

How Migrant Children Access Education in Trinidad and Tobago Podcast Transcript

Deanna Johnson: Welcome to this conversation from the Pan American Development Foundation. My name is Deanna Johnson and I am a Program Coordinator on the Migration Team. Our Migration Team works in 10 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, to provide sustainable solutions for individuals who have been forced to flee their homes in search of better, safer lives. From emergency humanitarian assistance in the Darien province of Panama to vocational training for adults in Aruba and Curacao to educational opportunities in Trinidad and Tobago. We strive to provide support services that are effective, participatory, and create sustainable change. Deanna Johnson: Our work is made possible thanks to the support of the US Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. I am very thrilled today to be speaking with Kamilah Morain who is our Deputy Director for our Trinidad and Tobago office. Ms. Morain, a native from Trinidad and Tobago, has over 14 years of experience as a humanitarian and development professional. She has worked in South America, the Caribbean, and the Sahel region of Africa, managing programs in the areas of food security and nutrition, cash transfers, resilience and recovery, sustainable and vulnerable livelihoods, and disaster preparedness and response. Ms. Morain has leveraged her extensive humanitarian background with her knowledge of Trinidad and Tobago politics and culture to successfully implement programming to support refugees and migrants in politically sensitive environments. Kamilah is an expert on the innovative work we have been doing to address educational and protection needs for children in Trinidad and Tobago. Welcome Kamilah it's great to have you here.

Kamilah Morain: Thank you Deanna, happy to be here.

Deanna Johnson: As you know well, there are often monetary or logistical barriers that prevent migrant children from fully accessing education. However, Trinidad and Tobago, is unique in that it affirmatively does not allow migrant children to receive an education. Could you explain for us this context a little bit more and what risks it poses for children?

Kamilah Morain: Sure. So firstly I'd like to say that PADF is doing quite a lot with in this area, alongside its partners to offer children education and protection opportunities, despite some of the challenges that you would have raised. Children on the move, generally face enormous challenges which limit their access to education opportunities in countries where there is not a targeted policy that seeks to include them in the education system there, or does not address their specific needs. So, following the June 2019 registration in Trinidad and Tobago, children of registered adults were granted the right to remain in Trinidad and Tobago, but they did not receive authorization to attend school and foreign nationals as a requirement must be in possession of a student permit, and this is a legal requirement for them to attend school. The issuance of these permits is dependent on the Ministry of National Security and, to date, there are about 4,000 children in the country of school age that are unable to participate in any form of the local education system. And this presents a number of risks, of course, and they are including but not limited to exploitation of children through child labor networks, social isolation of children. The lack of local integration for children also means that they are unable to learn the language properly and perform normal functions within their community that other children do. Additionally, I think that there's about 40% of children from this group in Trinidad and Tobago, that have been out of school for a period that is exceeding two years, and this means that you have a higher incidence of school dropouts for these children. This of course impacts adversely their learning outcomes and their ability to succeed in the school system and it drastically cuts off their opportunities to earn income in the future and to lead dignified lives and it increases their risk of remaining in poverty.

Deanna Johnson: Yeah, so as you're mentioning that a number of protection issues that are born out of not being able to access schooling for children and for their families, as well. And so what are some of the

things that PADF and its partners are doing to offer migrant children education or protection opportunities, despite the challenges that you've described.

Kamilah Morain: PADF has been working actively with many stakeholders here, in turn, either have an interest in advancing children's rights and the access of children to education. We are an active member of the education working group and the stakeholders there include UNICEF and local csos. A representative of the Ministry of Education, the UNHCR and also the Catholic Board of Education Management, just to name a few. And, together with these stakeholders we're working to bring about systemic and structural changes that would result in greater access to education and improve equity in education in Trinidad and Tobago. I would say that, in addition to this PADF and UNICEF work with two partners TTV and the living waters community. To support the education of just over 200 high school students who all participate in a global online school platform which provides them with the opportunity to continue their education and to receive accredited instruction. And UNHCR and UNICEF also supports the education of primary school aged children through a notes master program and it reaches seven several hundred children in that way. PADF as an organization has also worked extensively with the University of the West Indies, to develop an English as a second language curriculum that is aligned to the national primary school curriculum of Trinidad and Tobago. And that concerns children age five to 11 and it's, the first of its kind in the Caribbean. The curriculum was piloted with 30 teachers who were trained on how to teach the national primary school curriculum content to children who did not speak English as their first language, and we also developed a workbook to support Spanish speaking children's learning of English. In the classroom using the content and language integrated learning approach. COVID 19 for us meant a shift in the paradigm of sorts. And it has forced educators, to think about how learning materials are delivered to learners and how they can be supported outside of the classroom setting and context. So, in an attempt to expand educational opportunities for primary school children last year, the education working group engaged in consultations and interviews with students parents, teachers and online service providers. And the group is currently reviewing the results of those consultations and interviews, in order to come up with a solution that meets the needs of children in the current moment, while we're still seeking to achieve some kind of longer term goal of full inclusion for migrant children into the local education system of the country.

