

PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON THE STATE OF

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN

National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE)

Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID)

Aide et Action, India

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Education
Emergency

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THE CONSULTATION



The National Consultation on the State of Access to Education for Migrant Children took place on August 17, 2022, virtually. The organisers – National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE), Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) and Aide et Action – brought together other organisations working with migrant children across the length and breadth of the country to share their learnings and collectively put together a dossier of recommendations that could shape policy interventions.

The meeting was largely divided into two parts – Part 1 involved participating organisations sharing their experiences on-ground, the challenges faced by migrant children in the context of the pandemic and otherwise, and, solutions that have worked. Part 2 was focused on aggregating recommendations and creating a concrete action plan ahead.

The meeting began with a brief introduction by Gurumurthy Kasinathan of the NCEE introducing the coalition and the work it has done since it was convened amidst the pandemic. Part 1 of the meeting was managed by Umi Daniel of Aide et Action who emphasised the fact that while there were measures in place for addressing the needs of migrant children, steps and policy-level action was required at a national scale. Sajitha Bashir of the NCEE managed Part 2 of the meeting, aggregating recommendations and summing up the key highlights of the discussion.

HAVE WE MADE THESE CHILDREN INVISIBLE?

The two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have completely upended livelihood opportunities and sources of income for migrants. It won't be too far-fetched to assume that it has also completely disrupted the lives of migrant children. Not just their access to essentials such as food and shelter but also to education.

While there are macro numbers around migration, information on migration patterns, and types of industries that migrants are typically employed in, very little or virtually no information exists on the state of access to education for migrant children. Even amidst the pandemic, it took a directive from the Supreme Court (in April 2021) – more than a year after the pandemic had set – in to get states to gather and share information on the number of migrant children and the status of their access to fundamental rights. The rest of the country was adapting to the “virtual education revolution” even as these children were deprived of whatever form of education they had access to previously.



The National Consultation on the State of Access to Education for Migrant Children is a much-needed and timely effort to bring together organisations working with migrants and migrant children to demand concerted action. This charter of demands seeks to provide constructive solutions that governments, educational institutions, industries, and organisations working closely with migrant children can work together on.

WE NEED TO GIVE THEM THEIR DUE RIGHTS!

The National Coalition on Education Emergency (NCEE) was established in 2020 with the intent to bring the state of education in the country to the spotlight. Among the various issues that the NCEE has decided to focus on is that of the state of education of migrant children.

Very little data exists on how migrant children access education, what is done to bridge learning gaps they may experience due to constant migration multiple times a year, and how they cope with learning languages that are not native. The pandemic, subsequent lockdowns, and the complete lack of access to education over an almost two-year period have brought about a wide chasm in learning levels. Given the fact that parents of these children may have had very little or no employment during that period, whether education even remains a priority for them is worth considering.

However, since schools have begun opening up, it is almost as if it is "business as usual" with no attention being paid whatsoever to learning deficits. There is a definite need for comprehensive programs to aid learning recovery and to help children cope with the effects of "online education." Children from marginalised backgrounds who had virtually no access to any kind of education during this phase are being promoted to subsequent classes without any efforts to help them understand concepts that are essential for building a strong foundation. Migrant children are at an even bigger disadvantage since their access to education and learning was already fragmented and now, it has become even more so.



A National Consultation on the State of Access to Education for Migrant Children was organised jointly by NCEE, the Centre for Migration in Development (CMID) and Aide et Action, to bring together like-minded organisations already working with migrants and migrant children to assess the situation on the ground, particularly in the post COVID scenario, and put together a list of recommendations to urgently address the issue of quality and access to education for migrant children. Through these recommendations, we aim to seek redressal for immediate short-term challenges and also open up avenues for longterm policy changes that benefit migrant children.

WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN & WHAT ARE THEIR REALITIES?

The National Consultation on the State of Access to Education for Migrant Children was a rich discussion on on-ground realities and practical solutions that have either seen small-scale success or have the potential for being introduced institutionally. The organisations that are part of the national consultation have either been working with migrants and migrant children or in the field of education over the last several decades.

