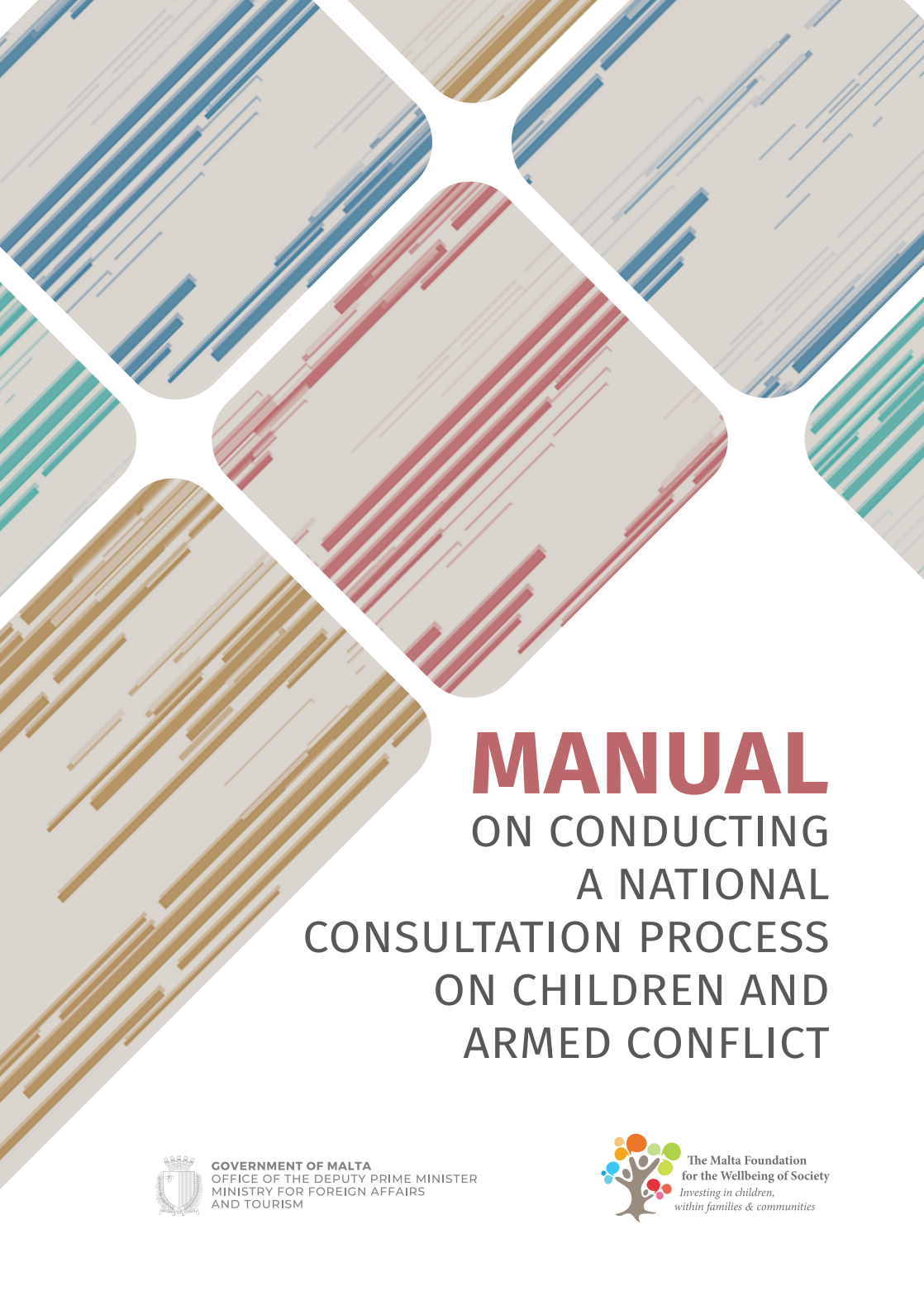# MANUAL
ON CONDUCTING A NATIONAL CONSULTATION PROCESS ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND TOURISM

The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society
Investing in children,
within families & communities

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FOREWORD

On behalf of The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, I am pleased to forward the Manual on Conducting a National Consultation Process on Children and Armed Conflict. This document sheds light on several pressing concerns regarding the violations of children's human rights in conflict situations.

The collaboration between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Tourism, supported by initial technical assistance from the Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, has been both valuable and productive.

Our researchers have worked diligently, conducting ten focus groups and twenty-six interviews with over a hundred and forty-five participants. The participants included children, families, communities, non-government organisations and government officials. Most importantly, the stakeholders have either experienced armed conflict firsthand or have worked closely with children from conflict zones. Their efforts have produced significant insights into the challenges faced by these vulnerable children.

The outcomes of this consultation process emphasize the need to address fundamental issues, and the manual offers practical recommendations for working with children who are victims of war and conflict. These tangible solutions are a critical step toward improving their well-being and safeguarding their rights.

Undoubtedly, the findings require further reflection and action from all relevant stakeholders and authorities. This manual stands as a testament to our steadfast commitment to protecting children's human rights in a world ravaged by ongoing conflicts and wars. It is both a necessity and a responsibility for us to prioritize the protection of children in such dire circumstances.

It was a moment of great pride for my country and the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society when Malta, as a member of the UN Security Council, chose to take a stand for children's human rights in armed conflict. Children often become invisible if not given the necessary attention, and it is all too rare for them to be at the centre of discussions on issues of global importance. By placing their protection at the forefront of multilateral dialogues, we reaffirm our collective responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable among us.

While I look forward to continued collaboration on this vital issue, I augur that the Manual on Conducting a National Consultation Process on Children and Armed Conflicts will become a vital resource not only in Malta but across Europe, the Mediterranean, and worldwide, guiding efforts to protect and uphold the human rights of children affected by conflict.

