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EL SALVADOR COUNTRY BRIEF



Summative Evaluation of the EU Global Promotion of Best Practices for Children in Migration Project

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1. SUMMARY

This country brief discusses the key findings of the evaluation of the EU's Global Promotion of Best Practices for Children in Migration (also known as Children on the Move or CotM). This 30-month programme (October 2020 – July 2023) covered four countries across two continents: El Salvador and Mexico in Latin America and the Caribbean Region, and South Africa and Zambia in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region.

The purpose of this country brief is to inform UNHCR and UNICEF child protection officers engaged in decision-making and programming involving children on the move of the findings and key lessons learned from the CotM programme's interventions, as identified by the evaluation. This document summarizes the main messages and draws lessons and conclusions from these experiences for similar interventions in other regions.

2. CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

El Salvador has a long history of multifaceted and multicausal migration and forced displacement involving a variety of push factors, such as the inadequacy of social services, poor economic prospects, high rates of insecurity, and the effects of natural disasters. According to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (2018), there are approximately 71,500 people who are internally displaced within in El Salvador due to widespread violence. Studies on the internally displaced population indicate that the phenomenon is focused mainly within young family groups in vulnerable socioeconomic conditions. There is also a high rate of irregular migration in El Salvador. Between 2016 and 2020, the country's *Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería* (Directorate of Foreign Affairs and Immigration) registered 154,318 returnees into the country, of which 14% were children and adolescents.¹ Even though there is growing evidence and data on the returned/deported population, there is still a notable lack of data on those who are internally displaced within El Salvador.

The *Comprehensive Law for the Protection of Childhood and Adolescence* (LEPINA) serves as the regulatory, rights-based child protection framework in El Salvador. This law aims to safeguard children and adolescents. While there are efforts in place to protect children on the move, such as the establishment of Care Centers for Children, Adolescents and Returned Families (CANAF) under the responsibility of the National Council for Early Childhood, and Adolescence (CONAPINA), the government's capacity to respond to displaced persons, particularly children who are on the move, is limited and requires further expansion. This expansion would include increasing the number of CANAF Centers (currently there are only six), as well as allocating more financial and human resources to child protection efforts.

The CotM programme was jointly implemented by UNHCR-UNICEF El Salvador and the Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Child Development (ISNA²), at the government level: the Ombudsman,³ National Council for Early Childhood, Children and Adolescence (CONAPINA⁴), and General Directorate of Migration (DGME⁵), as well as the transition of the protection system generated by the approval of the Grow Up Together Law (2023). Joint work plans were developed with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), such as Save the Children, the Scalabrinian Missionaries,

¹ Brazos Abiertos. (2021) Plan de Atención y Protección Integral a Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Migrantes Retornados y sus Familias 2021-2023.

² Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez

³ Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos.

⁴ Consejo Nacional de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia.

⁵ Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería.

the Independent Monitoring Group of El Salvador (GMIES⁶), CONTEXTOS, the Spanish Red Cross, Aldeas Infantiles SOS, Save the Children, the Mental Health Training and Research Association (ACISAM⁷), and the Human Rights Institute of the Central American University (IDHUCA⁸), as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The EU Global Promotion of Best Practices for Children in Migration (2020 – 2023) project in El Salvador, focused on UNICEF’s and UNHCR’s support to government and relevant institutions in designing a strategic plan for the protection of displaced and returned children and their families. The objective was to contribute to the effective protection of children on the move and the realization of their rights through a child protection system that provides quality integrated services, alternative care, mental health, and psychosocial support, all with a gender-sensitive lens. The programme documented and shared best practices for using alternative care options to avoid detention. The programme supported vulnerable migrant families, as well as displaced, returnee, asylum-seeking, and refugee children moving within or between countries, with or without caregivers.

UNICEF and UNHCR, with Civil Society Organizations, developed an integration model for returned children and families through the provision of humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, legal and medical assistance, food, shelter, education, skills training, life planning, and resilience building activities. The strategy also enhanced knowledge via awareness raising campaigns, by encouraging participation, promoting interventions to improve child protection practices, and by offering capacity building to strengthen case management and the protection of children.

The overall objective of the CotM programme was to ensure that “children on the move are effectively protected and their rights are being realized through child protection systems that provide quality integrated services, alternative care, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).” This objective was structured around four outcomes:

- 1) **Outcome 1:** Child protection systems include gender-responsive quality and integrated services in reception centers and other care and attention facilities.
- 2) **Outcome 2:** Child protection systems have integrated gender-responsive psychosocial services and prevention mechanisms addressing gender-based violence and other structural problems.
- 3) **Outcome 3:** Child protection systems provide alternative care options, with emphasis on community and family-based alternatives.
- 4) **Outcome 4:** Exchanges of gender-sensitive good practices and lessons learned across two regions/ four countries serve as evidence for protecting CotM in different contexts, based on empirical evidence and data.

3. EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The evaluation employed mixed methods and tried to unpack the implementation process, challenges, and lessons learned, from both the perspectives of implementers and beneficiaries. The key evaluation questions focused on analyzing the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of the programme’s activities. The evaluation used a theory-based approach⁹ that enabled a nuanced investigation into “What worked?” “For whom?” “In what respect?” “To what extent?” and “In what contexts?” that included participatory qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The steps

⁶ Grupo de Monitoreo Independiente de El Salvador

⁷ Asociación de Capacitación e Investigación para la Salud Mental

⁸ Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la UCA

⁹ For in-depth explanation of the ToC please refer to the Final Report.

involved in this approach included: 1) document review; 2) secondary data analysis; 3) participatory focus groups with key informants; 4) an online survey; and 5) data analysis.

4. DISCUSSION OF KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS



Relevance

The evaluation found that the programme showed a strong alignment with national priorities in El Salvador related to child protection systems for CotM. The programme focused on providing humanitarian assistance and strengthening government institutions through strategic partnerships. It demonstrated adaptability to the evolving context in the country, but faced ongoing challenges associated with the changes brought by response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the State of Exception, and dissolution of institutions, etc. It expanded capacity-building initiatives aimed at system strengthening. However, while the program did have programmatic areas relevant to gender and disability consideration, the programme encountered certain limitations in practically applying those considerations.

A key strength of the CotM programme was its alignment with national priorities and system-strengthening objectives through close partnerships with relevant government agencies and partners. Significant capacity-building activities improved staff skills and led to updated protocols to advance the protection frameworks. Even though vulnerable groups such as girls, children with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ people were considered in the programmatic part of the project, further actions can be taken to ensure the full protection and intentional inclusion of these groups.



Coherence

The evaluation found that the programme demonstrated alignment with local coordination systems, like the Humanitarian Country Team, ensuring complementarity and minimizing overlap. Collaboration between UNICEF and UNHCR facilitated access and coordination with implementing partners (IPs). A National Advisory Committee allowed for shared progress and coordinated actions. Joint work plans were developed locally to build capacity and adopt methodologies. However, some barriers prevented fuller synergies, as not all IPs were aware of the extent and nature UNICEF-UNHCR collaboration. Challenges existed in maximizing communication and collaboration across partners and regions.

Overall, moderate to high coordination existed at the local level through systems alignment and partnerships. The cross-regional exchange could have been improved through more established communication channels. In general, the program demonstrated moderate-high coherence through aligning with coordination systems and facilitating local partnerships. However, communication between IPs was limited. This inhibited a fuller integration of programs, as well as the sharing of learnings between partners. There was also limited awareness among partners of the full extent of programme collaboration, including the vital collaboration between UNICEF and UNHCR. This limited communication and collaboration across implementing partners and regions remained a challenge throughout the lifetime of the CotM programme. Therefore, enhanced coordination is required to maximize communication channels between partners, and ensure greater collaboration, synergies and integration of partnerships, as well as to facilitate cross-partner and cross-regional learning and information exchange.



Effectiveness

The evaluation found that the programme activities have been effective in improving access to integrated services, alternative care, mental health support, and psychosocial support for CotM in El Salvador. This was achieved through multi-level interventions spanning policy work, capacity

building, service delivery, and engagement with relevant actors. Over 2,900 children accessed psychological care, counseling, and empowerment initiatives. Child-friendly spaces were established in government reception centers and shelter houses. Protocols for case transfer increased service accessibility.

Multiple partnerships with IPs, NGOs, and government agencies expanded alternative care options. Capacity building enhanced officials' skills in case management and child protection services. Participatory approaches involving children in shaping their lives created empowerment and enhanced effectiveness. Overall, the program effectively expanded access, provided care, and enabled community reintegration through coordination, capacity building, and child participation. However, quantitative monitoring data remained limited; there were few baseline assessments and measurement of progress over time.



Efficiency

The evaluation found that the programme made efforts to apply a cost-effective approach by building on existing programmes and partnerships, and through its focus on capacity building to strengthen child protection systems. Coordination ensured initiatives did not overlap, showing that efforts were made to maximize resource allocation, as well as expand the geographical reach. The nature of the programme enabled expansion and improvement over time. However, there was a lack of systematized joint monitoring and evaluation frameworks and mechanisms across key stakeholders, including UNICEF and UNHCR teams, IPs, and government entities. This inhibited consistent tracking of shared strategies and indicators necessary to quantify cross-program efficiency from systematic perspective.

