

# 2020 REFUGEE CHILD RIGHTS CRISIS IN EUROPE



FREE. SAFE. EDUCATED.

## BRIEFING

Accurate data is difficult to find, but the number of unaccompanied children who are 'on the move' around the world ranges from 110,000 to 300,000. These are children who have been forced to leave home and are trying to survive without a member of their family, usually in refugee or informal settlements.

At present, the 100 Million campaign is working to end the ongoing child rights crisis affecting almost two thousand unaccompanied children trapped in overcrowded refugee settlements on the Greek islands. These children are particularly vulnerable due to the extremely unsafe conditions they are living in, and the months or even years they have to wait for their asylum claims to be processed. The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic also poses grave threats to the health and safety of these unaccompanied minors on the Greek islands.

We're calling upon the governments of European Union (EU) Member States to immediately commit to the emergency relocation of unaccompanied children from the Greek islands to other European countries.

We're asking our activists and partner organisations to support our call by lobbying their respective European governments to fulfil their responsibilities to these highly vulnerable children.

## CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Imagine being a child told you have to leave your home immediately. Imagine not knowing where you're going, or how long you would be gone for. Imagine the impact on your rights as you remain on the move. Your freedom. Your safety. Your education.

This is the reality for millions of children on the move right now.

### WHO ARE CHILDREN ON THE MOVE?

The term 'children on the move' includes many different individuals, from refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and asylum-seekers, to economic migrants and trafficking victims. A child migrant is also always under the age of 18.

Factors causing children to have to leave their homes include violence, conflict, natural disasters including those created by climate disaster, as well as extreme poverty and the need to be reunited with family members.

A lack of data means no one knows exactly how many of the world's children are on the move. However, according to the UN Refugee Agency, children below the age of 18 years of age make up around half of the world's 25.9 million refugees, and this figure doesn't take into account any children of the world's 41.3 million internally displaced people.

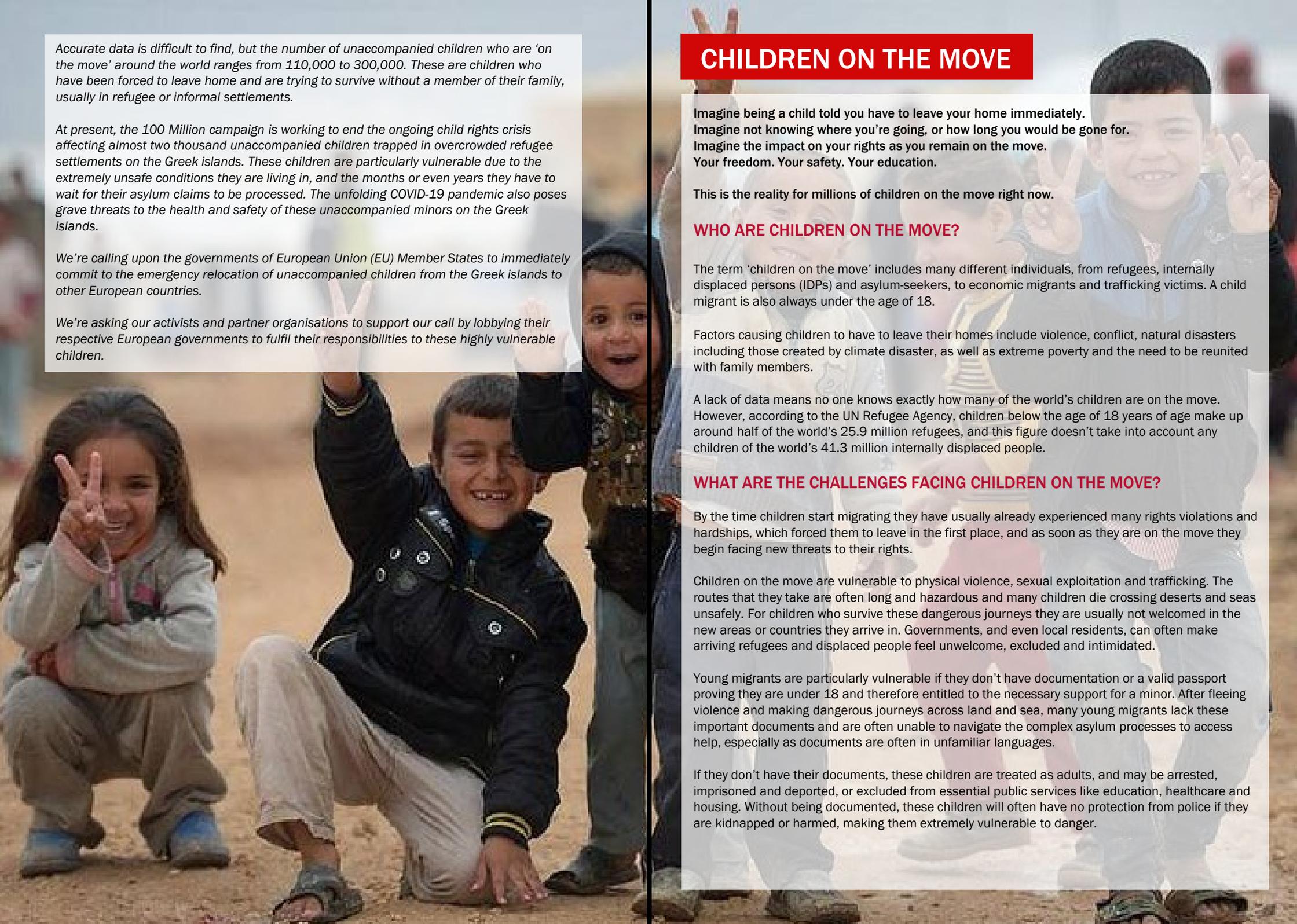
### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING CHILDREN ON THE MOVE?

