

## Beyond Borders:

# What It Takes to Make Case Management Work for Children and Youth on the Move in East, West, and North Africa

Despite growing investment in child protection systems, one reality remains: **for children on the move, protection often stops at the border.**

A child identified and supported in one country may lose access to services in the next, drop from follow-up mechanisms, or be exposed to new risks. Across migration routes in East, West, and North Africa, this fragmentation continues to undermine protection outcomes.

A recent exchange among practitioners, donors, and global actors working across these regions pointed to a shared challenge: **what actually enables continuity of care across borders?**

### Different regions, different entry points

Experiences from East, West, and North Africa show that regional cooperation on case management for children on the move can have different entry points.

In **East Africa**, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) operates on a member-state ministerial level. IGAD has been supported by the “East Africa Migration Routes” (EAMR) Project with the development of a Regional Child Policy Framework and cross-border Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) – the first intergovernmental instruments in Eastern Africa explicitly addressing protection gaps. The IGAD model provides political legitimacy and contributes to a structured framework for coordination across member states – but translating commitments into operational reality remains a work in progress.

In **West Africa**, the *Réseau Afrique de l’Ouest pour la protection des enfants* (RAO) originated from frontline actors – social workers, civil society organisations, and local authorities – and was later institutionalised within ECOWAS. The “*Enfants et Jeunes en Mobilité*” (EJM) Project has supported the strengthening of this

system through training for social workers, government officials, and community leaders, as well as by improving management tools. Today, RAO serves as a reference mechanism for transnational case management, with shared procedures, coordination structures, and tools such as the CaseData system. CaseData has also been extended to Morocco, linking countries of origin in West Africa with countries of destination in **North Africa**.

### Where cooperation breaks down in practice

Beyond purely technical gaps, the challenge lies in connecting systems that operate under different legal frameworks, institutional structures, political priorities, and levels of financial commitment, with many cross-border mechanisms still heavily reliant on external donor funding rather than sustained national or regional budget allocations.

Across East, West, and North Africa, national child protection systems remain largely inward-looking, while migration dynamics are inherently cross-border, creating structural mismatches.

At the same time, migration governance frameworks – often centred on border control and security – do not always align with child protection principles. This tension is particularly visible where restrictive migration policies further complicate cooperation.

Despite strong policy commitments and emerging frameworks, several recurring **bottlenecks** continue to undermine effective cross-border cooperation on case management:

- **Operational gaps at border areas, where coordination is weakest** and, in practice, care often stops at the border – as highlighted by field testing under the EAMR Project;

- **Fragmentation of tools and systems**, including parallel databases and procedures;
- **Limited interoperability**, even where digital systems exist;
- **Weak or inconsistent application of Best Interests Procedures (BIP)** across contexts;
- **Limited, unstructured or no cross-border communication and cooperation** between actors;
- **Dependence on personal relationships and informal exchanges**, rather than institutionalised mechanisms;
- **Persistent gaps between policy and implementation**, particularly in resource-constrained settings;
- **Insecurity in some regions**, such as Sudan, Mali and Niger, disrupts the continuity of services.

## What works: lessons across regions and projects

While contexts differ, several lessons learned emerged from the experiences shared.

### 1. Combining top-down and bottom-up approaches

Sustainable cooperation requires both political anchoring and operational ownership. Top-down frameworks such as IGAD provide legitimacy and continuity, while bottom-up mechanisms such as RAO ensure relevance and functionality in practice. Collaboration across both levels is thus important.

### 2. Building on existing regional platforms

Regional organisations such as IGAD and ECOWAS offer important entry points for embedding child protection within broader policy frameworks. Supporting case management procedures and frameworks within these structures helps move beyond project-based approaches.

### 3. Harmonizing tools without forcing uniformity

Efforts such as shared SOP or platforms like CaseData in West and North Africa show the importance of alignment. At the same time,

flexibility is essential to accommodate different national systems and capacities.