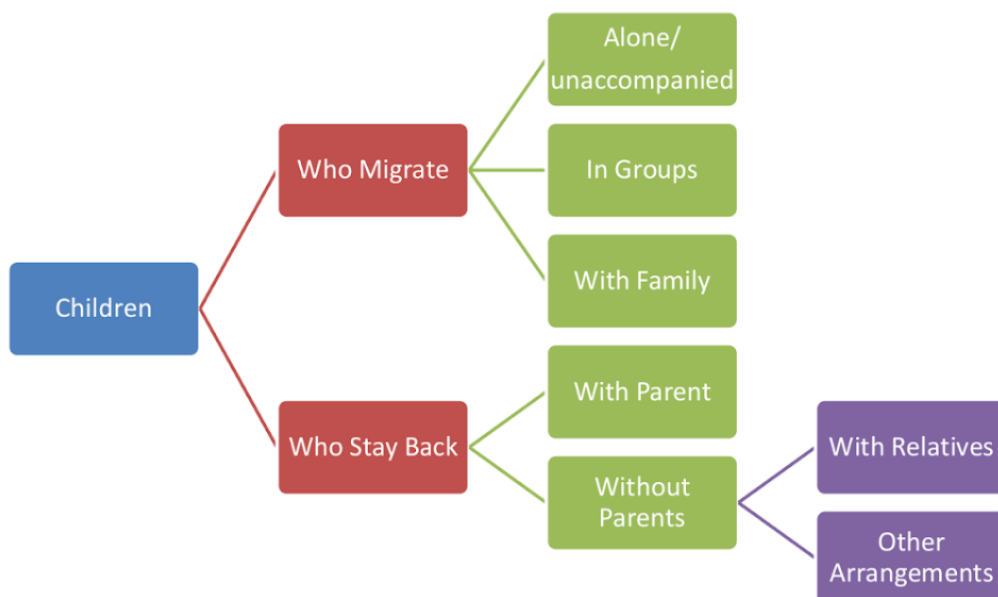
It was unilaterally agreed that we must stop looking at action as being “beneficial” for the children but rather as rights that they need to be given access to. It was also clear that the issues being faced by migrant children pre-date the COVID-19 crisis. But the crisis has really pushed the situation to the brink and necessitated the need for immediate action to ensure these children do not suffer more than they already have. While participating speakers spoke about their respective experiences and insights based on their work in specific states/regions, this report organises the issues around certain common themes that emerged during the discussion. The following issues are being faced across the country and need targeted and specific action.

We do not know the numbers

There is very little information/data available on migrant children. In the absence of such data, how do we expect to formulate policies that will be inclusive to their specific challenges?

Father Francis from Don Bosco Migration Services rued the lack of a national registry on migrant children, a practice that other countries already have in place. Sajitha Bashir of the NCEE raised the concern that even the Unified District Information System on Education (UDISE) does not capture any details related to migration.

Given that migration is a nationwide phenomenon and large-scale inter-state and intra-state migration happens for a good part of the year, can we imagine the kind of learning gaps being created, not to mention potential physical safety and security threats that the children experience? There is an urgent need for visibility on the migration of children and the impact it has on their growth and development.