By the time children start migrating they have usually already experienced many rights violations and hardships, which forced them to leave in the first place, and as soon as they are on the move they begin facing new threats to their rights.

Children on the move are vulnerable to physical violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking. The routes that they take are often long and hazardous and many children die crossing deserts and seas unsafely. For children who survive these dangerous journeys they are usually not welcomed in the new areas or countries they arrive in. Governments, and even local residents, can often make arriving refugees and displaced people feel unwelcome, excluded and intimidated.

Young migrants are particularly vulnerable if they don't have documentation or a valid passport proving they are under 18 and therefore entitled to the necessary support for a minor. After fleeing violence and making dangerous journeys across land and sea, many young migrants lack these important documents and are often unable to navigate the complex asylum processes to access help, especially as documents are often in unfamiliar languages.

If they don't have their documents, these children are treated as adults, and may be arrested, imprisoned and deported, or excluded from essential public services like education, healthcare and housing. Without being documented, these children will often have no protection from police if they are kidnapped or harmed, making them extremely vulnerable to danger.



## REFUGEE CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

In every part of the world, there are families and children who are being forced to flee their homes and their countries to find safety. Each refugee situation represents a child rights emergency. While this briefing is calling for action from European Union states, it is critical to remember the sheer scale of this global injustice.

80% of the world's refugee population lives in countries neighbouring their home country. This typically means that most refugee host countries are those which are less economically developed, with fewer resources available to support the refugee communities to access their rights. Uganda is home to the most unaccompanied child refugees, with over 41,000 living in refugee camps and settlements.

Europe is home to some of the world's richest countries, and their lack of action to protect some of the world's most vulnerable children on its doorstep is abysmal. The urgent needs of refugee children, particularly those living without the protection of family, must be met by these countries with wealth and resources.

The top 5 countries which host the largest community of refugees are (in order):

TURKEY	3.7 MILLION
PAKISTAN	1.4 MILLION
UGANDA	1.2 MILLION
SUDAN	1.1 MILLION
GERMANY	1.1 MILLION

The Bidibidi settlement in Uganda seen from the top of a hill. © Yilmaz Polat/AI Jazeera

## WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE GREEK ISLANDS?

In recent years families have been forced to flee conflict in Middle Eastern countries including Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many have been forced to move westwards to find safety in Europe, but are facing violence and human rights violations both during their journey to, and arrival on, the Greek Islands.

### SYRIAN CONFLICT

In Europe, a large number of refugees, including many unaccompanied minors, are trapped in 'limbo' on the Greek Islands between Turkey and the European mainland. This means they are waiting for their asylum process to be completed, and are forced to live without adequate protection – sometimes for well over a year.

Turkey shares an eastern border with Syria, a country which has suffered from 9 years of brutal conflict. Turkey hosts 63.5% of the world's refugees, including 3.6 million Syrian refugees.

