



Protecting children on the move at the East African community border posts during covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to find out the protection of children on the move at the East African community border posts during Covid 19 pandemic. A visit to any East African border posts shows that COVID 19 Communication and protection measures are directed toward adults, not children. This is despite the fact that children are not only affected by COVID but are also border post users. More than this, the poor economic climate caused by the Corona pandemic has also led to the rise of children on the move being at risk in several ways. There are numerous challenges that children on the move have had to endure across the EAC borders. It is clearly evident that these challenges have only been exuberated by the covid-19 pandemic. However, despite its many shocks, the pandemic has presented an opportunity for EAC partner states to reassess their strategies and protection mechanism where children on the move are involved. The study recommends that the principle of non-discrimination and inclusion at all stages of the checkpoint should be adopted, as well as adopting effective communication mechanisms and relaying child-friendly information, child participation in the decision-making process to establish the views and needs of the children on the move.

Key terms: Children on the move, Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

Children form a large percentage of the human population that use East Africa Community border entry points and ground crossings. Migrant and child displacement are one of the people that have been hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic. These vulnerable populations are likely to face the impact of COVID-19, ranging from the restrictions on movement, stringent border controls and chances of abuse and child trafficking during the COVID pandemic (Buechner, 2021). While cross-border traffic has contributed to the transmission of the covid-19 virus, states, including the EAC region, have imposed stringent movement restrictions to combat the spread of the virus. Border entry points, including ground crossings which used to facilitate the movement of people, goods and other commodities from a state to another, offering a boost to the economy and social fabric of states, have been halted, and restrictions to control the movement of people and commodities imposed since the covid-19 pandemic began. Today, countries in the East Africa region have relaxed their covid-19 containment measures and opened up their borders, with specific rules and regulations to which every individual has to comply (WHO, 2020). These controls have, in certain circumstances, failed to fully address the welfare of children using the same borders for movement into and out of certain states. This article, therefore, outlines some of the border controls and measures adopted in the EAC region, which seek to protect children using the border posts and their shortfalls and possible recommendations to ensure that children are protected at the border posts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research and reports carried out on the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic across the globe, including in East Africa, indicate that certain gender-specific challenges for migrant and displaced children are intensifying (IDAC, 2021). Some of these threats existed before the pandemic but are since intensifying as a result of the pandemic. UNICEF (2021) has reported that children form part of the group that is doubly affected by the covid-19 pandemic. This means that children are affected by the socio-economic fallout resulting from the pandemic and are also not included in the response and recovery measures. In addition, most migrant populations are accompanied by a child. Yet, most of them are apprehended or turned away to

their countries of origin without being accorded safety, a trend that is reported to have increased during the pandemic (Buechner, 2021). Therefore, during this pandemic, the EAC border posts must accord more stringent protections to all children using their borders. These protections should draw inspiration from the host country's national and international laws, for instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

The EAC partner states undertook to take a joint action in responding to the covid-19 pandemic by partnering to come up with a covid-19 response plan in April 2020. While the priority focus areas that outlined targeted actions to combat the spread of the virus included, among others, developing and sharing guidelines to partner states to support and maintain quality care, capacity strengthening of EAC staff such as airport staff, providing information to staff of EAC organs, institutions and people in the communities to help manage the risk of exposure and reduce the spread of infections, none of the key interventions and recommended public health actions were specific on the protection of children, particularly children on the move (East African Community Secretariat, 2021). Many partner states across the EAC region, including Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, have incorporated internal measures for screening all entrants at the border posts. For example, most of the EAC partner states require that all individuals present a negative covid-19 test result. In Kenya, entrants are required to fill out a health assessment form availed by the Ministry of Health on their website and present the same to border authorities on arrival at the Kenyan border. There are also requirements for mandatory quarantine for individuals who have arrived from certain countries that have large numbers of covid-19 cases.

While these measures are keen on ensuring that people who have tested positive for covid-19 comply with the rules and regulations such as quarantine, to prevent them from spreading the virus, it is quite unfortunate that most of the policies and regulations put in place by EAC partner states have little specific measures to protect children on the move. There is, therefore, a dire need for the review of these covid-19 containment measures across the EAC partner states,

both individually and as a region, to ensure that children, specifically those on the move, have specific measures that protect them, owing to their vulnerability.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Factors that Make Children on the Move Vulnerable, Especially during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 puts children in a very precarious position by making them more susceptible to contracting the infection, in addition to the challenges they meet by being on the move. Children on the move are likely to be exposed to diseases, especially covid-19 while transiting from one country to another. They also face the risk of abuse and exploitation during their movement, now more than ever, since most of the current regulations and policies put in place by various governments are focused on controlling the spread of covid-19 only, paying little or no attention to welfare and treatment of children. Further risks facing children during these uncertain times include the loss of income by their parents or caregivers, who consequently struggle to provide food and other necessities to the children, forcing them to beg for alms or take up jobs that may harm them (IDAC, 2020). Loss of income by a child's carer also means that such a carer would grapple with providing food and other primary necessities to the child, consequently leading to malnutrition of the child from lack of food and exposing the child to sicknesses. Additionally, during this pandemic, many carers, guardians and parents of children may be taken ill from the virus, resulting in children being left unprotected and subjecting them to the risk of violence or exploitation.