H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
Founder and Chair
Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

FOREWORD

It is a moment of great pleasure for Malta to reaffirm its commitment to the protection of children affected by armed conflict. As a member of the United Nations Security Council and during Malta's Presidency, Malta has consistently defended the rights of children and advocated for stronger mechanisms to safeguard their wellbeing. This handbook stands as a testament to our continued efforts to ensure that children who have fled conflict find safety, protection, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives.

During its term on the UN Security Council, Malta remained committed to its collaboration with the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, to conduct this vital project. This initiative sheds light on Malta's proactive role in monitoring, reporting, and addressing violations against children in conflict situations. Through this manual, Malta aspires to support other nations in developing frameworks that amplify the voices of these vulnerable children, address their needs, and protect them. By understanding their experiences, we can shape policies that offer not only protection but also life opportunities and a future free from violence.

When children are included and involved in projects, the focus obviously shifts towards peace. Children's perspectives are not influenced by political ideologies or allegiances but instead offer genuine solutions for fostering peace and stability.

As part of our unwavering commitment, Malta urges continued support for the Children and Armed Conflict mandate, ensuring that monitoring and reporting mechanisms remain robust and effective in addressing these grave violations.

This handbook is more than a resource, it is a call to action. We hope that it will serve as a guiding tool for governments, policymakers, and humanitarian actors in their efforts to protect children fleeing conflict. By working together, we can ensure that no child remains invisible and that their human rights, dignity, and future are safeguarded.

Malta remains committed to placing children at the forefront of international discussions and multilateral efforts. With this publication, Malta takes another step forward in our collective responsibility to protect those who are most vulnerable and to drive meaningful change on a global scale. It is our duty as adults to help children envision a world where peace is the foundation for growth, where leaders prioritise dialogue over conflict, and where every child feels valued and empowered within a society that is committed to fostering harmony.

Hon Ian Borg
Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of global conflict, children remain among the most vulnerable and profoundly affected population, with the issue of children and armed conflict becoming one of the most pressing humanitarian crises of our times. Millions of children are caught in the crossfire of wars and conflicts, facing severe risks to their physical and mental wellbeing with potentially long-term psychological and social repercussions[1].

Most often, these children are forced to flee their homeland, to reside in safer spaces with or without their families. Although the relocation to a new country may offer safety and stability, the experience presents new challenges which may be further isolating.

These include the adjustment to new cultures, social environments, and languages; the disruption of education; as well as legal and economic challenges. This is further complicated by the potential lingering effects of their past traumatic experiences of being exposed to, or witnessing, direct or indirect violence, exploitation, abuse, and losses[2].

Despite these challenges, many children hailing from armed conflict zones exhibit remarkable resilience. Yet this happens when hosting countries have effective supportive measures in place which promote integration, thus enabling children to become

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1   https://www.unicef.org/eca/children-seeking-safety-and-asylum-europe

2   https://reliefweb.int/report/world/
hope-and-harm-childrens-experiences-seeking-safety-europe

active members of their new community whilst ensuring that they retain their sense of identity and belonging[3].

In view of this, there is an urgent call for comprehensive research that informs policy, practice, and advocacy efforts aimed at protecting children who have survived armed conflict and are now seeking peace and stability in a new country.

Within this context, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) conducted a two-year consultative structured process in Malta starting 2022 aimed to:

1) channel the voices of conflict-affected children living in the Maltese Islands

2) consult with people who work directly and indirectly with conflict-affected children and their families, to determine how the national system supports these people

3) recognise and understand the diverse experiences of armed conflict, their journeys, and the integration within the receiving country, as well as the effects these have on the health and wellbeing of different children

4) understand the way national institutions give their primary and secondary response to support conflict-affected children of different age groups coming from different countries and help them integrate.

5) inform and advocate for the necessary policy changes with decision makers in the best interest of conflict affected children.

The methodological process – with its pros and cons- was noted by the research team, and this manual was developed aimed at offering guidance to other organisations, researchers, and policymakers in navigating the intricate and sensitive terrain of studying children affected by armed conflict in an ethical and holistic manner.

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3   https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/
     act-to-protect-children-affected-by-armed-conflict/

This manual includes a set of 6 qualitative indicators that can be used to assess specific areas of focus and provide means to evaluate the effectiveness of the processes, strategies, or interventions experienced by different children and their families, throughout the various points in their life journeys. As illustrated in the following table (Table 1), these indicators help users to assess the process integrated by countries in supporting children who fled armed conflict, as well as to track the achievement of the intended goals and objectives of this study:

Table 1: The 6 indicators and their aims

Indicator 1:
IMMEDIATE SUPPORT GIVEN TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHIDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES AT PRIMARY POINT OF CONTACT IN THE NEW HOST COUNTRY

Indicator	Aims of Indicator
For this indicator, the research team will look at how: a) Immediate support is given by the state to conflict-affected children when they arrive in the new host country from conflict zones with or without their families. b) The legal protection, interventions and laws in place are ensuring that any decision taken at the point of arrival is taken in the best interest of the conflict-affected child and safeguards the protection of their rights.	a) To carry out a mapping exercise identifying any established support services and level of protection offered to children upon arrival in the new host country with their families. b) To explore how decisions are taken in the best interest of the conflict-affected child upon their arrival in the host country.

Indicator 2:	
COMMUNITY SUPPORT GIVEN TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE NEW HOST COUNTRY	
Indicator	**Aims of Indicator**
For this indicator, the research team will look at how: a) Continuous support and protection given by the state to children coming from conflict zones with their families to ensure their integration within the community. b) Existing mechanisms enable the protection and safeguarding of conflict-affected children living with their families within local communities.	a) To carry out a mapping out exercise identifying any established services, and level of protection and support offered to conflict-affected children within the community with their families.
Indicator 3:	
INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES LIVING IN HOST COUNTRIES	
Indicator	**Aims of Indicator**
For this indicator, the research team will look at how: a) Past exposure to conflict may impact negatively and positively the wellbeing of conflict-affected children living in host countries.	a) To explore how the experience of being exposed to conflict may have negatively impacted children living in the host country.

b)	The host country provides support services to ensure individual holistic wellbeing of children coming from conflict zones with their families.	b)	To explore how the experience of being exposed to conflict may have affected the level of resilience of children living in the host country.
		c)	To carry out a mapping out exercise identifying any established services and support offered to conflict-affected children and/or their families aimed at ensuring their holistic wellbeing.

