Adolescence, food crisis and migration

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Adolescents who migrate because of food crises face distinct risks. Specific strategies are needed to prevent and respond to this phenomenon.

At times of crisis related to drought and ensuing food shortages, most child-focused actors have looked primarily at the youngest children, and specifically at the problems of widespread malnutrition, high infant mortality rates and the large number of drop-outs from primary school. Little attention has been paid to older children, and in particular to the dynamics of labour, migration and violence that affect this group. Adolescent children – those between the ages of 10 and 18 – are more at risk of becoming separated from their families and being exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse, often in connection with migration from affected areas in order to look for work. However, in spite of this there has been little consideration of the impact and the specific measures needed to reach adolescent children.

In order to find out more about the experiences of adolescent children affected by food crisis, Plan International in West Africa recently conducted research on the impact of food crises on the protection of adolescent girls and boys in Burkina Faso and Niger.¹

A major finding concerned the pressure on adolescents – and especially boys – to migrate or travel in order to find work. Families affected by food crisis who rely predominantly on agriculture for food and for income are forced to find alternative sources of revenue when harvests fail. Adolescents are often called upon to support their families in these times of crisis. In Burkina Faso, 81% of boys and 58% of girls reported that they had to undertake work due to the food crisis compared to 75% of boys and 42% of girls before the food crisis. In Niger, the percentage of adolescents reporting undertaking work during the crisis almost doubled compared to levels before the crisis – from 31% to 60%. Furthermore, whereas before the food crisis many children would have been involved in agricultural work close to home, the onset of crisis pushes families to send adolescents outside their communities to find paid work. In Burkina Faso, 17% of adolescent boys and 10% of adolescent girls reported that they had been obliged to move due to the food crisis. In both countries, adolescent boys moved to larger towns and even abroad to seek jobs as manual labourers or street vendors. Boys also sought work on mining sites. Working on a mining site did not necessarily require children to migrate but rather to travel back and forth periodically, with boys especially likely to spend nights at mining sites. Girls were more likely to stay within the community, undertaking a greater share of unpaid domestic labour, including gathering food or caring for younger children.

Migration and movement for work also appeared to go hand in hand with exposure to violence as adolescents moved without adults to protect them. In Burkina Faso, 26% of adolescent boys interviewed, compared to just 2% of girls, declared they had been a victim of violence at least once due to the impact of the food crisis. In discussions, it was found that this related primarily to exposure to violence on mining sites, where adolescents

¹Plan International/Shona Hamilton

Niger
could be attacked by older miners looking to steal their findings. In addition to exposure to violence, the work itself could often be dangerous and hard. While fewer children who worked in cities or abroad were present during the study, the accounts of their parents and peers echo other studies that suggest that these children too are more likely to be exposed to violence and exploitation.

The feeling of marginalisation amongst these children was emphasised. Children who had moved to towns and cities or abroad were reported to face significant difficulties, often working illegally in countries and cities with different cultures and values to their own, thus exposing them to violence, harassment and exploitation. Adolescents and their communities in this survey were also not aware of any initiatives in their communities or at their destinations aimed at preventing and responding to violence resulting from the food crisis.

The increase in children engaging in work was, not surprisingly, accompanied by a decrease in children going to school. However, the contributions made by adolescents at times of crisis are considered very important and essential for the survival of families. Adolescents themselves did not dwell on their future or their own situations or problems but seemed to accept the need to take on additional responsibilities as part of the natural order of things. On the whole, the role of adolescents as breadwinners did not appear to be enforced by adults. As one adolescent girl remarked, simply, “We’re aware that there’s nothing to eat if we don’t work.”

Interestingly, the fact that food crises impelled many adolescents to take up new roles in the family as breadwinners in some cases afforded them a greater say in family and community decision-making – for many girls and boys, the onset of a food crisis means an abrupt end to their childhood. The pressure on adolescents is significant and has consequences for their physical and psychological development; many boys and girls interviewed over the course of the study spoke of their desperation and hardships due simply to the fact that they were facing extreme poverty and hunger. The darker side of the new responsibilities of adolescents was also reported in increases in risky behaviour – in particular, exposure to prostitution and drugs.

