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# CHILDREN ON THE MOVE:

A RAPID ASSESSMENT AND POLICY  
ISSUES FOR BANGLADESH



## 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 which are 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, internally displaced or asylum-seeking or refugees.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that about 50 million children are on the move worldwide.<sup>2</sup> This figure is likely to be hugely underestimated, as it considers only those 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 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 organizations, but there is scope for improvement. The policy brief draws on the findings of the report 'Children on the Move: A Rapid Assessment and Policy Issues for Bangladesh', to highlight some of the major issues, and related policy implications, for Bangladesh.

### CHILDREN ON THE MOVE: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

A multitude of causes can interact in triggering the children to move, and 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 better livelihood opportunities (which causes migration to different locations). 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 moving either solely or accompanied by third parties, or trafficked, is also quite widespread.

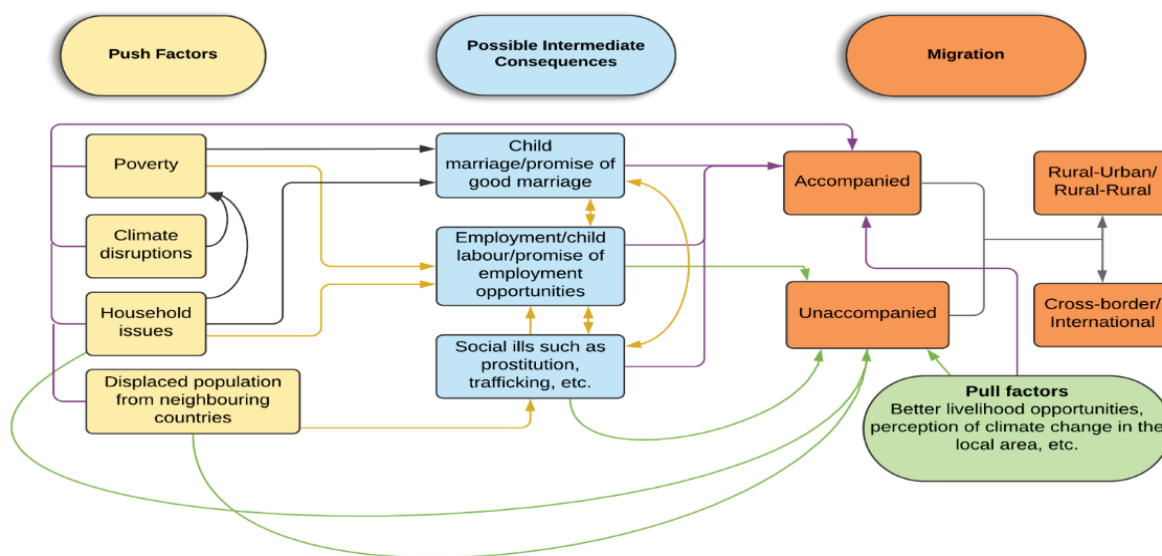
The distinction between push and pull factors is not always straightforward. Migration decisions could be influenced by both. For instance, the decision to travel based on poverty and deprivation in individuals' native locations can be reinforced by the perception of improved economic opportunities elsewhere. In other cases, opportunities for a better education, employment, social amenities, etc., act as the driving force, and are thus the underlying decisions 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 such as floods can destroy homes and directly displace people, but they can also destroy farmlands. This adversely affects the livelihood of people, pushing them into poverty, and ultimately forcing them to migrate and seek better economic opportunities. Similarly, issues such as being evicted from home, and household issues (e.g., divorce or separation), might directly trigger displacement, or indirectly cause it through poverty.

The international source of children on the move emanates from displaced children from neighbouring, or even distant countries, who flee their homeland from civil wars, persecutions, and ethnic-cleansing, etc. They could be accompanied by family members or caregivers, or could be alone, the latter of which carries more likely exposure to vulnerabilities.

1 According to 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.

2 UNICEF, 'Uprooted: The growing crisis for refugee and migrant children', 2016, <https://weshare.unicef.org/Package/2AMZIFQP5K8>

**Figure 1: Analytical framework for children on the move**



Source: Authors' illustration.

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

## EVIDENCE OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN BANGLADESH

### Climate disruptions

Bangladesh has had more than its fair share of climate issues, including river erosion, floods, cyclones, and saltwater intrusion. From 1990 to 2018, riverine floods and cyclones caused over 150,000 deaths, affected more than 150 million people, and caused over US\$12 billion worth of damages in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> That would imply 60,000 child deaths, and around 60 million children being affected in that period.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Poor households tend to have more children, and a third of them live in the 20-most disaster-prone districts of Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> According to statistics provided by the UN, in the period 1973-2017, Bangladesh's three major rivers -- the Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna -- eroded more than 1,600 km<sup>2</sup> of land, which is roughly five times the land mass of the country's capital.<sup>8</sup> These people often get caught in a vicious cycle of displacement and resettlement.