Indicator 4:
TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Indicator		Aims of Indicator	
For this indicator, the research team will look at: a) The training and support available and/or provided to professionals working with conflict-affected children and their families to better equip them with knowledge and competence in communicating with children with experiences of conflict.		a)	To see what (if any) pre- and post-training programmes are in place for professionals working with or for children coming from conflict zones with or without an accompanying adult.
		b)	To see what (if any) support programmes are in place for professionals working with or for children coming from conflict zones with or without an accompanying adult.

Indicator 5:

THE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES ACCORDING TO THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.

Indicator	Aims of Indicator
For this indicator, the research team will look at how: a) The host country provides support to all conflict-affected children and their families, taking into consideration their diverse backgrounds. Conflict-affected children and their families are supported according to the type, nature, and duration of violence they were exposed to, in their home country and throughout their journey to the host country.	a) To investigate how the different needs conflict-affected children and their families are supported in the host country, according to the unique experiences of conflict and background. b) To investigate how the different needs conflict-affected children and their families are supported in the host country, according to the unique bio-psychosocial needs.

Indicator 6:

THE EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT-AFFECTED UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN WHO ARRIVE AND LIVE IN HOST COUNTRIES, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THEIR FAMILIES

Indicator	Aims of Indicator
For this indicator, the research team will look at how: a) The host country assesses and acknowledges the unique holistic needs of the unaccompanied conflict-affected minors. b) The host country supports the unique holistic needs of the unaccompanied conflict-affected minor.	a) To explore how the unique needs of unaccompanied conflict-affected minors are assessed and acknowledged. b) To explore the type of support that is provided by host countries to conflict-affected minors.

THE PROCESS AND ITS ASPIRED OUTCOMES

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It is important to note that this manual was not designed to be merely a compilation of resources, but it aspires to equip its users with the necessary tools to conduct research - that is ethical, rigorous, and compassionate- using a structured, user-friendly, and adaptable approach. Hence, whether one is a seasoned researcher or new to the field, this manual will support in designing and executing research on children hailing from armed conflict and are now living in different countries.

Findings emerging from such research will contribute to the creation of a deeper understanding of the complexities of children's experiences, yield recommendations on areas of improvement, as well as illustrate good practices and innovative effective interventions in different countries. The use of this manual by different countries increases its potential for making sound advocacy and policy impact, as practical recommendations may be translated into actionable strategies. In addition, it facilitates collaboration between different international organisations, fostering a more holistic understanding of the issues at hand, as well as a more unified and resonant voice.

In the following sections, a step-by-step framework is intended to guide the users through a systematic process, from the planning to the execution phase of such a project. It is important to

underline that in all stages of this process, the focus is kept on the amplification of conflict-affected children's voices.

The roadmap developed in the undertaking of this project is set out in 3 phases, each of which will be further explained under their relevant subheading. These are:

a) Phase 1 - The preparatory phase.

b) Phase 2 - The consultation phase.

c) Phase 3 - The concluding phase.

PHASE ONE: THE PREPARATORY PHASE

3

Essential baseline work is imperative to ensure this research project is well-planned and executed effectively and ethically. Hence, in the preparatory phase, which may take between 1 to 3 months to complete, the following steps are important:

3.1.1   **Identify required resources:** Primarily, the research core team are identified, and this should at least include a project coordinator to oversee the progress of the processes involved, and research officers to carry out data collection, data analysis and reporting. Additional team support may include (but not limited to):

◆   a group supervisor to support the psychological wellbeing of the core team, to allow for a more objective and unbiased approach to the study.

◆   a psychologist to support data collection processes with conflict-affected children.

◆   cultural mediators to provide language translation when needed.

◆   professional transcriber to support the verbatim transcription of qualitative data gathered.

> **It is important that all the persons involved in this project - particularly the research core team - have prior experience in working in participatory processes with children and be knowledgeable about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and safeguarding policies.**

3.1.2 Carry out a review of the literature: Being a dynamic and complex topic, the research core team should conduct a literature review to investigate existing literature related to the research topic on a national, European, and global level. This helps the team to understand the current state of knowledge, identify any potential gaps and investigate if there is already research focusing on migrant children and possibly children who fled armed conflict.

3.1.3 Carry out regular meetings within the team: A series of meetings should be held between the research core team feedback to plan this project, familiarise themselves with this manual and start drafting timelines and resources needed. The research team are encouraged to involve the MFWS team[4] – as the owners of this manual - for any support and clarifications.

> **Seeking the expertise of local academics may help to ensure that a sound ethical methodological approach is undertaken by the research team.**

3.1.4 Organise cultural-sensitivity training for the research team: Given that the research officers will carry out interviews with persons coming from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, it is sensible to equip them with further knowledge on cultural competence before starting data collection, to ensure that cultural aspects are always taken into consideration. In this regard, cultural-sensitivity training should be organised for the core team.

PHASE TWO: THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

4

Rolling out a consultation process in such a project involves recruiting participants and data collection. Throughout there is the need to ensure that the process is aligned with the project's scope. In total, this phase may take between 4 to 6 months to finalise, should it be carried out in a full-time manner. Here's a step-by-step guide on how this may be done:

4.1 Identification of individuals and groups whom to consult and ways to consult them.

The participants should ideally be recruited purposively as they should be individuals who are likely provide rich and diverse perspectives on the research topic, in line with the six indicators.

