journeys before securing a point of disembarkation (NYT, 2018).

Given the unsatisfactory reception conditions facing so many distress migrant children, the growing evidence of abuse, exploitation and violence, and the xenophobia-fueled intransigence of wealthy host states to increase their humanitarian migrant intakes, return home presents itself as a compelling, and seemingly inevitable solution. Denying the predictable challenges and hardships associated with return, states have continued to assert that home and family is where children belong (Engebrigtsen, 2003, p. 192; CRC Art. 9; Bhabha, 2014), justifying large-scale returns with streamlined procedures that often overlook necessary procedural and humanitarian safeguards along the way.

Any implementation of a return scheme, whether voluntary or not, must consider the unique history of each child if it is to be consistent with the CRC principle of the best interests of the child. Conditions in the home country, including socio-economic realities, security, safety, as well as care arrangements and reintegration opportunities should always be assessed before a return process is initiated. Often though, conditions on the ground reflect a different reality. Recent research indicates that returnees from the UK to Afghanistan have experienced high levels of danger and insecurity (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 26); returnees to Pakistan have been subjected to detention for leaving Pakistan illegally and have been forced to pay large fines to secure their freedom (van Liempt et al., 2017, p. 23). According to a study conducted by Save the Children, a significant number of children

returned to Afghanistan felt that they were not actively involved in the decision to return, and that the return process was not child-sensitive. The same research notes that an assessment of how safe children would be upon their return home was not carried out prior to their return (Guillaume, Majidi, & Hall, 2018, p. 30, 31). These deficits are concerning, particularly at a time when States are urging the humanitarian community to scale up the implementation of child migrant return schemes. Without an investigation of whether home is really "home", a place of safety and security, and whether the child migrants have antecedents of abuse or exploitation that they were fleeing, the project of furthering the protection of these young people is compromised from the outset.

The notion that adolescents belong with their families in their country of origin needs more careful, critical attention than it has received thus far (Chase & Allsopp, 2013, p. 16). A recent study finds that some of the driving factors behind young people's decision to leave Somalia were insecurity, poverty stemming from climate change and limited access to educational opportunities and health services (Research and Evidence Facility (REF), 2018, p. 1). A nationwide study conducted in 5 sub-Saharan and West African countries cites Nigerian's mistrust of the government for its constant human rights abuses as a main driver of migration (Kirwin & Anderson, 2018, p. 17), while a study carried out by Save the Children highlights violence and abuse, harmful work and harsh living conditions as the main drivers for children from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Zambia (van Zyl, & Tschudin, 2018). Given these factors and the absence of concerted engagement with home country conditions prior the children's return, it is questionable whether returning home could be considered in these children's best interests. More likely the return process, conceptualizing migration as a linear and episodic process that can be reversed at any point along the journey, paves the way for re-migration attempts (De Genova & Peutz, 2010). In spite of these considerations, since 2017 a significant number of children and youth have return to the top five migrant producing African countries.

OBSTACLES TO CHILD PROTECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF DISTRESS MIGRATION

States' obligations to act as "parens patriae", or parent of the nation, are of very long standing and apply to all children within their jurisdiction, irrespective of nationality or immigration status. When States adopt "return home" programs in the context of exclusionary migration policies, they violate this cardinal role. Since the beginning

of the so-called European migration crisis, more than 500,000 migrant children have entered Europe by way of Greece, Italy, and Spain. While many of these children were traveling in families and fleeing situations of acute conflict such as the civil war in Syria, the ongoing political instability in Afghanistan and the aftermath of foreign interventions in Iraq and Libya, many others were traveling unaccompanied in search of a new horizon for belonging and creating "home".

Meanwhile, from 2016 onwards, the European Union, in response to growing domestic political pressures, implemented a series of harsh exclusionary and border patrol measures, which had draconian effects on children, effects that were not anticipated or addressed. 23,500 migrant children were left trapped in Greece (UNICEF, 2018), 18,303 unaccompanied children in Italy (UNICEF, 2017), 4,539 in Spain (UNHCR, 2018), and 54,310 in Libya (UNICEF, 2017b). Though increasingly recognized as a significant constituency within contemporary global migration flows, these children and youth were largely unprotected, receiving fragmented and inadequate support at best. Aside from well-documented resource and logistical deficits, deterrence is also a likely contributory factor, a measure designed to address the fear that robust child protection measures could incentivize irregular migration. Thus, by subjecting migrant children to institutional maltreatment, lethargic and ineffective bureaucratic processes, while promoting voluntary return as the best antidote to this maltreatment, States spread the message that distress child migrants are not welcome on their territories and that no viable future exists for them there. To quote the Interior Minister of Italy:

> Is [the humanitarian aid we offer] enough? Of course not. But the alternative cannot be to just accept the impossibility to govern the migration flux and hand to the human smugglers the keys to the European democracies. (The New York Times, 2017b)