In December 2019 the conflict in Syria significantly escalated, and nearly **1 million people have been forced to flee their homes since then – over half of these are children.**

### TURKEY OPENING ITS BORDERS

With even more Syrian refugees being forced to flee to neighbouring Turkey, the country announced at the end of February 2020 it was no longer able to support the millions of refugees it was already hosting from across the Middle East. The Turkish government therefore decided to open its borders to encourage onward movement of refugees towards Greece so they can access the European Union.

Since then, thousands of refugees have attempted to cross the border into neighbouring Greece – either by land or by boat to neighbouring islands including Lesbos, Samos and Chios. Some refugees have been stranded in a 'no-man's land' at the land border between Greece and Turkey, without any kind of protection or support. Those trying to reach the islands have undertaken journeys which are extremely dangerous, with reports of children drowning in the process.

### ARRIVING IN GREECE

There are currently approximately 90,000 refugees in Greece. 50,000 of these have been given settled status in the country, and the **other 40,000 are being held on the Greek islands in overcrowded reception centres designed for just 6,000 people.**

These people are now stuck in an impossible situation without shelter or support. **The situation is even worse for children who have been separated from their parents or caregivers.** Provisions for safe accommodation and protection are insufficient, with many unaccompanied children not receiving dedicated housing and being forced to find shelter for themselves. These children are unable to access their fundamental rights and are highly vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CHILDREN?

Children on the move and those awaiting approval of their application to be relocated safely are often denied their most basic rights including education, safety or healthcare.

Refugee children without any parents or caregivers are classified as unaccompanied minors – some of the world’s most vulnerable children. There are an estimated 1,800 unaccompanied children currently on the Greek Islands, all in desperate need of protection.

## IMMEDIATE IMPACT

The unaccompanied minors are being deprived of their fundamental rights in the camps, including access to:

- **Shelter & safety** – with insufficient safe accommodation, children are highly vulnerable to violence, trafficking and abuse. In March one child was killed after being trapped in a shelter which caught fire, and NGOs have warned about the rise of sexual exploitation in the camps.
- **Clean water** – there’s an estimated 1 tap providing clean water per 1,300 people in these camps, leaving children vulnerable to sickness and disease.
- **Medical care** – in the camps’ overcrowded conditions, disease spreads quickly and there are few medical services available for children who become sick.
- **Education** – without adequate schooling in the camps, many children are receiving no education, meaning they are missing out on crucial learning and development and are at higher risk of exploitation such as child labour.

## THE IMPACT OF CORONA VIRUS (COVID-19)

The coronavirus pandemic also poses an immediate threat to the safety of refugee children. Not only does the pandemic risk the existing needs of refugee children being pushed further down the agenda, children living in refugee camps are more vulnerable to the impacts of coronavirus, and are least likely to have access to protection.

Due to the unhygienic, overcrowded living conditions on the Greek island camps, the threat of an outbreak among residents is extremely serious. It is not easy to keep a distance – let alone ‘stockpile’ goods, pay for them electronically, or even wash hands regularly with soap and water. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has described these conditions as **providing “the perfect storm for a COVID-19 outbreak”**.

Despite current information from the World Health Organisation suggesting that children are more likely to recover from the disease than older people, an outbreak would have a devastating impact on caregivers, increasing the number of unaccompanied children, and likely overburden the already weak healthcare, food and sanitation structures. All of this would undoubtedly further harm marginalised children who rely on these people and basic services to survive.

## LONG-TERM IMPACT

Many of these children have already experienced significant trauma on their journey and this experience and subsequent stay in the dire conditions of the camps also exposes children longer-term impacts such as:

- **Mental health** – refugee children are in desperate need of psychological support and therapy; instead, they are experiencing further trauma in the camps which is causing them to experience anxiety, depression, recurrent headaches and inability to sleep. UNICEF has also warned children in the camps are at risk of being **“set back for years to come”** due to emotional distress and anxiety caused by uncertainty surrounding family reunification.
- **Future employment** – due to disruption in their education, even to those who are relocated and enter schools in their host country, refugee children are hugely disadvantaged in comparison to their peers. This can lead to few or no qualifications, which risks future unemployment, financial security and independence.
- **Integration** – as a result of the above, and through no fault of their own, refugee children can often experience difficulties in integrating in host communities. Speaking the native language, doing well at school and entering the job market are all so important to build social bonds, yet doing this when you have horrific unresolved trauma and haven’t been in education can be incredibly, and unfairly, difficult.