3 Eskander, S. and Steele, P., 'Bearing the Climate Burden: How Households in Bangladesh are Spending too Much', IIED, London, 2019, <https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/16643IIED.pdf>

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

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

6 Dasgupta, S., et al., 'River Salinity and Climate Change: Evidence From Coastal Bangladesh', World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2014, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/522091468209055387/River-salinity-and-climate-change-evidence-from-coastal-Bangladesh>

7 UNICEF, 'A Gathering Storm: Climate Change Clouds the Future of Children in Bangladesh', March 2019, [www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/2326/file/ClimatechangeReportBD.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/2326/file/ClimatechangeReportBD.pdf)

8 Anas, AZM., 'Bangladesh's Disappearing River Lands', The New Humanitarian, 29 August 2019, [www.thenewhumanitarian.org/Bangladesh-river-erosion-engulfs-homes-climate-change-migration](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/Bangladesh-river-erosion-engulfs-homes-climate-change-migration)

## Poverty and other issues

There has 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 resettle. Issues such as violence against children have also been found as a potential source of displacement. Streets and slums are two of the most visible evidence of rural-urban migration of children, and is especially triggered by poverty. Four million people are estimated to live in around 5,000 urban slums in Dhaka.<sup>9</sup> Numerous studies show that the appalling state of children on the streets and in slums, and the combination of overcrowding and limited resources and services, results in unhealthy living conditions in these areas. The Child Wellbeing Survey in Urban Areas 2016 revealed that slums, in general, are way behind their non-slum counterparts in terms of nutrition, health, water and sanitation, and education. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates: 15.5 per cent of girls in Bangladesh marry before the age of 15, and 51.4 per cent before the age of 18. Poverty has been one of the main factors generally cited by the girls and family members in pushing them towards marriage.<sup>10</sup>

## DISPLACED POPULATION FROM NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Bangladesh hosts around 1 million Rohingyas,<sup>11</sup> with children under the age of 18 comprising 55 per cent of the Rohingya refugees.<sup>12</sup> These child refugees' 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.<sup>13</sup> However, the Bangladesh Government has recently announced that it will be offering schooling and skills training opportunities to the Rohingya children.<sup>14</sup> As per the government's plans, Rohingya children will

get school education, through the provision of the Myanmar curriculum, up to the age of 14, and children older than 14 will receive skills training. A pilot project led by UNICEF and the Bangladesh Government will involve 10,000 children from grades six to nine.<sup>15</sup> The scheme will then be expanded to other grades in a phased manner. The camps are in rugged and hilly regions, and 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 these 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 provided some insights into the dynamics of the children on the move phenomenon. It found that both unaccompanied and accompanied migration, and rural-urban and rural-to-rural migration of children was prevalent. The main push factors were poverty, the 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 in slums do not have access to health care and education;

9 UNICEF, 'Analysis of the Situation of Children and Women in Bangladesh 2015', Dhaka, 2015, <https://uni.cf/37TQ9oM>

10 UNICEF, 'Ending Child Marriage in Bangladesh: What Matters Most for Change? Exploring Preferences, Beliefs and Norms', Draft Report, 2019.

11 ReliefWeb, 'Five Things you Should Know About the Rohingya Refugee Response', 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/five-things-you-should-know-about-rohingya-refugee-response>

12 ReliefWeb, 'JRP for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis', March-December 2018, <https://bit.ly/37QAbf1>

13 ReliefWeb, 'Long-term Solutions for the Rohingya Response', 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/long-term-solutions-rohingya-response>

14 Amnesty International, 'Bangladesh: Rohingya Children Get Access to Education', 28 January 2020, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/bangladesh-rohingya-children-get-access-to-education](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/bangladesh-rohingya-children-get-access-to-education)

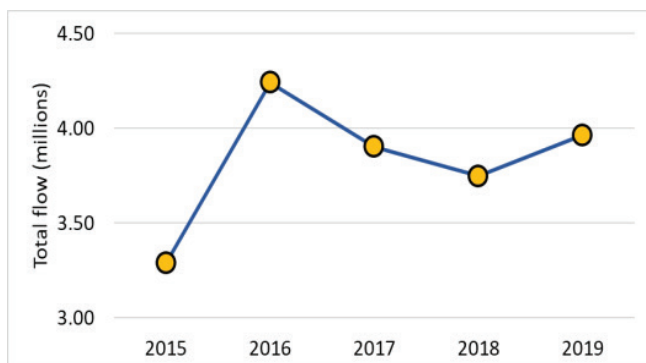
15 UNICEF, 'Expanding Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh', 10 February 2020, [www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/expanding-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/expanding-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh)