While participatory monitoring was inclusive, interoperability with government systems remained limited. Formalizing a monitoring system and establishing benchmarks across agencies are needed to systematically track, measure, and optimize results and efficiency in the country. Despite efforts to maximize resource allocation, the lack of a formal Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework between relevant agencies hindered efforts to track strategies and efficiency systematically. The current flexible approach lacked concrete mechanisms to quantify and optimize evidence-based decisions. Establishing a better standardized monitoring and evaluation framework would allow concrete tracking of progress and support data-driven resource allocation and project strategies.



Sustainability

The evaluation found that the programme succeeded in placing migrant children on the agenda of national and regional governance bodies, emphasizing forced internal displacement, returned migrant children and their reintegration. This was achieved through institutional strengthening, capacity building, and awareness-raising initiatives at different government levels, with partners and local communities. Institutions demonstrated an improvement in the protection of CotM. Formal agreements were signed to strengthen cooperation in addressing needs. Systems and partnerships have been established to build ownership and resources to strengthen systems.

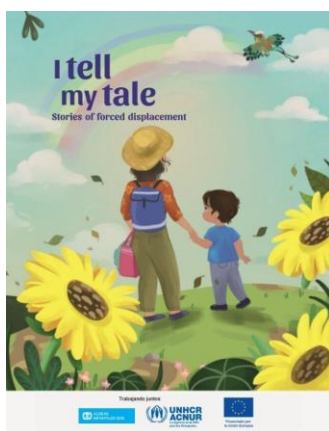
The initiatives implemented in El Salvador, particularly focusing on the protection and reintegration of returned children and adolescents, align with sustainability goals. However, threats persist, including challenges related to funding, human resources, administration changes, and the ongoing need for operational support. It is crucial to maintain commitment, local ownership, and enhanced coordination to address these challenges. Future interventions should prioritize legal frameworks, and community-based approaches to ensure sustained impact.

5. BEST PRACTICES AND KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Best Practices

The implementation of the interventions offers some good practices and lessons. Some of the lessons and good practices are:

- a) A **community strategy** rolled out in a phased approach (training local committee members as trainers, then supporting the development of local protection plans), strengthened community leaders and built the capacity of local authorities, enabling them to equip communities with better tools and procedures to attend to displaced families and children.
- b) The **collaboration with partners** allowed the CotM programme to reach new geographical areas and communities, expanding the access to services.
- c) The specialized **Diploma Course** built the capacity of 70+ government officials annually on the protection of displaced children, through training decision-makers and operational teams. Capacity building of national staff at different levels created a cascade effect for long-term systems strengthening.
- d) The **Proyecto de Vida Empowerment Tool**, a practical self-directed tool designed for youth and staff, serves as a best practice in guiding returned migrant adolescents in rebuilding their life projects.
- e) Participatory development of **Short Story Books and Board Games** on forced displacement and child recruitment helped raise awareness. Dissemination of these tools to institutions, child-friendly spaces, and communities enabled play-based learning.
- f) El Salvador successfully launched and implemented the **Brazos Abiertos Plan**, an action plan focused on the protection and reintegration of returned children and adolescents, demonstrating commitment to their rights and well-being.



- g) Through the collaborative efforts with UNICEF and UNHCR through the **Assistance to Returned Migrant Children** project, over 4,500 returned migrant children who were detained in North America and deported to El Salvador received crucial assistance.

Lessons Learned

There were many learnings that happened over the course of the CotM programme, some of the principal lessons learned include the following:

- a) **Awareness-raising remains relevant.** Institutions and families stressed the need to continue the activities carried out under the CotM programme in order to prevent and respond to situations of internal displacement and irregular migration.
- b) **Working at a local level allows for better coordination and flexibility** allowed for a speedier than normal case management process, as well as reintegration, and the expansion of support networks.

“One of the most rewarding outcomes of this project has been the sense of community it has created among the children and families involved. Beneficiaries often tell us how much they value the connections they have made through the program.”

Interview Female, CONTEXTOS, May 31st, 2023.

- c) **Psychosocial activities** have helped families maintain their unity and allowed them space to let go of trauma experienced during the migration or displacement process.
- d) **Collaboration between UNICEF and UNHCR, as well as IPs** was beneficial for the exchange of information, the identification of gaps, and the added value of coordination between agencies improved access to communities.

“The project has been able to reach new places in the country and communities through the coordination between IPs, UNHCR, and UNICEF, which has helped families and children to have a voice and better access to different services, as well as the development of a more coherent protection system.”