Moreover, children on the move, especially those who are undocumented, are likely to be excluded from social protection measures, such as being accorded benefits relating to health and education, while moving from one state to another. This is because such undocumented children are considered non-nationals by the host country and are equally not protected from their countries of origin since they are not physically present in their country of origin to be accorded any social protection (UNICEF, 2021). Expanding social protection measures beyond nationals and citizens may be a challenge in most states due to current capacity and resource shortfalls. However, failure to extend such protection measures

to non-nationals such as migrants and children on the move creates a larger risk because migrant families are likely to fall into poverty and face exploitation and health risks, which in this case, is covid-19, thus creating more devastating consequences to everyone else.

The Need for Protection of Children on the Move during the Pandemic

According to UNHCR (2021), Covid-19 has a multi-faceted impact on children's rights, such impacts touching hugely on the socio-economic rights of children such as education, social protection, mental health and psychosocial support, health and nutrition. The significant disruption in many children's livelihoods enhances the risk of resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including child abuse and exploitation. School closures have been reported to have increased protection risks for children, including refugee children. Children on the move are also particularly vulnerable. They miss out on school and face other abuses like discrimination within the communities they interact with while moving from state to state (UN Coordinated Appeal, 2021).

Further, response mechanisms initiated during Covid-19 impact family unity and may result in children being separated from their families or remaining unsupervised for long periods. Children may also suffer neglect, thus increasing their chances of being abused or exploited, especially girls, who, in most instances, fall victim to sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, with the closure of schools, school-going children have missed out on opportunities to learn, translating to reduced learning outcomes. The closure of schools also meant that school feeding programs were suspended, and this negatively affected children who relied solely on schools to feed them. Consequently, such children may have been prone to malnutrition, which poorly impacted their health, making them more vulnerable to diseases.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child extends its protection to all children in a country, despite their nationalities. These protections include, among others, the right of every child to education, play, express their opinions freely and the freedom to enjoy all their rights without any form of

discrimination. Therefore, whenever a state excludes a child from any social protection by virtue of their status, such as being a migrant or a non-national, the state undermines the child's rights outlined in the charter. Children on the move also run the risk of being separated from their primary caregivers due to quarantine or confinement measures, and this also exposes them to neglect, abandonment, violence and exploitation. Further, such children, as mentioned above, are also likely to lack access to health treatment and suffer mental and psychosocial impacts, including malnutrition.

At the border entry points, migrant families usually face the risk of refolement due to the increased restrictions on movement owing to the ongoing pandemic. Many migrant families are therefore likely to be turned away at the borders, despite being accompanied by children. Children who are turned away at the borders and forced to return to their countries of origin are likely to not only face stigmatisation from their communities but are also likely to be excluded socially and internally displaced. Further, these children are likely to be subjected to the same violence and poverty which they were escaping. Moreover, the countries where these migrant children came from are at the moment facing strenuous environmental conditions largely attributed to the pandemic and in their attempt to meet the global protections and devise policies to curb the spread of the infections from covid-19 may not be able to cater for the needs of the migrants who have returned home if they are not able to support their citizens in the first place.

Measures that the EAC Partner States can Adopt to Protect Children at the East African Community Border Posts

The covid-19 pandemic has created immense suffering for thousands of children and their families who ordinarily use the borders now and again. Yet the pandemic also allows correcting some of the gaps in policy, legislation and enforcement measures children on the move have been left unprotected. The pandemic also provides a chance for states in the EAC region to position their ample resources during this time in case of any future shocks and emergencies.

Prioritising the Best Interest of the Child in all Policies Established to Respond to the Covid-19 Pandemic

There is a need to prioritize the best interests and incorporate these interests in all policies that are being put in place to respond to the pandemic. In this case, the child's best interest would involve the children to determine their views and perspectives on programs created to protect them while on the move. Officers at the border entry point ought to ensure that when making decisions that may affect children and their well-being; children's best interests must be assessed and taken into account and their views shared freely and safely to inform the decision-making process.

Prioritizing the child's best interest includes providing child-friendly isolation toolkits to protect them from contracting the virus and their general well-being and rights. For instance, child-appropriate isolation kits would include isolating children while taking into consideration of the children's need to play by providing them with toys, the child's right to privacy, availing changing rooms to the parents or guardians and the children's right to food and nutrition by availing nursing stations to breastfeeding mothers or providing food to the children while isolated or quarantined. Further, states may develop guidelines to ensure specialised support toolkits for vulnerable children such as children with disabilities and sick children.

Incorporating the child's best interest also involves availing of social protection to children by ensuring that their socio-economic rights are respected. This can be done by allowing children on the move are able to access to clean water, though access to clean water is already a challenge experienced by many in a number of locations within the EAC region. The authorities at the border post authorities may still ensure that general basic hygiene requirements such as water and soap are provided to the children. In addition, their parents or guardians and the children are offered psychological support through counselling and other therapies where needed.