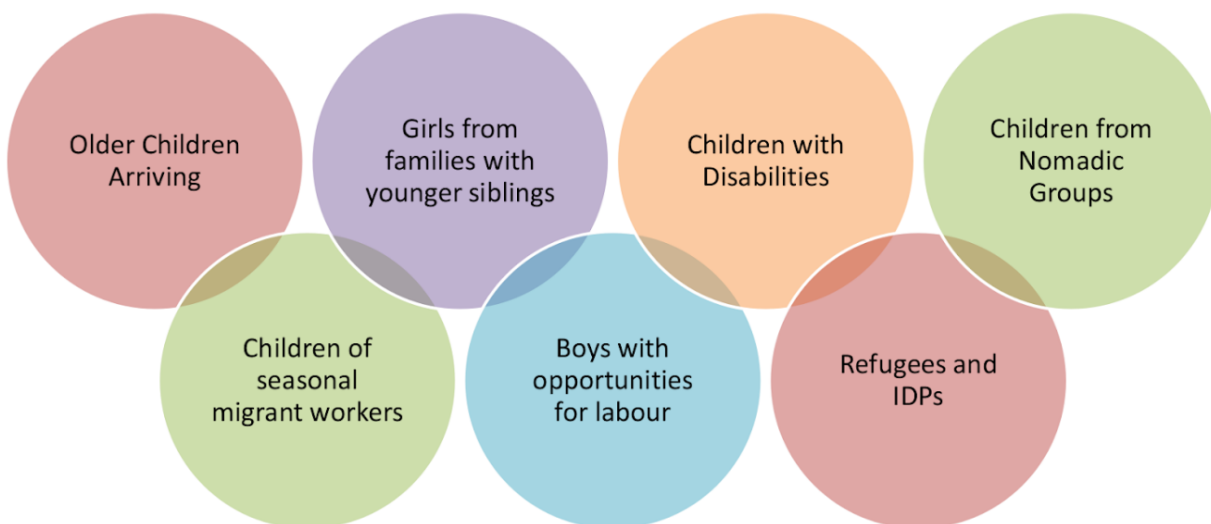
Source: CMID

Migration is a nationwide phenomenon. Yet, we do not clearly know the number of migrant children. in India

Migrant children are not a *homogenous* group

Further compounded by the lack of visibility on numbers is the fact that not all children who have been affected by migration have the same kind of socio-economic circumstances. Baishali Goswami of the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) emphasised the fact that children affected by migration need to be understood in the context of their specific situation so that policies can reflect those. The figure illustrated below represents the kind of complexities that children affected by migration might come with. Mahesh Gajera of the Aajeevika Bureau stressed the fact that sibling care is one of the major reasons for dropouts or children not enrolling in school in the first place. Once we start tracking and identifying migrant children with their specific circumstances, we will be able to create more inclusive policies and measures.

There are Children with Compounded Vulnerabilities



Source: CMID

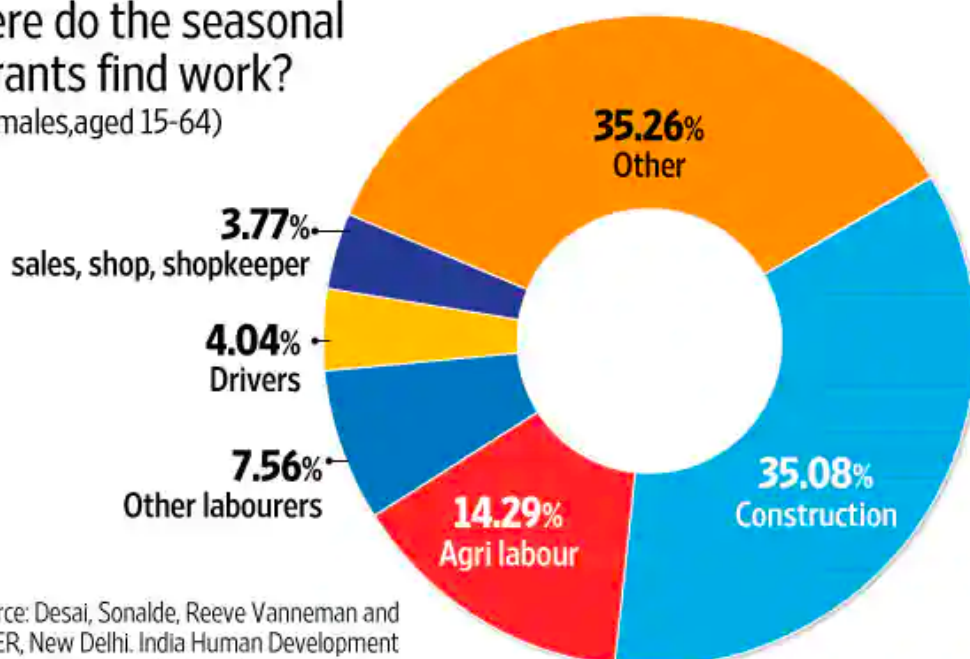
We need to start recognizing migrant children as individuals in their own right with specific requirements.