In the pilot study conducted in Malta by the Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, individual online or face-to-face interviews, and focus groups were mainly carried out, using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide to steer the conversation and frame the discussions. These methods were deemed useful to gather in-depth narrative data, allowing for participants to express their views more freely, as well as for clarification, probing and flexibility to move with the participants' responses rather than following rigidly a fixed interview schedule. On the other hand, the focus groups offered further room for interactions between the participants, and space to generate insightful discussions. Despite having the same aim to meet the objectives of this study, each sample group had specific guiding questions, which were

age-appropriate and context-specific, focusing on mapping out of the current context whilst understanding the trajectory and support given to conflict-affected children from the point of arrival on our shores, and beyond. The following table (Table 2) includes the six indicators with their possible data sources and data collection methods. This will help to guide the project's core team in the identification of potential participants and seek the best means to consult them.

Notes for the research team:

Carry out an extensive exercise using formal and informal sources, as well as online searches to explore and map out the local scenario and identify potential candidates with a good level of expertise, knowledge, interest and/or experience within this area of study.

Explore existing conflict zones on an international level and devise a list of countries of origin for the participants.

Essential Alerts!

Throughout the data collection process, the research team should keep focus on the following essentials:

- are there any published reports or available data on the research topic in the local setting?

- what is being perceived as good practice? What are the areas that warrant improvement?

- what practical recommendations, possible solutions and action points are being put forward?

- are there any additional challenges for children and young people on grounds of age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other vulnerabilities?

- Is the same support provided to *all* children in a tailor-made and transparent manner, or are services exclusive or accessible only to certain groups of certain contexts?

- are services and support provision free of charge?

- are there any barriers of language within services and systems?

Indicator	**Indicator 1:**
	IMMEDIATE SUPPORT GIVEN TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES AT PRIMARY POINT OF CONTACT IN THE NEW HOST COUNTRY
Possible data sources (indicative only)	• National statistics, policy, governmental and organisational reports, and legislation • Stakeholders working within the public service who work directly or indirectly – *at primary point of contact in the new host country*- with children who fled warzones with their families (such as, the police, armed forces, health officers, social workers, commissioners for children and/or refugees, line ministries and governmental agencies, cultural mediators, and officers working with migrants). • Stakeholders within civil society who work directly or indirectly – *at the primary point of contact in the new host country*- with children who fled warzones with their families (such as NGOs, religious communities, and activists). • Adult members of the families who fled warzones with their children and are now living in the host country.

	• Adults who fled warzones as children and are now living in the host country.
	• Young people who fled warzones as children and are now living in the host country.
	• Children who fled warzones and are now living in the host country.
Possible Data collection methods	• Quantitative (questionnaires or survey)
	• One-to-one physical or online interviews
	• Focus groups
	• Secondary data

Indicator	**Indicator 2:**
	COMMUNITY SUPPORT GIVEN TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE NEW HOST COUNTRY
Possible data sources (indicative only)	• National statistics, policy, governmental and organisational reports, and legislation
	• Stakeholders within the public service who work directly or indirectly – *within the community* -with conflict-affected children and/or with their families (such as, persons working with children in education settings, health officers, justice, housing and social services, police, armed forces, social workers, commissioner for Children and/or migrants, line ministries and governmental agencies, cultural mediators, mental health commission and migrant health officers).
	• Stakeholders within civil society who work directly or indirectly – *within the community-* with conflict-affected children and/or with their families (such as NGOs, open centres, religious communities, activists).
	• Adult members of families who fled warzones with children and now living in host country.

	• Young people who fled warzones as children and are now living in host country.
	• Children who fled warzones and are now living in host country.
Possible Data collection methods	• Quantitative (questionnaires or survey) • One-to-one physical or online interviews • Focus groups • Secondary data

Indicator	**Indicator 3:** INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES LIVING IN HOST COUNTRIES
Possible data sources (indicative only)	Same data sources as those listed in Indicator 1 & 2
Possible Data collection methods	• One-to-one physical or online interviews • Focus groups • Surveys

Indicator	**Indicator 4:** TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES
Possible data sources (indicative only)	• Stakeholders within the public service who work directly or indirectly with conflict-affected children and/or with their families (as per Indicators 1 & 2) • Stakeholders within civil society who work directly or indirectly with conflict-affected children and/or with their families (as per Indicators 1 & 2).

Possible Data collection methods	• One-to-one physical or online interviews • Focus groups • Questionnaires
Indicator	**Indicator 5:** THE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES ACCORDING TO THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.
Possible data sources (indicative only)	Same data sources as those listed in Indicator 1 & 2
Possible Data collection methods	• One-to-one physical or online interviews • Focus groups
Indicator	**Indictor 6:** THE EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT-AFFECTED UNACCOMAPNIED CHILDREN WHO ARRIVE AND LIVE IN HOST COUNTRIES, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THEIR FAMILIES
Possible data sources (indicative only)	Same data sources as those listed in Indicator 1 & 2 but including the participation of persons who have fled their home countries due to conflict, without the support of their families. *N. B - For this indicator, the research team should also integrate Indictors 1, 2, 4 and 5*
Possible Data collection methods	• One-to-one physical or online interviews • Focus groups

4.2   Carrying out multi-stakeholders' consultation process.

For this project, stakeholders refer to persons who – through their personal and/or professional experience, and/or voluntary work in various fields– have insight into conflict-affected children and/or their families living in the host country, through being in a primary, secondary, or tertiary contacts. These persons should be directly and/or indirectly at the point when conflict-affected children and/or their families arrive in the host country, and/or towards their community integration.

The questions posed in the interview guide for this cohort should be devised to broadly capture how existing national systems, mechanisms, policies, legal frameworks, and services are supporting, safeguarding, and protecting the holistic wellbeing and integration of conflict-affected children and/or their families from the point of their arrival at our shores to their integration within our communities.

