Contribution to OHCHR Report: The Impact of Externalisation on the Human Rights of Migrants

Submitted by: Project Play, working with migrant children in northern France.

Contact: Katie Hall, Advocacy Lead - katie@project-play.org

1. Introduction

Project Play is an association which facilitates play sessions for children on the move in northern France. Alongside playwork, we provide parental support and safeguarding casework. In 2024, we supported 1,124 children (average age 7.7 years), and have worked with 7,642 since our founding in 2018. As the only independent organisation working with children aged 0-18 in this context, we have a unique perspective on the rights issues faced by children and families.

This submission evidences how the externalisation of the UK border to northern France undermines children's human rights. Measures to deter migration and 'securitise' the border restrict access to asylum, subject children to violence and erode their rights to health, safety, family life, survival and development, amongst others. We document rights impacts resulting both from the irregular crossing attempts children are forced to undertake and the living conditions they are exposed to whilst in limbo at the border.

2. Irregular Crossing Attempts

2.1. Right to Seek Asylum (ICCPR A.12 & 13, Refugee Convention A.33)

UK policies have steadily dismantled access to safe routes to seek asylum.[1] Accessing asylum in France has also become increasingly difficult. Inadequate outreach, coupled with physical barriers, namely the inability to claim asylum in Calais and the need to travel to Lille while facing police ID checks and harassment, illustrate that the priority of both the UK and France is on the reduction of migration rather than upholding their obligations in international law.[2]

As a result, the children and families we work with see no other choice but to risk their lives crossing the English Channel. In 2024, the mother of a child killed during a crossing attempt told us that the family still intended to cross, as she felt it was the only option to find safety for her other children.

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[1] Refugee Council (March 2023), "The Truth About Channel Crossings"
[2] Medecins Sans Frontieres (2024), "Mineurs non accompagnés à Calais". Accessed - https://www.msf.fr/actualites/mineurs-non-accompagnes-a-calais-des-violences-repetees-et-banalisees (10/06/2025)

Externalisation policies not only make irregular crossings the only option - they also make them more dangerous. The interception and destruction of boats before reaching departure points has reduced availability and led to overcrowding, heightening the risk of crush injuries, shipwreck, and death. The children we work with frequently describe frightening levels of overcrowding and parents often express fear for their children, who are at particular risk in such situations. At least three children died in 2024 from crush incidents during crossings.

2.2. Right to be Free from Violence (ICCPR A.7, UNCRC A.19)

Recent years have seen the steady increase in UK funding for 'securitisation' operations, including in the interception of people attempting irregular crossings. This is reflected in the UK Home Office's decision to begin publishing data on interceptions, whilst persistently failing to publish data on deaths on the border. This reflects an inherent lack of transparency and accountability.

In 2024, we observed a staggering escalation in violent police interceptions of crossing attempts, which had a profound impact on the children we work with. These interceptions frequently include the use of tear gas and the stabbing of inflatable boats in shallow water. We worked with children of all ages with tear gas injuries - including a 3-month-old baby with damaged eyes. Children also reported that injuries to limbs were sustained during interceptions or attempts to flee them.

These interceptions are also a source of psychological violence - children were often emotionally dysregulated following high levels of police interception. Children also expressed fear of crossing, of the water and of the police.

A central aim of increased UK funding has been the expansion of digital surveillance technologies. Whilst these technologies enable rapid responses to life-threatening situations, and are ostensibly procured for such purposes, they are often used to prioritise violent interceptions, surveilling land rather than sea.[3] The children we work with often express fear of drones and of being watched, illustrating the impact of surveillance on them and raising further questions regarding their rights to privacy.

2.3. Right to Life, Survival and Development (ICCPR A.6, UNCRC A.6)

2024 was the deadliest recorded year on the UK-France border - with more children killed than in the previous four years combined. Without safe alternatives, heightened police interceptions do not prevent crossings. Instead, they expose people to further risk - both from increased violence and the adoption of more dangerous routes to evade detection. In March 2024, we worked with the family of a 7-year-old girl who drowned in a canal over 20km from the coast - an embarkation site chosen to avoid heavily policed beaches.

[3] See, for e.g. State Watch (2024), "Frontex Flights and Fatalities in the Channel". Accessed - https://www.statewatch.org/news/2024/september/frontex-flights-and-fatalities-in-the-channel/ (10/06/2025)

Increasing violence has also meant that more children witness and experience traumatic events, including shipwrecks, drownings and death. One child who experienced a near drowning attempt spoke to us about choking on water, using their hand to gesture that the water was up to their neck. They spoke of the police having sunk their boat with knives, throwing them into the water.

This has a profound impact on children's emotional health. We have observed numerous instances of children displaying symptoms of psychological trauma, particularly where they have lost siblings, friends or directly witnessed deaths. It is likely that this will have long-term impacts on their wellbeing and development.

2.4. Right to Family Life (ICCPR A.17 & 23, UNCRC A.9)

Families often experience separation during crossing attempts. In 2024, we worked with children who had been separated from parents and siblings, and many more expressed fear of being split from their families during future attempts.