Trapped between their obligations regarding child protection, and the need to control irregular migration, States vacillate in their construction of the migrant child, an ambivalent attitude that detrimentally colors policy (Bhabha, 2014). On the one hand, return home is justified by the notion that children are dependent and vulnerable victims who, without their family's protective framework, are unable to flourish. On the other hand, young migrants are penalized for "gaming the system", for their adult-like agency and attitudes willfully flouting immigration laws, as criminal aliens who deserve summary expulsion (Rozzi, 2011). A shift in the perception of children from innocent victims to cunning law-breakers can lead to State indifference about child suffering and protection deficits. It is in this context that a hasty "return home" scheme presents itself as the durable solution of choice,

overshadowing state responsibilities to care and protect them as children (Allsopp & Chase, 2019, p. 294). The Stockholm Program, which requires the European Commission to find practical measures to facilitate the return of unaccompanied children ineligible for international protection, exemplifies this approach.

The impact of this approach on distress child migrants can be devastating. Denied adequate protection, many fall prey to the lure of established smuggling and trafficking networks, gangs or other exploiters (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018, p. 117; Digidiki & Bhabha, 2017, p. 22). The story of an Ethiopian migrant youth returning from Greece to Ethiopia illustrates this vicious cycle:

> I've decided to go back to Ethiopia. I know I could be put in prison and be tortured, but I'm in a prison here and people are dying in this prison too. After I arrived [in Ethiopia], I spent six hours with my family. Then two men came with a pick up to our place. They put a gun on my head, forced me in a car and brought me to an underground place. They took my papers, asked me endless questions, hit and tortured me. I stayed in Ethiopia for two weeks, before I flee the country again to save my life[3].

WHERE IS HOME? LIFE AFTER RETURN

As thousands of distress migrant children return home, pressure on home countries to reintegrate and care for them increases, a task made all more difficult because of the complex circumstances under which return takes place. With no viable pathways to establish a livelihood, returnees continue to see migration as a powerful and attractive life strategy, however unrealistic a journey it may be, and as the main alternative to their conditions at home.

Emphasizing the need for sustainable reintegration as a measure to prevent irregular re-migration attempts, and operating under the assumption that improved living conditions in home countries can and will reduce the desire of migrants to migrate irregularly (Sinatti, 2015), European host states have forged bilateral return agreements. These include the recent European Union and African Union cooperation, and the Joint EU Task Force with the African Union, as well as cross-state initiatives like ERPUM (the European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors)[4]. These initiatives are designed to assist the efforts of home countries, and they include allocations of millions of euros to support return initiatives. The European Return Fund allocated 676 million euros for the period 2008–2013

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3   Ethiopian youth, male. Experience shared with the Legal Center Lesvos.

4   An agreement between the UK, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden

(Official Journal of the European Union, 2007) and the EU allocated a further 150 million euros in 2018 (European Union External Action, 2018). These substantial subsidies have not so far improved the quality of life, economic condition, or prospects in home countries, factors that will hinder the reintegration of returned children and youth.

Recent reports from the field highlight how the lack of adequate resources for individuals and communities to support work in economic, social and psychosocial contexts has hindered sustainable reintegration of young returnees. In the Gambia, only 170 of the 2,435 returnees have received reintegration packages, but no employment opportunities exist to support returnees' attempts at successful reintegration (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018; Refugees Deeply, 2018; Zanker & Altrogge, 2017, p. 23). In Guinea, young returnees cannot generate sufficient income in the labor markets to cover their immediate basic needs and lack sufficient startup capital to create their own income-generating opportunities. Economic barriers further prevent effective social reintegration as returnees have difficulty earning the respect of their communities when they are unable to generate income (IOM, 2017, p. 39). To quote one of the returnees in Guinea:

> I came back seven months ago. I could not go to Europe because the smugglers stole our EUR 8,000, my brother and I. It was my family who found the money. Here right now I cannot believe it, it's impossible. I do not know yet what I want to do. (IOM, 2017, p. 40)

Furthermore, recent research confirms that the dangerous lack of familial and societal protective factors for returnees exposes a significant number of returned children and youth to psychological and physical violence at the hands of community and/or family members. For instance, young returnees to Iran face imprisonment if families do not pay expensive bribes to authority figures to secure the safety of their children (Schweizer & Hänsel, 2018); young returnees to Afghanistan report recruitment attempts to enlist in armed combat, and experience adverse mental health impacts that can lead to suicide attempts (Guillaume, Majidi, & Hall, 2018, p. 37).