Industries that employ a majority of migrants are not involved in shaping policies or contributing to migrants' well-being

Migration happens largely for economic reasons. Given that there are certain industries that benefit from migration, it wouldn't be unrealistic to assume that the companies benefiting from migrants are involved in their welfare. Nomita Sikand of Gubbachi, which works primarily in Bengaluru, explained that when it became mandatory for construction sites to have creches for children of labourers working on site, several companies changed their hiring practices. They largely began hiring single men or men who wouldn't travel with their families. This, in turn, affected migration patterns as well with labourers from distant north India travelling to Karnataka for work. If these men then bring in their families, it further compounds education opportunities for children due to language barriers, accessibility and lack of transportation.

Vrushali of Mumbai Mobile Creches recommended that industry bodies representing the interests of specific sectors within the country be involved in consultations. This will enhance access to various players belonging to those industries and also result in definite action across the board. It is time to make stakeholders more accountable.

Where do the seasonal migrants find work?
(rural males, aged 15-64)



Source: Desai, Sonalde, Reeve Vanneman and
NCAER, New Delhi. India Human Development
Survey-II (IHDS-II), 2011-12 and Mint calculations

Source: livemint.com

There is lack of an integrated policy that addresses the basic needs of migrants including nutrition and health, especially for children.

All participants at the national consultation unanimously agreed that there was a need for concerted effort to address challenges of health and nutrition among migrant children as much as there was a need to address their educational requirements. Pankti Jog of Agariya Heet-Rakshak Manch spoke of the need for coordination between government agencies to ensure mid-day meals, books, bags, and other supplies are available to children even in makeshift schools. She was speaking from her experience of working with the Agariya community in the Little Rann of Kutch. Disha D of CMID raised a critical point about school enrolment cycles not being in consonance with migration patterns. She pointed out that in government schools, the allocation of resources happens based on the strength of students on the sixth working day at the beginning of the term. However, migrant children may seek admission to school much later, depending on when they migrate with their families - in such situations, a school may not admit them due to lack of resources. The existence of a single body focused on the welfare of migrants will be able to address these issues effectively.

95% children do not get access to education at destination locations



85% of children do not get immunization and nutrition at their destination locations

Aide et Action study



There is a need for a comprehensive policy that addresses all developmental aspects of migrant childrens' growth.

Apart from unequal access to education, lack of safety, sexual abuse and trafficking affect migrant children disproportionately.

The COVID-19 crisis proved to be an exacerbator of several vulnerabilities that migrant children were already at risk from. Alicia of Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) referred to a survey that the organisation had conducted during the lockdown. The survey indicated that there was an increase in domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and even malnutrition among children during the period when they were confined to their homes/communities that were unsafe. Further, migrant children are also victims of bias and discrimination in the states that they migrate to, often resulting in dropouts and alienation from mainstream educational opportunities. Saroj Kumar Barik of Aide et Action highlighted the fact that children of seasonal migrant workers (those working in construction, brick kilns, rice mills, etc.) are most vulnerable since they spend a considerable amount of time on informal work sites. Vulnerabilities include forced employment at an early age, abuse, and exploitation, and lack of access to education, nutrition, and even immunisation, among other things.