We also worked with families who arrived in northern France after years spent in other European countries - particularly Germany and Sweden. This correlates to shifts towards policies of increased hostility and externalisation in these nations, and across Europe. In several cases, children born in these countries were ultimately forced to the UK-France border in search of safety, facing the risks associated with irregular crossing, violent interceptions and unstable living conditions. These cases illustrate the impact of collective failures to prioritise human rights over hostility.

2.5. Failures in Child Protection and the Right to Recovery from Trauma (UNCRC A.3 & 39)

Children on the UK-France border exist in a child protection lacuna. Children who survive failed crossings are frequently left without appropriate state protection or support. Rather than receiving trauma-informed care, some are detained or interrogated. On multiple occasions, children told us they were left by police and forced to walk for hours to return to their living sites - in 2024, we worked with a 14-year-old girl who suffered a fractured foot after such a walk. Where support does exist, families often fear accessing it - anxious that doing so could jeopardise their asylum claims.

Furthermore, as a result of policies of deterrence and the failure of both France and the UK to take responsibility for the rights of people on the border, mechanisms for raising child protection concerns are inadequate. When we report safeguarding cases to French authorities, we typically receive no response or replies after months of delay - too late to mitigate risk in any circumstances, let alone the transient one in which we operate. Additionally, there are no clear or effective cross-border child protection protocols. Where cooperation does exist, it is

inconsistent, opaque and unfit for the realities children face. As a result, serious concerns often go unaddressed, resulting in concerning gaps in protection for some of Europe's most vulnerable children.

3. Conditions in Informal Living Sites

3.1. Right to Shelter and an Adequate Standard of Living (ICCPR A.17, UNCRC A.27)

The majority of the children we work with live in informal living sites. These sites have no state-provided access to shelter, food or sanitation - instead, families rely on independent organisations for their basic needs. Often, these organisations struggle to meet needs due to funding and material constraints.

Access to shelter and adequate living standards is further blocked as a result of regular police evictions of informal living sites. Forming part of French government policy, but supported with funding from the UK government, these police evictions are frequent, violent and disruptive to children's basic living conditions. During them, families regularly lose tents and possessions, leaving children without shelter or warmth.

3.2. Freedom from Violence and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (ICCPR A.7, UNCRC A.19)

Evictions are also a source of physical and psychological violence for children, particularly unaccompanied minors, who are often treated as adults - subject to tear gas, rubber bullets and police abuse. Evictions cause significant psychological harm for children, compounded by the regular police surveillance of living sites. Children are often visibly dysregulated during or after eviction operations, and expressed fear and anxiety in response to ongoing police presence and the knowledge of aerial surveillance. We often witness children trying to hide behind members of our team when police arrive at a living site.

In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights found that the precarious living conditions in informal camps in northern France, aggravated by eviction operations and child protection failures, amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment under A.3 ECHR.[4] The daily experiences of the children we work with illustrate that little progress has been made to prevent these violations from recurring.

3.3. Right to highest attainable standard of health (ICCPR A.12, UNCRC A.24)

Alongside the physical and psychological harm risked by crossing attempts and evictions, poor nutrition, sanitation and exposure to the elements pose significant risks to the health of children. Yet, the governments of the UK and France repeatedly fail to provide essential services, focusing resources instead on violent deterrence.

[4] ECtHR - Khan v. France (no. 12267/16), 28 February 2019

This has a significant impact on children. We regularly work with children who display symptoms of trauma - including emotional dysregulation, dulled reactions and extreme fatigue - as well as indicators of poor physical health, including regular colds, rotting teeth and injuries. In 2024, we worked with a family whose 10-month-old baby died as a result of health complications whilst unable to access adequate care.

3.4. Right to Play and Education (UNCRC A.28, 29 and 31)

Play is fundamental to children's healthy development, and a key tool to enable them to process their emotions and experiences. This is of particular importance for trauma-experienced children. Without our service, many children on the move in northern France would be unable to access safe spaces for play. Yet, in 2024, 50% of the sessions we ran in Calais were disrupted due to police presence. Where sessions weren't directly affected, many children struggled to focus or engage due to stress or fear of police.

The children we work with also tell us that they miss school. Many have been out of education for prolonged periods as a result of their migration. On multiple occasions, families told us that they had had to take their children out of school in other European countries, where they'd been living for many years, disrupting their education.

This attests to the interrelated nature of rights concerns, and the extensive impact policies of externalisation have on the ability of children to meaningfully access each of their rights.

4. Summary

This submission, based on Project Play's work with nearly 8,000 children in northern France since 2018, outlines how the externalisation of the UK border systemically contravenes children's human rights.

Without access to safe routes, children are forced into dangerous Channel crossings, exposed to state violence, family separation and death. In both crossings and informal camps, UK- and France-backed deterrence measures undermine rights to asylum, safety, family life, health, education and play. Repeated police violence, surveillance, and evictions cause physical and psychological harm, while child protection systems remain absent or inadequate.

The evidence we present illustrates urgent human rights concerns raised by externalisation policies which not only fail to respect, protect and fulfil children's human rights, but systematically violate them.