The consultation process may start by giving information about the project and consent form. Subsequently, the researcher invites the participants to give their background information relevant to the research topic. The interview guide offers a set of open-ended questions designed to guide a research team develop an in-depth flowing conversation with the participants and to ensure that the interviews cover all the relevant topics and themes of interest, while allowing for flexibility and spontaneity in the conversation. Probing questions are used to delve deeper specific areas of interest and to clarify any ambiguity in responses. Transition questions allow to move smoothly from one theme to another, maintaining the flow of the conversation, whilst the closing questions allow the participants to provide any additional insights or reflections on the topic, as well as to identify both good practices and areas that warrant further improvement. Participants should be encouraged to put forward practical recommendations, training needs, possible solutions and action points, so that the necessary policy changes with decision makers may be advocated in the best interest of conflict-affected children.

The following textbox includes examples of questions and prompts that may be used as guide in this process.

Guide on possible questions and prompts that may be used in for consulting ADULT STAKEHOLDERS:

Q: What is your perspective of armed conflict?

Q: Can you explain to us what are the steps taken when children arrive to (country) from conflict zones? (prompts: Is there a difference between coming by air or by sea? illegal or legal?)

Q: What special considerations are taken when a child is coming from a conflict zone?

Q: Can you please describe the immediate support given by the state to children when they arrive from conflict zones with their family?

Q: What laws ensure the protection and safeguarding of children arriving from conflict zones with an accompanying adult/s?

Q: How are decisions taken in the best interest of the child?

Q: How are children provided with child-friendly information about their rights when they arrive from conflict zones? (prompt: Language barrier/ translation offered?)

Q: What health checks are done for these children regarding their (1) physical and (2) mental health?

Q: Can you please describe the support that is provided within the community to children and/or their families living in your country who have come from conflict zones with an accompanying adult/s?

Q: What are the policies/procedures in place that ensure access to education for children hailing from armed conflict zones?

Q: How are these children followed up in the community to ensure their protection is safeguarded? (prompt: protection from being exploited or trafficked)

Q: How do you cater for such a heterogenous group – age, gender, culture, backgrounds? What is the level of collaboration between entities in relation to support provision? (prompt: views on vulnerable groups?)

Q: How are the voices of conflict-affected children represented at local, regional, and national level?

Q: What about children who are unaccompanied: what are their additional challenges (if any)? How are they provided with support in the community? (Prompts: Who gives support? For how long?)

Q: What type of pre- or post- graduate training did you receive (if any) on children and armed conflict? (Prompt: Do you feel that you are equipped to work with these children?)

Q: Can you offer solutions and/or suggestions that may improve the wellbeing of these children?

Essential Alert!

Keep in mind that the UNCRC applies to everyone under the age of 18. Note any discrepancies in policy, law and practices that are present, particularly when it comes to protection and rights of children between the ages of 16 and 18.

4.3. Carrying out the consultation process with children and adult service users

This stage is considered as paramount to this project given that the researchers will delve into the first-hand experiences of persons who navigated and met existing national systems, mechanisms, policies, legal frameworks, and services themselves– particularly children who are the primary focus of this project.

Essential alerts!

- Include participants of different genders, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation and/or (dis)ability: Adopting a multipronged approach with diverse perspectives is vital to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied, as it incorporates a variety of viewpoints, experiences, and angles, needed to uncover hidden complexities, and to generate more nuanced and multifaceted insights, as well as well-rounded and holistic analysis of the subject matter.

- Collaborate and involve the participation of community leaders and migrant-led non-governmental organisations at this stage: This helps to get the perspectives of these persons who support persons coming from different armed conflict zones, as well as utilise them as a resource for further recruitment of families and children. This also ensures that the process is conducted in a culturally sensitive manner, given that these persons have a deep understanding of the cultural norms, values, and traditions of the community, which can yield valuable insights and perspectives that may not be apparent to outsiders. It will also facilitate access to the community through trust building.

> - Ask for Support of language interpretation for those participants who may have problems to express themselves in the language spoken in the host country: Ensure that the language interpreters are professional, being that they have relevant qualifications, are neutral and do not influence the conversation, and ensure that they protect the confidentiality of the participants. An agreement may be signed with these professionals.

4.3.1   Consultation with Adult Service Users

For this project, adult service users include adults who arrive to the host country with their children due to conflict in their country of origin, and adults who were children when they fled from armed conflict with or without their families.

Research shows that adult caregivers/guardians play a crucial role in their holistic development and wellbeing and may contribute positively or negatively to a child's emotional, social, and cognitive growth. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that – within a context of displacement due to armed conflict - these adults may also be facing a myriad of challenges themselves, to heal from past experiences and rebuild their lives in a new environment. These can affect their ability to parent and thrive effectively in a new country, as their sense of stability, social connections, certainty, identity, and security are shaken and/or disrupted, and they too may need to overcome obstacles in navigating the reintegration processes, to cope with psychological and economic hardships, and to deal with displacement of family dynamics. Hence, it is essential to consider the experiences of adult caregivers/guardians present in the children's lives – and explore the challenges and resources that these persons have.

Additionally, this project should also include the voices of adults who arrived to the host county as children with or without their families, due to armed conflict situations. Here, the researchers aim to explore the processes involved in their adaptation to a new social environment, what support provision and resources helped them to cope with their past experiences and to build a positive future for themselves.

The following textbox includes examples of questions and prompts that may be used as guide in this process.

Q: How does this whole experience impact on you? and your family? (Prompts: what are coping strategies used? Resilience? Supportive factors?)

Q: Was support given to your children? (prompts: physical, mental health, social, material, educational?)

Q: What challenges (if any) did you find in accessing services?

Q: What do you think the host country should do to improve the experiences of people like you.

4.4   Consultation with children

The MFWS emphasises that research focusing on children actively includes their voices, as this ensures that their perspectives are truly acknowledged and respected. Hence, a methodological approach involving children was deemed to be the most apt methodological choice for this research to elicit richer data than the conventional adult-led projects. In line with Article 12 of UNCRC, the voice of each child involved in this project should be given due weight – and regarded as just as important as that of the adult participants - thus children are deemed as full collaborators. Moreover, the focus should not be on how children will or might become in the future, but on how conflict affected children living in the host country and are experiencing their present and what recommendations they put forward to address their current needs.

