



NOW

International  
Mayors'  
Conference

## Our shared obligation towards children

Children on the move are the most vulnerable victims, defenceless, exploited. But they also are **the greatest chance**. To help them and assure them a future all it requires is clear awareness of the issues.

This is the key message and finding from the 3<sup>rd</sup> NOW International Mayors' Conference in Vienna.

31 million children and teenagers are fleeing from war, violence, or extreme poverty. Further 17 million children are displaced within their home countries. Of the 1,2 million people who came into the EU in 2016, 300.000 are children, 70% of them from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Children and teenagers are affected in many ways by war and displacement and more vulnerable for many reasons, some of them being:

- They are traumatized by war and violence and have experienced existential threats
- They are particularly endangered during their flight – take trafficking as an example
- They are pulled out of school and face years of interrupted education
- They get caught in multiple traps: forced labour, child labour to contribute to family incomes, sexual exploitation, prostitution also in the form of early teenage marriages and many more
- They are forced into militias and armies
- Girls and boys are exposed to different dangers that could overshadow their whole lives. Children with their families are exposed to different dangers than minors on the move alone. What they all have in common is extreme vulnerability to the pitfalls mentioned above. They are innocent victims and if they are not cared for in appropriate ways some may become offenders themselves – not because their families don't care for them but in many cases because they simply cannot take care of them: because they don't have a roof over their heads, no job and therefore no resources to provide for them



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- When these children reach our countries they bring all those experiences and traumata with them
- Unfortunately it happens that new injuries are added here: they spend months and sometimes years in shelters, receiving little information about their rights and being insufficiently protected from sexual and other violence by fellow refugees

There is no greater humanitarian obligation than towards these children, each one of them, with her or his own personal history.

At our conference we have exchanged so many great experiences. Mayors, refugees, representatives of NGOs and relief organizations, trauma and education experts have presented and shared their best-practice experiences. They show clearly how much can be done even with limited funds to dispel some of the dark clouds hovering over them and how we can create a brighter future with and for them.

We have heard how Jordan and Lebanon created thousands more classrooms. We have heard about the successes of psychological support for children with PTSD. Children who have nightmares every night cannot concentrate in school and may show aggressive behaviour – they can be stabilized if sensitive caregivers and teachers receive adequate training and support.

We have heard of the many times children are overburdened by for example becoming the spokespersons of their families, simply because they are the first to have learned the new language – they become their parents' parents – which in turn is a challenge for the parents. We have also learned how this constellation can actually empower these kids.

**There is no “one solution”. Each child is different, each experience is different, each family is different. We have learned that we have to listen to each child.**

Not only refugee children are at risk. There are not too few children in our countries who are also growing up in stressful environments with low educational, social or income status and few opportunities – in families with and without migration backgrounds.

Our learnings from the past days have given us hope. While noticing a growing rhetoric of xenophobia, being overstretched and ostracism in our political discourse we have seen the enormous chances when dedication and humanitarianism go hand in hand.

We have seen children and teenagers who could start a new life within a few months or years, who have seized the opportunities and realized their potentials where they had been offered. We have seen and heard children who told us about their dreams and their achievements. We have seen children sing. And we have seen children's smiles.

But we have also heard heart-breaking, horrific things. As a next step we are going to invite representatives of all Austrian parties to a trip to the epicentres of the refugees' reality to enable them to witness themselves what we have collected. We are confident that no one can close his eyes and ears when confronted with the wounds of the most vulnerable.

We, the participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> NOW Conference

- Mayors from Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Austria and Germany
- EU and local politicians
- Scientists, experts and individuals from dozens of countries

**Pledge to continue developing and sharing our best-practice examples, to stand up for an open society, which shall protect the weakest and welcome those in danger with open arms and an open heart.**