Interview Male, Aldeas Infantiles SOS, June 1, 2023

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

#	Recommendation	Suggested activities	Structural or Operational	Responsible	Timeline
1	Recommendation 1: Enhance Stakeholder Engagement. Relevant stakeholders across all levels – beneficiaries, IPs, government entities, civil society organizations, and relevant UN agencies – should establish concrete feedback mechanisms to continuously gather inputs to set targets and objectives for future CotM programmes.	<p>Establish concrete feedback mechanisms such as regular surveys, suggestion boxes, or town hall meetings involving relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>Analyze feedback to set targets and objectives for future CotM projects.</p>	Operational	<p>Beneficiaries IPs Government entities Civil Society Organizations Relevant UN Agencies UNICEF & UNHCR</p>	Before the beginning of new projects
2	Recommendation 2: Prioritize Gender-Sensitive Interventions. Require IPs to allocate dedicated funding as well as specific programmatic actions and initiatives addressing gender needs, female-friendly space, and GBV prevention and response. Stakeholders should ensure interventions prioritize focus on prevention and response to GBV, through the adoption of a gender-sensitive approach.	<p>Allocate dedicated funding for gender-sensitive initiatives and GBV prevention.</p> <p>Develop and implement programmatic actions addressing gender needs and creating female-friendly spaces.</p> <p>Provide training to project staff on gender sensitivity.</p>	Operational	<p>UN agencies IPs Government entities UNICEF & UNHCR</p>	During implementation
3	Recommendation 3: Promote Multi-Stakeholder Collaboratives. Close, collaboration should be instituted across all stakeholders in the CotM project encompassing coordinated advocacy, and regular information exchange to address complex mobility challenges. This should include regular coordination amongst IPs, government authorities, civil society, UNICEF, UNHCR and other relevant actors.	<p>Organize regular coordination meetings amongst responsible stakeholders and relevant actors to discuss project progress, challenges, and strategies to address mobility challenges.</p>	Operational	<p>UNICEF & UNHCR IPs Government Authorities Civil Society Organizations</p>	During implementation
4	Recommendation 4: Facilitate Communication and Responsibility. Clear protocols should be developed outlining stakeholder roles, communication	<p>Develop and disseminate clear protocols outlining stakeholder roles, communication procedures, and referral pathways.</p> <p>Conduct Training sessions to ensure all involved parties understand</p>	Operational	<p>UN Agencies IPs UNICEF & UNHCR</p>	During implementation

#	Recommendation	Suggested activities	Structural or Operational	Responsible	Timeline
	procedures, and referral pathways across IPs, government entities, Civil Society Organizations, and UN agencies involved in the CotM project.	and adhere to protocols.			
5	Recommendation 5: Enhance Monitoring and Evaluation. Conduct a comprehensive baseline assessment to quantify the project's impact; develop a structured monitoring framework	<p>Conduct comprehensive baseline assessment to understand current situation.</p> <p>Develop a structured monitoring framework outlining key performance indicators, data collection, and responsible parties.</p>	Structural	IPs	Before the beginning of new projects
6	Recommendation 6: Engage Beneficiaries. Establish a regular participatory monitoring system involving beneficiaries to gain insight into what works and possible gaps.	<p>Establish participatory monitoring systems involving beneficiaries through regular feedback sessions.</p> <p>Train project staff on effective methods for engaging with and incorporating beneficiaries' insights.</p>	Operational	UNICEF & UNHCR Beneficiaries IPs	Before and during implementation
7	Recommendation 7: Strengthen Case Management. Provide technical support for establishing integrated case management systems, offering training on protocols and protection measures.	<p>Provide technical support for implementing integrated case management systems including training sessions and protocols and protection measures.</p> <p>Collaborate with relevant agencies to ensure seamless coordination in case management.</p>	Operational	IPs Government entities	During implementation
8	Recommendation 8: Implement Data-Driven Decision Making. Institute regular analysis of monitoring data to continuously track progress, identify issues, optimize resource allocation, and support data-driven decision-making.	<p>Establish a dedicated team for the regular analysis of monitoring data.</p> <p>Develop reporting mechanisms to track progress, identify issues, and optimize resource allocation.</p>	Operational	IPs Government Entities	Before the beginning of new projects
9	Recommendation 9: Promote Local Coordination. Strengthen local coherence by formalizing referral pathways, case transfer processes, and capacity building between IPs and Government Agencies.	<p>Formalize referral pathways, case transfer processes, and capacity-building initiatives between IPs and Government agencies.</p> <p>Conduct training sessions to enhance local coordination.</p>	Operational	IPs Local Government Agencies Community-level organizations	During implementation
10	Recommendation 10: Provide Support for the Institutionalization and Necessary Adaptations of Laws/Protocols. Continuous technical assistance should be provided to	Provide continuous technical assistance to government entities and partners for the institutionalization of newly developed protocols and laws.	Structural & Operational	UN Agencies IPs Government entities	Before and during implementation

#	Recommendation	Suggested activities	Structural or Operational	Responsible	Timeline
	government entities and partners post-project to support the full institutionalization and self-implementation of newly adopted laws and protocols related to CotM (e.g., Grow Up Together Law (2023), which faces potential gaps moving from policy adoption to nationwide implementation across).	Develop a transition plan for a seamless implementation.		UNICEF & UNHCR	