Child participation in such project is also considered important as the researchers aim to explore how the children's experiences of armed conflict, a forced migratory journey and integration in a new country, differ from what is experienced and perceived by adults. Furthermore, this project aspires to analyse each child's unique experience in relation to the context of the country of origin and the host country, rather than grouping all children together as one cohort. This creates better understanding on the different experiences and needs of various groups of children, moving away

from the assumption that all conflict-affected children have a universal experience.

Literature shows that persons who have been through the experience of armed conflict and are now living in a host country, are many times constrained from participating in society or exercising their skills and agency due to fear and/or lack of opportunity to be active agents of change[5]. Therefore, such project aims to not merely look at the various hardships experienced by children and their families, but to also analyse the level of resilience and agency that they make use to survive and thrive within the context of armed conflict, through their journeys in fleeing their homeland and the process of integration within a new host country. The project thus seeks to understand how the whole experience is shaping their life today or that of the people around them.

Moreover, this project strives to create a safe space and meaningful opportunity for conflict-affected children to feel that they can contribute to the wider society through their own perspectives, aspirations and acquired skills. Through the young participants' own voices, this project hence should aim to stimulate their self-reflection and give children a scope to help others – by channelling their recommendations on what measures need to be in place so that conflict-affected children are protected and empowered at all stages of their childhood and potentially adulthood. This project should create a democratic and inclusive space in which children could speak freely and engage in dialogue as equals in a context of mutual respect, without fear of repression, force, deprivation of freedom, tension and/or silencing; factors that interplay within contexts of armed conflict.

Nonetheless, consultation with diverse conflict-affected children requires careful planning so that the process is done in a safe, culturally- sensitive, and ethical manner. It must be noted that recruitment of children for this project may be time-consuming and challenging for the research team, regarding logistics, access, and participation rate. If the team faces issues with recruitment, one might consider accessing conflict-affected children through schools.

5   https://www.fmreview.org/hart/

The following textbox includes imperative points to consider when carrying out consultation with children, whilst the subsequent textbook includes examples of questions and prompts that may be used as guide in this process.

Essentials Alert!

A signed informed consent form needs to be obtained from parents/guardians, and an assent form signed by the children to ensure they understand the purpose of the project and what their participation will involve. The written consent form is read and explained in the mother-tongue of the child and in age-appropriate language before every session.

Sessions with children and young adults should be carried out in a comfortable and private spaces, free from distraction.

Some informal interaction time is to be allowed before the interview and/or focus groups commence, to give time for the child/ren to feel more relaxed and acquainted to the researchers.

Throughout the session, the researchers should use age-appropriate, clear, concise, and easily understandable language, avoiding technical jargon and complex explanations, to ensure that the children are engaged and can understand what is going on at all times.

Child-friendly techniques should be used in facilitating communication and making the sessions lighter. These include the utilization of visual aids such as maps, flashcards, emojis, and pictures, as well as play-based activities like encouraging storytelling, drawing, and use of different craft material (such as colourful pipe cleaners, pom-poms, wool, and paper). Children are encouraged to create whatever they wish and may explain what they created means to them.

A laptop is made available in the room in case the child wants to use it to search online, for any information, pictures, music, or to assist in case a description of words or concept in the native language is required.

The research team needs to be aware that opening a discussion on armed conflict may potentially be unsettling and hence due to the sensitivity of the topic, the involvement of a professional psychologist in the children's sessions should be included, to ensure that a safe space is created, as well as provide support when needed.

The research team should attempt to eliminate possible power relations between children in the focus groups, whereby children coming from certain cohorts may dominate the focus group and or force others not to voice out their experiences. Therefore, attention needs to be given to the group composition of the focus groups.

Focus groups are only done with children of similar ages, genders, and backgrounds to facilitate comfortable and safe interactions.

The focus groups should be kept small to be manageable and encourage participation of all children.

No focus group is to be done between children hailing from different armed conflict zones; and if the war is civil children should be interviewed alone especially if the researchers do not know the family history of the child.

The research team should decide the eligibility criteria of children regarding age and nationality.[6]

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6   In the piloted Maltese project, the research team opted to only include children who are 12 years and older. In the case of the unaccompanied refugee migrants, only those over the age of 18 were eligible for participation. The nationalities chosen were based on a compiled list of recent and existing conflict zones on an international level.

In addition to the voices of children coming from armed conflict zones, it would be sensible to include a focus group with local children who have not experienced armed conflict, to capture the perspectives of young people living in mainstream society about the subject topic. These children may have encountered other children who hail from different countries, within their social contexts and in schools daily. The researchers can explore these children's outlook on the challenges, resources and needs of children who have fled armed conflict.

Guide on possible questions and prompts that may be used in for consulting CHILDREN:

Before starting the interview/focus group, invite children to draw or create something that is important to them, and allow them to explain)

Ask simple informal questions, such as:

What is your age? What do you enjoy doing? What do you like to play with? Who do you play with? Where? How would you describe a typical day? Weekend?

Then slowly start the process by asking more substantial formal questions:

Q: Do you go to school? What is the name of school? Do you enjoy it? (prompts: lessons, friends, teachers, transport... check if there was a wait to start schooling following their arrival)

Q: We are aware that you lived in another country. What do you best remember about this country? (prompts: What was it like there – school, family, friends, food, music?)

Q: Can you explain to us why you left? (Prompts – proximity to armed conflict, any exposure to violence experienced by them or their family or their community)

Q: Can you describe how you travelled from your home country to come here?

Q: How many months/years have you been living here?

Q: How did you feel when you first arrived here?

Q: When you came here, did you understand what they were telling you? (prompts: language barrier, use of child-friendly language?)

Q: When you came here, how did you feel about your sense of safety and protection? How would you describe your feelings of safety now?

Q: Who were the people or organisation helping you when you arrived here? (prompt: how?)

Q: What do you think are the things you needed when you arrived here? Were they provided?

