Migration is a fact of life for many families living across the Europe and Central Asia Region. More than six million citizens of Central Asian countries are estimated to be on the move at any given moment, looking for better work and life opportunities. Labour migration remains a significant economic and social factor, with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan two the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. This leaves many children left behind, and impacts child care and protection issues for many families. Kazakhstan is a destination country for migration and, to a lesser extent, a source and transit country for men, women and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labour. Migration has operated on a different level in Europe. Between 2015 and 2017, some 1.5 million people arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean, of who are quarter were children.

The situation in Europe is characterized by perilous sea crossings through the Central Mediterranean, irregular movements in the Balkans and across Europe, as well as tightened border control and heated political debate on migration across the continent. Refugee and migrant children remain at high risk and require urgent action by international and national stakeholders to step up action for their protection.

With poverty driving labour migration in Central Asia, the number of children left behind is increasing. As parents migrate, children are often left with relatives who may struggle meeting their dependents. As a result, many children and adolescents are at risk, including being placed in residential institutions.

Children in the Europe and Central Asia region have face increasing protection-related risks in recent years due to the consequences of unresolved armed conflict, civil unrest, large scale and mixed migration, and recurrent albeit mostly small scale natural disasters.

Significant numbers of children are excluded and marginalized, and bear the consequences of ongoing social and economic inequity. In emergencies, national protection services can be quickly overwhelmed and emergency departments more preoccupied with damage assessments and logistical actions than recognizing and addressing issues of trauma and heightened vulnerability.

On-going fighting and economic vulnerability exposes children to new hazards, exacerbates existing problems and erodes pre-conflict protection systems. Children on the move often lack protection and risk falling through the safety nets during journeys. Some 178,000 refugees and migrants, including 33,000 children, entered Europe in 2017. Key challenges include poor reception conditions, discrimination and the inability to pursue education or access basic services.

UNICEF is responding to the current situation in Europe through a combination of advocacy and resource mobilization, technical assistance to governments, capacity-building of national and civil society actors and service delivery responses. In Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey the focus is mostly around children on the move. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the focus tends to be on those left behind.

Through all of UNICEF’s work in the area of children affected by migration, UNICEF is committed to strengthening existing child protection systems to be more responsive to children on the move or children affected by migration, rather than stand-alone interventions for ‘migrant children’.