

## National Inter-Agency Working Group (NIAWG) Public Statement

### ***Child Protection Week 2021: An urgent need to reach the most vulnerable “protecting ALL children during COVID & Beyond”***

**1 June 2021**

As we commemorate Child Protection Week (30 May – 6 June 2021), an umbrella body comprising eight humanitarian organisations, the National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children (NIAWG) acknowledges the achievements and efforts made by both government and non-government actors to ensure the rights of migrant and displaced children.

The Working Group wishes to highlight the gaps that remain within our child protection system, and to make recommendations towards further strengthening national child protection systems particularly with the different categories of migrant children such as (trafficked, stateless, undocumented, asylum seeker, refugees, foundlings & children of undocumented parents) among others.

In the context of the COVID - 19 pandemic, the NIAWG notes with concern that a significant number of children still do not have their birth registered as a result of cumbersome birth registration requirements such as:

1. Stringent DNA requirements, which are highly costly, making it nearly difficult for most parents who are willing to register their children’s births to do so;
2. Existing gaps in the Births and Deaths Registration Act which does not make provision for unmarried fathers to register the births of their children, under their surnames, where the mothers are not present or their whereabouts are unknown;

This lack of documentation perpetuates exploitation and abuse of these categories of children, as access to basic protective and development services such as education, health care and social assistance are highly dependent on birth certificates.

As we approach the Day of the African Child on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June (also commemorated as Youth Day in in South Africa), we are reminded that South Africa is a state party to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. It is fitting that the theme for this year is “30 years after the adoption of the Charter: Accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2040 for an Africa fit for children”.

#### ***Members of the National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of USMC:***

*Centre for Child Law, Consortium for refugees and migrants in South Africa, International Organisation for Migration, Jesuit Refugee Services, , Lawyers for Human Rights, Save the Children South Africa Terre des hommes, United Nations Childrens Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*

Agenda 2040 calls on governments, South Africa included, to ensure every child’s survival and a healthy childhood, that every child has access to education, that every child is protected against violence and abuse as well as ensuring that every child is free from the impact of armed conflicts and other disasters or emergencies. Aspiration 3 in Agenda 2040 specifically calls for “Every child’s birth and other vital statistics to be registered.”

The members of the NIAWG Committee call on the South African government to:

- Ensure that social service practitioners are well resourced to identify and render assistance to children in need of care and protection so as to ensure their protection and well-being. This includes, ensuring proper placement of children facing harm to places of safety, and schools particularly undocumented children as they face increased risks of trafficking, exploitation and abuse; Urge the Department of Home Affairs to re-open the citizenship and permanent residence section to ensure access to documentation for unaccompanied and separated migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, stateless children and South African children whose parents are currently struggling to overcome barriers to birth registration;
- Urge the Department of Home Affairs to provide further support to families in relation to the online permit renewal processes;
- The Department of Basic Education particularly in Gauteng province ensures that provision is provided for enrolment of children without documentation into the entry level school grades such as grade 1 and grade 8 through the online system.
- Ensure that children are not denied access to fundamental socio-economic rights due to a lack of documentation.

As South Africa, and the world, continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Child Protection Week and the Day of the African Child are key reminders of the urgent need to escalate assistance to the most vulnerable.

**About the NIAWG**

*The National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children is a committee comprised of organisations who work on issues related to children affected by migration and displacement, including and not limited to unaccompanied and separated migrant children as well as stateless children.*

For further information, please contact Nyika Machenjedge 0717652472 or [NMachenjedze@savethechildren.org.za](mailto:NMachenjedze@savethechildren.org.za))

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