Q: How did it feel after a few weeks/ months?

Q: Who provided you with help in the community? (prompts: How?)

Q: What has your experience been like in making new friends here?

Q: How do you feel living here?

Q: What things do you wish were done differently here? (prompts: why? how?)

Q: How is your voice heard in matters that are important to you?

Q: What experiences have left an impact/effect on you? (prompt: positive and negative?)

Q: What are your aspirations for the future? What do you wish to in the coming years?

Q: How can our country help children like you?

Tips!

The use of face emojis can help child to describe how he/she felt and/or is feeling.

The use of maps may help to start conversation on country of origin, conflict zones, and journey to host country.

PHASE THREE: THE CONCLUDING PHASE

5

The final stage of this project includes the preparation and organisation of data for analysis, and compilation of the final report. This process starts with the *verbatim* transcription of all interviews/focus groups, that is, the conversion of data from an audio to a word-by-word text format. This type of transcription captures the exact wording used by the participants, without any paraphrasing or interpretation, hence preserving authenticity and nuances of the spoken language. *Verbatim* quotations may be used in the findings chapter of the final report to further support data analysis. Given that this task is highly time-consuming, the support of a professional transcriber may be sought particularly for lengthy sessions.

A confidentiality agreement needs to be signed between the service provider and the organisation. This agreement needs to include non-disclosure of information, data security measures, usage of data solely for the purpose of transcription and not for any other purposes, data retention and disposal, as well as provisions for addressing breaches of confidentiality, including potential legal consequences for unauthorized disclosure of information.

5.1   Closing the Loop: Data Analysis and Final Reporting

Subsequently, qualitative data analysis[7] is carried out, whereby the members of research team carrying out data analysis familiarize themselves with the narrative data. This involves reading and re-reading the transcriptions while listening actively to the recordings for several times, to capture the overall meanings inherent within the data, whilst taking notes and highlighting key phrases or passages that stand out. This process starts the move from the raw data to meaning, by identifying distinct ideas and organising segments of narratives to generate the initial set of codes, which included words, phrases or parts of excerpts based on the central ideas. These initial codes are then revisited, collapsed and if necessary, even renamed, to group them into categories. Subsequently, the generated categories are also revised for their patterns, overlap, importance, and relevance. Once these categories are revised, the critical elements and central ideas are identified and the research team moves to the final step, that is, the development of key concepts and themes that reflect the larger meaning of the data, based on emerging similarities or patterns across the data sets.

The final step in this process includes the writing up of the analysis and report findings, whereby each theme is described and backed up by available literature and analytical discussion in the presentation of the results. Discussion of the emerging themes should be continuously carried out between the research team, to provide peer review and constructive feedback and suggestions. This helps improve the validity of the findings, that is, the extent to which the findings accurately represent the phenomenon being studied. On the other hand, a qualitative grounded theory approach was used to analyse the narratives of all those interviewed; a process that involves identifying, reporting patterns, coding, defining themes, and uncovering key concepts and ideas.

> **During data analysis and report writing, it is essential to keep the UNCRC at the core so that emerging data will be classified under children's RIGHTS, PROTECTION and VOICES.**

5.2   Country Profiling: Good Practices and Plans of Action

The following table (Table 3) provides an example of a template that may be used by each country to record key findings, highlight identified good practices and indicate any measures being proposed to close the current gaps and meet the needs of conflict-affected children. In this phase, the research team will refer back to the indicators and observe how well the host country is faring in the six identified areas.

Table 3: Country Profiling Template

Name of Host country:				
Years in which Project was carried out:				
Indicator	Key Findings	Comments & Observations	Examples of Good Practices	Follow Up Proposals
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

Through the application of this project by various countries – using this manual – it is envisioned that the diverse outcomes are presented in relevant local and international platforms. That way, data may be disseminated, creating further societal awareness, understanding and sensitisation on the experiences of children and armed conflict. Moreover, good practices and effective interventions can be shared between countries, potentially leading to strengthening collaboration and advocacy.

Essential Alert!

The final report should include:
- An executive summary
- Introduction section
- A short literature review
- Methodology chapter
- Findings chapter
- Strengths and limitations
- Ethical considerations
- Good Practices &
  Follow up proposals

Essential Alert!

Disseminate results: this may be done through various media sources and platforms, such as social media, papers, webinars, and public forums.

Tailor communication to the audience: this is crucial, as policymakers and decision makers may prefer succinct summaries over detailed research reports.

Advocacy and Lobbying: collaborate with more organizations and policy makers to push for policy changes. This can involve presenting findings at legislative hearings, participating in public discussions, or working with media to raise public awareness.

Overall, the goal is to create a strong link between rigorous research and effective policy decisions that lead to improved outcomes in society.

Essential Alert!

Feedback Loop: Successful research-informed policies can lead to new research questions or adjustments in methodologies, creating a feedback loop that fosters continuous improvement.

6

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the process, consideration needs to be taken to always ensure protection of the participants' rights. The following text box includes ethical considerations imperative to this study:

a) Process all information in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the General Data Protection Regulation.

b) Seek necessary permissions from gatekeepers in the process of participants' recruitment.

c) Prior to data collection, invite each potential recruit to read a provided information sheet. In the information sheet include an outline of the nature of the study, information about participant's rights, such as, voluntary participation, right to refuse/ withdraw from the study without giving reasons and get permission for audio-recording.

d) Invite the participants to sign the consent form after reading it and any clarification raised cleared and before starting the interview or focus group.

e) Audio-record interviews for better transcription and prevention of loss of data, always with the participants' permission.

f) Do not allow photographs or videos of the participants during the sessions, to protect the anonymity of the participants.

g) Hold interviews and/or focus groups at a time and day which is most convenient for the participants.

h) As much as possible, hold physical interviews at the location of the participants' preference, a space in which privacy and minimal distraction is ensured.

i) Nonetheless, keep in mind that conducting interviews with unfamiliar people may pose a risk to privacy and safety, and hence identify a space where these sessions may take place in this eventuality.

j) Ensure confidentiality and protection of the participants' identity by limiting access to raw data solely to the researchers, avoid any accidental breach of information by password-protecting electronic data, and store any written material under lock and key until their destruction when this study is completed.

k) Be vigilant in ensuring that the information obtained are presented in a way that would not identify any specific person and/or organisation.

l) Do not publish the whole transcripts in the final presentation of the report, to protect the participants' identity.

m) Omit any direct quotes containing distinguishable personal data (such as, names, geographical locations, workplace, and specific professional background) to prevent identification of specific person/s or organisation/s. To achieve this, the participants can be grouped under generic categories.