Moria camp on Lesbos has grown from a population of 5,000 in July 2019 to around 20,000. © Angelos Tzortzinis/Alamy

# WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN EUROPE?

The Greek government's processing of refugees arriving on the Greek Islands is taking several months, even years. As long as this process is delayed, these children are denied their essential rights. **We must act now.**

**There are nearly half a billion people living within the EU**, and the EU is made up of **some of the richest countries in the world**. EU member states can and should be able to welcome 1,800 of the world's most vulnerable children and provide them with the essential care they so desperately need.

That's why the 100 Million campaign, alongside our youth-led partners representing tens of millions of school and university students across Europe, the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) and the European Students Union (ESU) and 87 other human rights organisations, are **calling for EU-member countries to immediately relocate unaccompanied minors from the Greek islands to safety**. This call to action is even more important considering the current COVID-19 pandemic.

## WHICH EU MEMBER COUNTRIES HAVE ALREADY COMMITTED THEIR SUPPORT?

Across the European Union, there are an estimated 30,000 unaccompanied refugee children, with the vast majority being housed in Spain and Italy (over 25,000), usually having taken the treacherous sea route from North Africa to Europe.

The following countries have pledged their support in relocating unaccompanied minors from the Greek islands: Germany, France, Finland, Luxembourg and Portugal. We don't know exactly how many children they will eventually take but current numbers don't seem to cover the estimated 1,800 unaccompanied minors in urgent need.

## WHO HAS THE POWER TO DECIDE WHETHER TO RELOCATE THESE CHILDREN?

**Ultimately, EU-member states' national governments have the power to bring unaccompanied minors to safety from the Greek islands.**

For a government to change its position and welcome unaccompanied minors, the most senior ministers need to agree and publicly announce the decision.

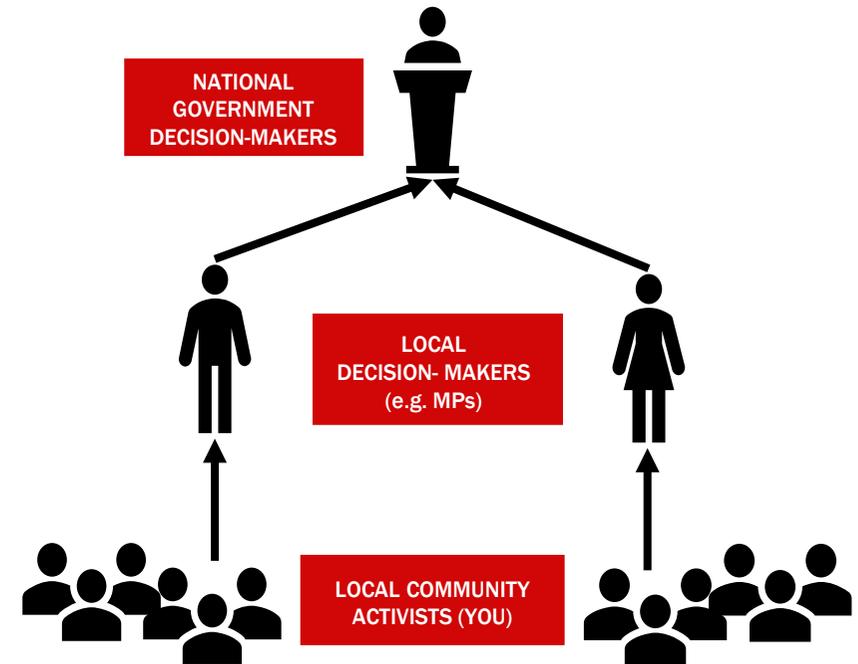
These senior ministers include those responsible for immigration, health and social care, home/interior affairs, foreign affairs, overseas aid and development, as well as your prime minister/president.

Most of us don't have direct access to these powerful decision-makers, but they can often be reached indirectly through our local decision-makers, including parliamentary representatives.

# HOW YOU CAN CREATE CHANGE

To convince these senior ministers, we need to create pressure from citizens and politicians within their own country.

We need local decision-makers to hear how much their constituents (the people they are elected to represent) care about unaccompanied refugee children on the Greek islands, and we need to demand that they pressure the government to take action and welcome these children to safety.



## WHY YOUTH ACTIVISM ON THIS ISSUE IS SO IMPORTANT

The issue of unaccompanied minors on the Greek islands is a child rights' crisis. Therefore, as young people, you are the best people to speak to decision-makers, as you understand better than anyone in your community what it means to be young and how those children might be feeling.