- Slum children, on the other hand, do tend to have some access to health care and education. However, they usually drop out from school to provide financial support to their families;
- Displaced children, especially street children, tend to not have birth certificates and other relevant documents, which could hinder them from availing education and health care; and
- 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

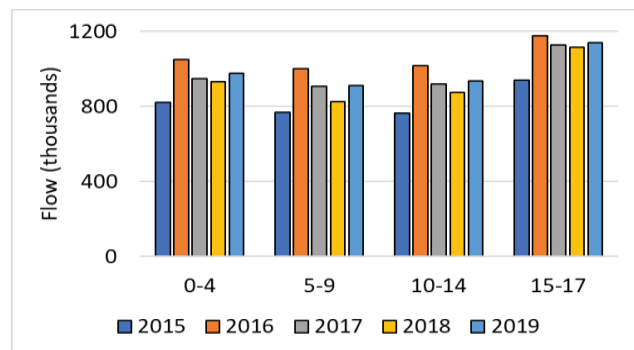
Data on internal migration from the Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) reports (2015-2018) can be used to provide an estimate of the flow (Figures 2 and 3) of children on the move in Bangladesh. Rural-urban migration and rural-rural migration have been considered for the estimation. Data for the age groups – 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 an estimate for the age group 15-17 years for each year in the period 2015-2018. As internal migration data is unavailable for 2019, the estimation of flow for then 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 about 17 per cent.

**Figure 2: Yearly flow of children on the move in Bangladesh, 2015–2019**



Source: Authors' calculations and presentations using data from various SVRS reports.

**Figure 3: Yearly flow of children on the move in Bangladesh by age group, 2015–2019**



Source: Authors' calculations and presentations using data from various SVRS reports.

The five-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; a range of 11-15.8 million children is projected (Table 1).

**Table 1: Five-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 11-15.8 million children on the move are not likely to be equally vulnerable. Data on susceptible 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.<sup>16</sup> This approximation should

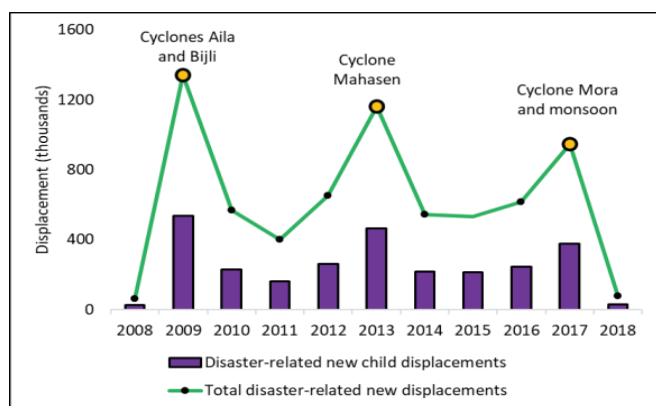
be considered as conservative, as all sources of displacements have not been possible to consider (e.g., unavailability of data on trafficked children), and a lot of displacements go unreported

## 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

Figure 4: Displacements due to climate disruptions



Source: Authors' Calculations and Presentation Using IDMC Data.

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.

for pockets/sources for which data exists. With those caveats in place, a conservative estimate of the stock of vulnerable children on the move is estimated to be about 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 4), while major cyclones are a significant contributing factor.

## GOVERNMENT ACTS, POLICY DOCUMENTS, AND DEVELOPMENT PLANS

To ensure the rights of children and deal with such issues as child labour/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 the 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), the 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.

The GoB has undertaken numerous initiatives to address issues regarding children on the move. These include, amongst others, allocating funds for child victims of natural (or other) disasters; establishing training and rehabilitation centres

16 Data Source: Climate disruptions -- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and Reuters (2019, July 19). 'Bangladesh Rivers Overflow, Force 400,000 From Their Homes', Voice of America, [www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/bangladesh-rivers-overflow-force-400000-their-homes](http://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.

for street children, safe homes for girls and orphanages, and implementing a national child helpline. Non-governmental organizations have also undertaken noteworthy initiatives to address the aforementioned issues.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following measures could be taken to address the issues 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 phenomena of child labour and 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 would be to undertake carefully designed and customized 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. This would generate information needed to ascertain the trends and dynamics of 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 can contribute to poor and vulnerable groups' improved economic and welfare situations, bolstering direct bottom-up approaches targeting their needs and vulnerabilities would also benefit children in disadvantaged regions and households.
- **Strengthening 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 potential.

- **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 and well-managed initiatives targeting vulnerable children (e.g., children subject to household violence and school dropouts) are needed to contain the undesirable aspects of children on the move.** Relevant government ministries and departments such as the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, the Ministry of Social Welfare, and the Department of Social Services should expand their support programmes for 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.** The budget needs to be more transparent on its allocation to specific programmes. This will create the space for the monitoring of public spending, and thus 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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