6.1   Additional safeguarding measures

In addition to the ethical considerations mentioned in the previous section, carrying out consultation processes with children and service users calls for the undertaking of extra measures to ensure adequate safeguarding. These are further explained below:

a)   Be mindful of the fact that engaging children and service users in such projects may create a level of enthusiasm, and hence the researchers need to be attentive not to raise high or unrealistic hopes for immediate changes, resulting in participants feeling disappointed and demoralised. Explain the purpose of this study before initiating consultation and gently remind participants throughout the interview, should these expectations be noted.

b)   Given the potential vulnerability and traumas experienced by the child participants and service users, their focus groups and/or interviews, involve the presence of a psychologist, to intervene in the eventuality that any participant experiences any discomfort, uneasiness, or negative emotion. Prior to the interview/ focus group, inform the participants of the presence of available psychological support.

c)   Provide group or individual supervision for the research team to ensure their psychological wellbeing is in check. Be aware that some narrations may be mentally taxing to listen to.

d)   In case of participants under age 18, the guardian/parent/s is/are required to sign the parental consent form. In parallel, a simplified assent form is to be devised for, and signed by, the children. Read it to the young participants and explain it in an age-appropriate manner before starting focus group or interview.

e)   Be aware that if at any time, the research informants reveal aspects of abuse that are criminal under the promise of confidentiality, steps need to be taken by the researchers. For adult participants, the researchers should have information to provide on confidential support services. However, in the

case of children, circumstances may arise when confidentially must be broken in the greater best interest of the child. In this eventuality, the researchers are bound to seek advice from professionals in the first instance before acting. A psychologist present in the interviews will support this process.

f) In line with the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, strive to maximize the wellbeing of the participants, and ensure the benefits of this study outweigh any potential risk, especially for vulnerable participants. Hence, avoid excessive probing and pushing hard to attain sensational data but in turn aim to strike a balance between gathering information and respecting the boundaries and comfort levels of participants.

g) Be mindful of non-verbal cues that may indicate discomfort, reluctance, or fatigue.

h) Visual aids, props, drawings, storytelling, flash cards and play-based activities help children express themselves more comfortably. Use different playful techniques to make the session more child-friendly and to establish trust and rapport.

i) Undertake cultural sensitivity training before data collection to increased reflexivity of the research team and reduce biases or assumptions that may influence the research process. Such training also helps the team to be sensitive and respectful to certain cultural norms and traditions and adapt their research methods accordingly, to ensure that participants feel safe, comfortable, and understood.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Each research process has its own constraints and strengths, but measures may be undertaken by the researchers to address aspects of validity and reliability and to strengthen this study's rigour and trustworthiness of findings. It is sensible that these are noted for credibility and transparency's sake.

On one hand, qualitative methodology offers the possibility to yield rich in-depth insights of the multi-dimensional concepts and phenomena, allowing for deeper understanding of complex human experiences of children and armed conflict. It would not be possible to capture such findings through quantitative data. On the other hand, the central critique of non-numerical data is the potential bias of subjective data interpretation, as if not cautious, findings may be influenced by the researcher's perspective. To enhance internal validity, in such a study the research team may use (a) triangulation, that is, getting data from multiple data sources through a wide range of participants and by using mixed methods design; (b) member checking, that is, seeking feedback from both service users and children as well as stakeholders and service providers; and (c) peer debriefing, that is, discussion of findings between the research core team. Moreover, in the process of data collection, the research team should take note when data saturation is reached, meaning that it arrives at a point whereby no new information or additional themes were emerging from the data collected. This indicates that the data gathered is enough to adequately address the aims of the study.

One of the setbacks of such project may be a small sample size of child participants that the researchers will manage to recruit. Nonetheless, in qualitative research, the sample size may not be large as it does not aim for generalization of findings, but alternatively on obtaining information-rich findings. Therefore, the depth offsets its lack of breadth. Moreover, the selection of a semi-structured interview schedule as a data collection method avoided the possibility of a poor response rate, misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the questions, and the consultation of responses between subjects - all known to be potential problems of the survey method. However, the researchers need to be aware that interviews carry a risk of interviewer bias. For this reason, care should be taken not to influence the participants either verbally or non-verbally during the interview.

Furthermore, one must state that the tool used in this project is constructed by the research team based on research question and the literature review. This tool is not used as a strict interview schedule but only as a guide to steer and unlock the discussion as well as to keep the focus on the aim of the study. Qualitative processes also prove to be more time-consuming and resource-intensive, and this may be experienced in this project in efforts to organize the logistics of the physical sessions and to conduct data analysis of lengthy transcripts.

Even though findings of such a project are context specific, they may be useful to point out similarities and differences between countries. Hence, data yielded from this process will aid in the sharing of good practices potentially on a national, European and global level, and recommendations may be translated into practice, policy, and further research.

CONCLUSION
AND WAY FORWARD

8

Much can be learnt from the accounts of these children, young people, family members and stakeholders, in relation to the current situation of children and armed conflict within host countries. Such consultation process amplifies the voices of conflict-affected children and shed light on a largely invisible group in society, potentially aiding to increase more awareness on the reality of these persons and those involved in their lives. In addition, being a multi-stakeholder research enriches the holistic understanding of this topic, and hence maximizes the research output.

NOTES

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