Adapting the Principle of Non-discrimination and Inclusion at all Stages of the Checkpoint

Pandemics such as the covid-19 menace can increase the chances of discrimination and expose children to risks like abuse, neglect and exploitation. State parties

are obligated by international law to ensure that every child is protected from all forms of discrimination on the basis of the child's status, activities, expressed views, or beliefs of the child's parents, family members, or legal guardians (Convention on the Rights of a Child, 1989). Border post officials must therefore ensure that they accord children equal treatment at the border, despite their status. All children showing up at the border entry must therefore have access to adapted protective resources and support. The EAC partner states may also adopt both internal policies and regulations and regional policies to ensure that social protection programs for children showing up at their borders are inclusive and consider migrant families and displaced persons, notwithstanding their citizenship status, nationality or nationality migration status. Such social protection programs may include humanitarian cash transfers to assist families' access services such as healthcare and buying the basic necessities essential to their survival.

Adopting Effective Communication Mechanisms and Relaying Child-friendly Information

Relaying information about covid-19 to children in age-appropriate methods to enable them to understand the safety and protection measures that they can take to keep themselves safe from contracting the virus would be helpful in protecting the health of children on the move and keep them aware of the impact of contracting the virus. However, since the age of the children who are the targeted audience varies widely, each state party may generally adopt appropriate child-friendly communication mechanisms such as visual representations of the process of hand washing, images of protection measures such as wearing of masks and audio announcements of what needs to be done by children at the entry points during inspections and screening.

Child Participation in the Decision-making Process to Establish the Views and Needs of the Children on the Move

Measures to ensure that the children participate in responses put in place to protect them from the virus may enable a more effective individualized response to the needs of children on the move. The policies put in place should be custom-made to fully engage children on the move to openly and without fear and share their views about how their needs are handled.

This allows the relevant competent authorities to obtain feedback that they may use to amend their laws and policy to take care of the needs of children's welfare.

Technical and Financial Capacity Building to Avail the Necessary Resources to Serve the Needs of Children on the Move

For EAC state parties to serve the needs of children on the move, they must be very intentional in availing the required capacity, both technical and financial, including human capital, to cater for the needs of children on the move during the covid-19 pandemic. For example, building capacity at the border posts includes training health care workers and port staff on children's rights and how to enforce the various regulations for border security while also protecting children's welfare.

Co-operation by EAC State Parties in Regulating Border Movements while Upholding the Rights of Children

Cooperation by the states sharing borders is also imperative to ensure that border control officers have consistent regulatory controls and guidelines on handling children at the entry point with a view to protect the children's rights. This way, consistent laws and regulations across the EAC region would bring harmony in the coordination of protection measures to shield children from abuse. Further, effective collaboration of border agencies such as immigration authorities would lead to more efficient and child-friendly health screening services, provision of first aid facilities, properly equipped quarantine facilities and health facilities for children who have tested positive for the virus.

Multi-sectoral Response and Collaboration

Multi-sectoral response involving all stakeholders such as communities, governments and the various agencies tasked to protect and enforce children's rights, children and parents would be necessary to devise better and more efficient strategies to protect children at the border posts. In addition, close coordination and collaboration across each sector that contributes to children's welfare may assist in the prevention and response to covid-19 when the pandemic is still ongoing and even in the future, as a response to prevent and combat the spread of

infectious diseases. Adopting an inclusive response mechanism involving all stakeholders also involves the inclusion of migrants and children displaced in covid-19 preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts while joining forces with relevant local, national and global partners. A multi-sectoral response helps holistically address the needs of both the children and the caregivers at all society levels and leads to better outcomes for children.

Investing in Statistical Data to Determine the Nature and Extent of Response Required

Quality and reliable data provide a more transparent grasp of the virus's damaging effects on children on the move. It is advisable that the data be collected by enhanced methodologies that reflect gender-diverse populations and intersectional inequalities. Robust data can be used to analyse the age and sex of the most vulnerable children, and ensure sufficient knowledge, tools, and resources can be used to protect the children on the move.

The statistics obtained on aspects such as rates of infection, most affected groups and geographical spread of the virus have informed most policies that today regulate the key response mechanisms to the pandemic. Scientific data and methodologies may equally be used to generate reliable information on the extent of response required with respect to children on

the move. The EAC partner states should also support data-driven analysis that prioritizes the child's welfare through the provision of the necessary resources, including financial support to organizations undertaking research on the impact of the pandemic on children on the move.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: There are numerous challenges that children on the move have had to endure across the EAC borders. It is clearly evident that these challenges have only been exuberated by the covid-19 pandemic. However, despite its many shocks, the pandemic has presented an opportunity for EAC partner states to reassess their strategies and protection mechanism where children on the move are involved.

Recommendations: The study recommends that the best interest of the child in all policies established to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic should be prioritised. The principle of non-discrimination and inclusion at all stages of the checkpoint should be adopted. In addition, the study recommends the adoption of effective communication mechanisms and relaying child-friendly information. Also, it encourages the child participation in the decision-making process to establish the views and needs of the children on the move. Finally, multi-sectoral response and collaboration and investing in statistical data to determine the nature and extent of response required.

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