These findings form part of a growing evidence base that stands in stark contrast to the widely accepted belief that returns are a safe and viable migration solution. For a significant number of children and young people returning home, hopes of establishing a fulfilling life are replaced by violence, unfair treatment, and a systemic lack of opportunities to develop economically or intellectually. Despite these facts, States that support "return home" as a durable solution continue to sidestep their responsibilities for the lives of returnees, placing the onus of securing thousands of lives on the ill-equipped and impoverished home countries. For

example, several European countries continue to facilitate returns of migrants to Afghanistan, under the EU-Afghanistan deal, despite clear evidence that the country cannot enforce even the most basic of human rights, and thus cannot be rightly designated as a safe country of origin (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 10; Slagter, 2019). Furthermore, the European Commission recently concluded informal readmission agreements with sub-Saharan countries, including with Guinea in 2017, and with Ethiopia, the Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire in 2018, despite the vast criticism that this type of informal agreements violates European and international human-rights standards (Slagter, 2019).

This absence of meaningful incentives or opportunities will breed desperation in children and youth and manifest itself as immense pressure to embark upon another migration cycle, regardless of the increased risks. Waithood can only substitute for engagement and hope for so long, before it leads to toxic or self-harming results. A recent study examining the desire of returnees in 6 countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Sudan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam) to re-migrate demonstrated that 53% of the participants aspired to re-migrate and 11% already had a concrete plan to re-migrate 12 months after their voluntary return (Kuschminder, 2017, p. 117). These findings highlight the impact of limited and unsuccessful reintegration efforts. To quote one returnee in Senegal:

> The situation is worse than before. At the moment I have no income […]. The shop is even going bankrupt. The family's expenses are too great. The shop is emptying. Frankly, what I had thought before returning here doesn't match what I expected […]. I'm the father of the family, if the situation doesn't improve I have no solution, it'll be terrible. (Flahaux, 2017)

The imperative of contributing to successful, rights-respecting reintegration could not be more evident if return programs are to continue. Without such reintegration, the trauma of migration remains unappeased, and the desperation to exit remains pressing. At present, based on the reports from the field, returnees seem likely to remain unintegrated, isolated and deeply disappointed as long as they remain in their home country.

CONCLUSIONS

Prevailing European migration policy prioritizes measures tailored to efficiently exclude distress migrants, sidestepping the urgent imperative to develop strategies and approaches that improve child migrant protection at source, transit or desti-

nation sites. A key plank of this policy has been the voluntary return program, a process that has been introduced widely, to facilitate exclusion rather than to lay the basis for durable and protective migration solutions. By failing to construct robust structures that receive and support children and young people, that enable them to construct viable and safe lives for themselves, what is dubbed a "durable solution" is in reality nothing but a short-term stop gap exclusion measure. In some cases, the measure will result in long-term relocation of young distress migrants back to their countries of origin, but in others it will be a stepping stone to renewed migration efforts. So far, the "return home" approach has forced humanitarian agencies, home governments, children and youth to make impossible snap decisions, to remove or abandon child and youth migrants in inhumane conditions, while European States continue to willfully fence themselves off from the humanitarian tragedies at their doorstep.

Once home, the impact of the scheme is apparent. With their migration cycle violently interrupted and their dreams unfulfilled, returned children and youth struggle to find their place within family units unprepared to receive and care for them, in schools unable to cater for them, and within communities unable or unwilling to reintegrate them. The two-way inclusion process necessary for any successful reintegration scheme depends on resources – material, social and psychological – that require careful planning and coordinated implementation. Focused and tailored assistance becomes most paramount when necessary community and familial protective factors are missing. The gap between what children need in order to stand a chance to heal and reintegrate, and what home countries can offer, leads many children down a dangerous path of seeking new strategies for irregular re-migration.

Given the propensity of adolescents and young people to explore exit options when current circumstances are bleak or intolerable, the urgency of investing in integrated child protective solutions, in all parts of the migration journey, could not be more urgent. Redistributive schemes that incentivize fairer educational and employment opportunities are critical, as are mechanisms to promote legal, safe and regular migration for children and young people.

In the interim, the current "return home" approach needs radical revision. Returns should never be construed within an exclusionary migration framework but instead should be centered around the best interests of the child and considered one option among several, rather than the only possible outcome. Careful best interests assessments and determinations need to precede the decision to accompany a child back to their country of origin. Post return realities also need urgent attention, so that cooperative solutions can generate sustainable and rewarding

environments in which young people can flourish. Whereas eliminating exposure to violence, abuse, exploitation and deprivation is a top priority, other reintegration processes are also essential if children are to recapture a sense of belonging, a deep sense of being at home in their world. Practical measures which can facilitate this include providing support and assistance to families of returned children to strengthen their protective capabilities and combat returnees' feelings of failure, stigma or societal exclusion following a "failed" migration cycle. An optimal approach is to capitalize on the creativity and energy of the young people themselves by generating programs and roles which they can lead and develop, where their voice, agency and resilience can generate constructive outcomes. This could create the basis for what we have referred to as a post-return two-way inclusionary approach. Ultimately the task of generating a safe and rewarding space of belonging is a continuous and multifaceted one; at best, short cut strategies such as harsh humanitarian exclusion followed by *de facto* compelled return will make no contribution to this process, but at worst they will severally undermine it, possibly for years to come and at immense human cost.

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