**Dearth of responses**

In spite of the significant and specific impact of food crises on adolescents, there appear to be few if any programmes designed to respond to their needs. The participation of adolescents in humanitarian assistance programmes designed for adults also did not appear to respond to their specific needs. Food for work and cash for work programmes in the areas assessed in this study were also reported to have had little effect in preventing adolescent migration. In particular, since adolescents under 16 are not allowed to participate in these projects, migration for work was one of the only viable strategies for them to increase family income.

Discussions of food crises in the humanitarian world seem to revolve these days around the concept of resilience. Yet within this debate little place is given to issues of migration, protection and education. Furthermore, humanitarian responses to slow-onset food crises have typically not invested in preventing and responding to the specific issues affecting adolescents, including the pressures on adolescents to migrate out of their communities to find work. In addition to the negative impacts this has on individual children in terms of their exposure to violence and the consequences on their mental and physical health and development, there are also long-term consequences for community development in areas vulnerable to food crises. The pressure on adolescents to take up low-skilled work as a short-term coping strategy traps communities in a vicious cycle of poverty as children are unable to complete basic education or access opportunities for skilled employment.

Future efforts to build resilience in areas vulnerable to food crisis need to consider initiatives that not only aim to reduce the vulnerability of household livelihoods but
also proactively support adolescents as key actors in their households and communities in times of crisis. For example, supporting adolescent children to develop skills in diverse income-generating activities such as poultry farming or vegetable gardening that can be maintained alongside school attendance could not only encourage parents to send children to school but also reduce the pressures on children to migrate to find work.

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Criminal violence and displacement in Mexico

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Rampant criminal violence, from direct coercion and physical threats to the erosion of the quality of life and livelihood opportunities, pushes people to move in a variety of ways. Not everyone forced to move has equal access to protection or asylum.

According to official Mexican government information, 47,000 people were killed as a result of the wave of intense criminal violence which started in 2007. Civil society estimates put the figure as high as 70,000 in April 2012. Displacement of civilians has been a significant effect of the drug war in Mexico.

Civil society organisations, academic institutions and the media have progressively begun to document cases and patterns of forced displacement caused by drug-cartel violence, seeking to untangle the different forms of human mobility and distinguish migration that is forced from migration that is not. Overall, the proportion of people leaving violent municipalities is four to five times higher than that of people leaving non-violent municipalities with similar socio-economic conditions. In addition to displacement of Mexicans, the safety of Central and South American migrants making their way to the US through Mexico has become greatly threatened as a result of increased insecurity and drug-cartel violence. It has been estimated that 70,000 Central and South American migrants have disappeared since 2007 while crossing through Mexico.¹

This context begs the question: at what point does criminal violence give rise to a humanitarian crisis? The intensity and perversiveness of the violence in Mexico certainly poses a widespread threat to life: between 50,000 and 70,000 people killed in a six-year period is by any measure an enormous loss of life. Furthermore, systematic and large-scale kidnapping of migrants as well as mass murders of migrants present a widespread threat to life and physical security and constitute a humanitarian crisis. Finally, the violence has also been associated with loss of livelihoods and subsistence, which pushes people to leave.

While violence and insecurity need not occur in the context of an internal armed conflict in order to constitute a humanitarian crisis, the existence of a conflict would reinforce the view that Mexico’s situation of violence does amount to a humanitarian crisis. In fact a prima facie analysis of Mexico’s violence under criteria established by IHL shows that the situation meets most of the criteria for the existence of a non-international armed conflict, despite the fact that Mexican drug cartels do not have a political agenda or an ideology.

What protection do existing legal frameworks offer?
Acts that violate criminal law (including robbery, assault, rape and murder) occur in every society and are predominantly dealt with through retributive justice