### 4. Strengthening cross-border operational linkages

Concrete mechanisms – such as cross-border committees, referral pathways, and joint case management processes – are critical for ensuring continuity of care. These are often the weakest, but most decisive elements. Equally important is the need for clear mapping of stakeholders and accessible, regularly updated databases of actors involved in case management. Such tools help reduce duplication, close information gaps, and significantly improve the quality and continuity of responses across borders.

## From practice to advocacy: where change can happen

A key objective of the exchange was to **provide inspiration and identify realistic entry points for strengthening advocacy**.

While all stakeholders advocate for improved regional cooperation on case management to enhance the protection of children and youth on the move, they operate with different mandates and responsibilities, engage through different platforms, and occupy different institutional roles.

**Grassroots organisations and CSOs**, including all organizations implementing the EJM and EAMR Projects, sit at the heart of this process due to their proximity to affected communities and their knowledge of protection gaps and needs. They see where systems fall short, where protection gaps persist, and where small shifts could make a tangible difference. **Regional organizations** such as IGAD and RAO contribute to the improvement, harmonization, and coordination of national legislation and practices and the development of common standards. **Donors** such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) play a critical enabling role — not only by providing financial support, but by fostering collaboration across these different levels, encouraging joint approaches,

and promoting alignment rather than parallel systems.

Collaboration among grassroots organisations, CSOs, and donors in advocacy strengthens the clarity, coherence, and collective impact of their shared purpose. Avoiding duplication of efforts is not just a question of efficiency; it is what allows to advocate with a stronger, more unified voice. It is thus important to build on each actors' access and role – whether as a direct implementer, driver of change, or as an enabler of advocacy.

Crucially, advocacy efforts must remain **grounded in operational realities and sensitive to political contexts** – particularly when engaging with security and migration actors.

### **Towards continuity of care across borders**

Across East, West, and North Africa, important building blocks for regional cooperation are already in place. Yet, they remain uneven, fragmented, and often disconnected.

Through the **EJM and EAMR Projects**, significant progress has been made in strengthening both operational and institutional dimensions of cross-border case management, contributing to the development of shared tools and approaches across countries – whether through support to mechanisms such as RAO or engagement with regional bodies like IGAD. These efforts, backed by sustained investments from the SDC, have helped to bridge gaps between policy and practice and to connect actors across regions.

At the same time, the importance of keeping these evolving systems firmly anchored in global child protection standards stands out, particularly through the consistent application of the best interests of the child across different national and migration contexts.

Strengthening regional case management is therefore not about creating entirely new systems, but about **connecting existing ones—across countries, regions, and levels of governance**.

This requires a shift in perspective: from viewing child protection as a national responsibility to recognising it as a **shared, cross-border commitment**. Only then can protection systems begin to follow the child – rather than stopping at the border.

***This article draws on insights from a webinar on “Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Case Management Systems”, conducted by the KAPCYM Unit on 20 April 2026.***

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The **Knowledge and Policy Dialogue on Protection of Children & Youth on the Move (KAPCYM) Unit** supports the two projects “Programme Enfants et Jeunes sur les Routes Migratoires d’Afrique de l’Ouest et du Nord” (EJM, implemented by a consortium led by Helvetas) and “East African Migration Routes” (EAMR, implemented by Save the Children), financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The Unit has the mandate of enhancing Switzerland’s positioning on Migration and Child protection, to foster or contribute to a community of practice, regional synergies and exchanges of evidence-based lessons learnt and good practices; and hence contributing to a more strategic approach to Swiss partners’ policy advocacy messages and approaches.

Operating independently of operational responsibilities, and complementary to the activities of the two regional migration projects, the KAPCYM Unit’s objectives focus on (1) knowledge building; (2) the dissemination of good practices / learning; and (3) providing support and recommendations for advocacy through selected messages to be used by Swiss representations, federal offices and project partners, in their respective external engagement efforts.

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