We have written a **draft letter** that you can find on the next page (and downloadable on our website [www.100million.org/act-now/refugees](http://www.100million.org/act-now/refugees)) that you can send to your local decision-maker. You can use this letter as a starting point, but you should also think about adding your own personal message(s) alongside it, as these can be very persuasive.

Dear Minister of the Interior,

As your constituent[s] in [constituency name], I am writing to ask you to act on an urgent issue of significant personal concern to [me/us], **to publicly support and use your legislative power to immediately relocate unaccompanied children from the Greek islands to other European countries, including [INSERT YOUR COUNTRY].**

As you will have seen, violence on Lesbos and the other Greek islands is escalating and 1,800 children are trapped in increasingly unsafe and deteriorating camps and informal settlements. These children are deprived of access to their most basic rights such as shelter, water, food, medical and psychosocial care, as well as education. This is no place for any child, let alone children who do not have the protection of family.

At the beginning of March 2020, over 87 organisations came together to issue a joint call to action to the governments of European Union Member states. It highlights the devastatingly cruel situation unaccompanied children on the islands are facing. In Moria camp in Lesbos, now home to over 20,000 people, “seriously ill children... are being deprived of medical care” according to Médecins Sans Frontières, and psychologists working with unaccompanied children have stated that an increasing number of children are experiencing psychological distress, and in some cases self-harming or attempting suicide.” By February 2020, there were 1,000 unaccompanied children in Moria and the surrounding ‘Olive Grove’ and ‘high numbers’ of these children are homeless, sleeping in the olive grove without tents and beside adult strangers. Data from the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, suggests half the unaccompanied minors in Greece are living “outside appropriate accommodation, including 1,060 living in informal/insecure housing conditions”.

The European Union response to arrivals of people seeking protection at its borders has fundamentally failed. **The islands and open reception and identification centres (RICs) have morphed into overcrowded camps, constantly criticised for their human rights violations, containing thousands of people in inhumane conditions, including the most vulnerable unaccompanied children.**

While the Greek government needs to ensure it meets its legal obligations towards unaccompanied children, it is time for European leaders to take responsibility in providing these children on EU territory with appropriate care and protection. There is precedent for change, providing a basis for further solidarity:

- France recently committed to accepting 400 asylum seekers;
- Mayors in Germany have expressed their willingness to relocate individuals from the island along with the governments of Finland and Ireland; and
- Serbia and Greece have initiated discussion on the transfer for 100 unaccompanied children.

**[/We] urge you, as [my/our representative/Minister], to join and amplify these efforts to protect children.** We are European citizens as well as [INSERT YOUR NATIONALITY] citizens, and we ask you to refuse to accept this situation in our Europe, ‘founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights’. These are children who are now living with the threat of COVID-19, but without any of the protections children in our country have to prevent them from becoming sick and infecting the vulnerable community in which they live. **Please publicly support and use your legislative power to immediately relocate [INSERT FIGURE] unaccompanied children from the Greek islands to [INSERT YOUR COUNTRY].**

**[/We] would like to request a call with you, to discuss this matter in more detail. [/We] look forward to your response.**

In solidarity and friendship,  
XXXXXX

## REACHING YOUR LOCAL DECISION-MAKER

There are different ways you can ensure your local decision-maker hears your demands. We’d suggest using multiple methods to increase your chances of a response. During these extraordinary times of a health pandemic, your decision-maker may be especially busy, but the more messages they receive on this issue the more likely the needs of refugee children will be heard.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Letter writing** – a handwritten, personalised letter remains one of the most powerful advocacy tools. You can usually find the address of your target on their personal or government website, calling them in advance to check they are still using this address during the COVID-19 pandemic would also be a good idea before posting!
- **Email** – emailing your letter is fast and safe way to reach your decision-maker. Digital tools are especially important when offline options are limited. For example, you could attach a video of yourself discussing your demands or photos of you and your friends who support this action.
- **Social media** – amplify your demand and increase public awareness of your demands by sharing them on social media and asking your friends and followers to repost. You can find downloadable graphics, videos and suggested text on our website [www.100million.org/act-now/refugees](http://www.100million.org/act-now/refugees). If you tag the profile of the decision-maker you’re targeting this can also strengthen accountability through public pressure.