“A good deal of academic research supported by the efforts of non-government organisations (NGO), international agencies and the government on the conditions of the children of poor families in India highlights the phenomenon of child labour that persists despite the recent trends of economic growth, and reveals unsafe migration and the trafficking of children for labour, characterised by exploitation at the hands of abusive agents, employers and others.”

www.ilo.org

Larger Issues Associated With Education of Migrant Children That Need Further Deliberation

While it was acknowledged that there are several big and small policy measures in place to address the needs of migrant children across the country, there is a need for larger policy and programmatic level frameworks to be able to address the needs of migrant children in an effective manner. During the discussion, several nuanced issues emerged as well which require further deliberation and thought. They include the following:

Embracing multilingualism

In a country like India where multilingualism is a reality, how do we deal with the issue of children from states in one region migrating to another and not having a common language with the destination state? Should the child have the right to choose to study in their own mother tongue? How will the destination state enable that if there are migrants from multiple states coming there, each with a different language? Assuming that the child does study in the language of the state that they migrate to, what if they happen to migrate back to their state of origin? What happens then?



Protecting children's rights in migration

Shantha Sinha, a former member of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) opined that policy measures must be put in place to ensure that parents migrating for work have a real option when it comes to making choices about their children's education. She referred to a study where it emerged that about 15% of parents migrated without their children to ensure that their children could continue studying. Shantha Sinha was of the opinion that since a considerable number of parents were already doing it, enabling it institutionally would provide that option to several others and enable many children to continue studying rather than migrating with their families for want of an alternative.

We would like to emphasise here that while the migration is a right and there are several individuals who may want to migrate with their families irrespective, the point being made here is that they must have a real choice in the matter.



How should we view migration? A problem or part of the process of development?

Swati Chakraborty of the Child In Need Institute (CINI) raised a pertinent question as to whether migration should be framed as a “problem” or as a phenomenon that needs a “solution”. She spoke of the fact that several countries, including India, constitutionally guarantee migration as a fundamental right. When migration is seen from this enabling framework, policies and measures that emerge from it will also be enabling rather than benevolent.



LET US SHAPE INCLUSIVE POLICIES

The recommendations included herein are practical and actionable insights derived from years of on-ground observations. The working group is willing to extend any support required to help convert these recommendations into guidelines and policy measures.

Need for an integrated migrant children development policy at the national level

It has been emphatically established in this document and through decades of work with migrant children that the country lacks a comprehensive policy that addresses all key aspects of growth and development for migrant children. This policy framework also needs to have room for interpretation at the state, district, and even village levels so that implementation is possible based on specific nuances at those levels. Pertinent issues that need to be addressed through this framework include access, the need for integration with the mainstream, nutrition, and health, adjustments with migration cycles, and so on.

Need for state and national level data on migration patterns/state of education of migrant children

There is a clear need for specific data to be able to create inclusive policies that ensure migrant children are able to access their rights fully.



Collaborations between state governments on migrant policies

There are characteristic trends in the seasons when migrants travel to other towns, cities, and/or states and the periods during which they stay there. Economic reasons dominate migration decisions. The argument, therefore, is that the town, city, or state that the migrants are moving to benefits from increased economic activity due to migration. This lends itself to the possibility of both the native town/city/state (also known as source) and the receiving town/city/state (also known as destination) coming to some kind of an economic arrangement that creates a fund to be utilised for the well-being of the migrant population. The recommendation is that these funds be utilised for providing safe working environments; access to food and clean water and to educational institutions imparting quality education for children.

Deeper industry/private sector involvement in creating access to quality education for children

There are economic benefits that states and organisations employing migrant workers enjoy. It is, therefore, inevitable that the stakeholders be involved far more in addressing the needs of migrant workers and children. Not-for-profits already working with migrant children can be involved in running and managing centers by collaborating with the employers resulting in quality education and other resources being provided consistently to these groups.

Evolving a nuanced curriculum for migrant children

Apart from low enrolment levels, the retention of migrant children in schools is a major problem. Sibling care, lack of transportation, learning in non-native languages, and alienation due to discrimination and bias are among the primary reasons. Further, language proves to be a major barrier, especially for older children, who may not be able to grasp a new language as easily and comfortably as young children. There is a need for evolving a curriculum, especially for migrant children that factor in seasonal migrations, language sensitivities and needs of older children.

NATIONAL CONSULTATION SPEAKERS AND ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH MIGRANT CHILDREN

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- Pankti Jog, Agariya Heetrakshak Manch
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