We would also usually suggest meeting them face-to-face, perhaps by visiting their constituency office in person or holding a rally. However, it’s critical that we all listen to the social distancing and isolation recommendations to protect ourselves and each other from contracting or spreading COVID-19, especially in our activism. On the next page you can find some alternatives as well as how to prepare if restrictions are lifted in the future.



# WHAT IF YOU GET A RESPONSE FROM YOUR DECISION-MAKER?

## IF THEY AGREE TO A MEETING

A letter to your decision-maker is often the first step in persuading them to act. Usually a face-to-face meeting is necessary to secure a commitment. In light of the restrictions in many parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, a physical meeting is no longer safe. However, this doesn't mean your elected decision-makers do not have a responsibility to hear your concerns, you can ask for a phone call, Skype or Zoom meeting instead.

## IF THEY RESPOND POSITIVELY

If your decision-maker tells you they will take action on this issue that's great! But the work doesn't stop there, it's important to make sure they know you will be following their progress and holding them accountable on their commitments. Here's a suggestion of what to do next:

1. Reply and thank them for their words but let them know you will be following up to ensure they turn this into action. Ask for details, such as a timeline, of what they will do and request a meeting in the near future to discuss progress they've made so far.
1. Make their promise as visible as possible! For example thank them on social media posting a picture of their response.
2. Let us know what they've said! Send their response to us so we can also publicly share their commitment and support you in tracking their action. You can find all the ways to contact us in the box below.

## IF THEY DO NOT RESPOND OR RESPOND NEGATIVELY

If your letter doesn't inspire the response you want, it is time to increase the pressure. Be as creative as you can, especially in light of COVID-19 restrictions. For example can you organise a social media blast, asking friends to join you in mass-tweeting or posting under all their Facebook comments? Could you send them another letter every day until they respond? Or ask neighbours in your local area to hang banners with your demands outside of their windows.

Also if they respond negatively, let us know what they've said and we can support you to reply countering their points.

### CONTACT US:

- Email our Community Group Organiser, Sean: [sean@100million.org](mailto:sean@100million.org)
- Join the Facebook Group: [www.facebook.com/groups/100MillionActivists](https://www.facebook.com/groups/100MillionActivists)
- Join the Whatsapp Group for your continent by clicking on the link or contacting Sean directly to be added in on **+44 7747 823561**: [Africa](#), [Americas](#), [Asia](#), [Europe](#)
- Get in touch online using the social media pages in the box opposite.

# HOW THE 100 MILLION CAMPAIGN CAN SUPPORT YOUR ACTIVISM

The most important thing to remember when taking action for child rights, is that you are **never doing so alone**.

This is especially important during a time when the majority of the world is heading into self-isolation in response to the coronavirus. Remember that regardless of whether you are on the streets protesting, in school learning or staying safe at home, you are always part of a global network of youth activists fighting for the rights of the most exploited children.

## CONNECTING THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

The issue of unaccompanied children is not isolated to the Greek islands. Wherever there is a refugee crisis in the world there are always children who have lost their parents or caregivers and are therefore at a greater risk of further harm. For example, youth activists with the 100 Million campaign are also working to support the rights of unaccompanied Sudanese children in Bidibidi refugee camp in Uganda, one of the world's largest and fastest growing camps.

As a global campaign we always strive to connect the local actions of one community group to another group working on similar issues, even if they're on the other side of the world. There is power in this solidarity, especially when tackling issues such as refugee rights whose lives and suffering are directly impacted by intolerance, borders and extreme nationalism.

To make sure you feel the power of this collective unity we will be sharing videos and examples of other activists and community groups that have also taken action, both on this issue and others like it. You'll receive regular communications from us and from time to time we'll arrange Facebook live link-ups so you can feel connected to fellow activists and learn from each other.

For this campaign we also hope to organise high-profile stunts in Europe and elsewhere to draw the world's attention to this urgent child rights crisis depending on the latest coronavirus developments. For those groups which have been deeply committed to raising this issue in your community, and demanding action from your decision-maker, we may be able to invite you to join us for these exciting stunt moments.

## EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

Whether you want to discuss this issue in more depth, would like more guidance on how to contact your decision-maker or need ideas for a creative stunt, we are with you every step of the way. Your fight is our fight and you can always get in touch for a chat through email, WhatsApp or social media.

The more you keep us updated on your planning and activities the more we can help and the more we can showcase your activism to inspire others to take action on this issue with you.