Deanna Johnson: I'm really happy that you bring up the education working group and our work with university of the West Indies and ttp solidarity network and others, because one thing that we really emphasize here at PADF is being able to rely on coordination with other partners as that makes our work more sustainable. So could you talk a little bit more about the role of our local and regional as well as our international networks in the work that we've been doing to protect and provide education for children on the move in Trinidad Tobago.

Kamilah Morain: Well, I think that in this area, I would say that it is really and truly a collaborative effort, I think the local networks, including the local diaspora organizations that are operating in this field do have a unique understanding of the population that is being served. And they do also have a personal stake in ensuring that these children are able to thrive in their new environment so there's a lot of commitment there to support these children and ensure that they're successful ensure that programs are well resourced and ensure that they're getting the highest level of care and opportunities that could be available to them. And I think that is also the case with respect to international and multilateral agencies that are working towards achieving this goal. UNICEF leads a technical team that ensures that educational standards are of the appropriate level and that the children that benefit from these programs are not just learning. How should I say, not just learning information but they're also learning how to live in their new societies in their new communities. And that they're gaining skills that can be transferred and that are transferable to other aspects of their lives, whether or not they remain in Trinidad and Tobago, or if they choose to move on with their families, and I think that this is very important that children be equipped to learn and continue learning but also be equipped to apply that learning wherever they might find themselves in the world, particularly with this highly mobile Venezuelan population.

Deanna Johnson: Agreed, agreed. I do and PADF does recognize the importance of supporting children outside of just education, to be able to really succeed as they are living in their host communities and moving on to other communities. And so, with that I wanted to just ask you about apart from educational components and we know that there are challenges and social integration within Trinidad and Tobago, for children and their families. So could you tell us a bit about what PADF and its partners are doing to address you know phobia on the island, particularly for children.

Kamilah Morain: So I would say that, on the question of the social integration of children, we have really invested a lot in this area. In late 2020 we launched *A Story of Hope* and it recounts the experience of migrants and their journeys to Trinidad and Tobago, we worked with a visual artist, Brianna McCarthy, and the author Darren Sandy to render images and to distill many of the stories that were collected and this form the basis for a children's bilingual picture book. And we held a virtual reading caravan at local schools and libraries and we also worked with the artist to do small in person readings and art sessions with children so that they could engage with the materials and the subject matter, that the book dealt with. And we disseminated the book throughout the library networks in Trinidad and Tobago and that was extremely helpful and what we found was that when we engage with children, regardless of their nationality, all children were very interested in the subject matter, but also concerned about how they could help make things better so children have an enormous degree of empathy and that is able to translate I think into. You know, an approach that will probably help facilitate school integration, because one of the challenges, people often raise is. How can these children probably coexist in the same space with our children, seeing as they don't speak the language, and they have a different culture. But also seeing that resources may be stretched too thin but we see that these are preoccupations for adults and there are policy measures that can be put in place to alleviate these concerns, but children themselves are quite open to welcoming other children into their spaces and working with them. And cohabitating and existing alongside them. Another thing that we have done is that we've worked extensively with the heroes foundation in order to promote older adolescents and youth integration in Trinidad and Tobago society of migrant children, and this has been extremely successful, even with the COVID 19 challenges and having to do most of this work, virtually we were able to engage a substantial number of migrant youth and older adolescents, as well as local youth and an older adolescents in cultural exchange programs and initiatives that range from linguistic exchange programs to culinary exchange programs and even their participation in a home gardening project together, where the children of both communities were able to work together in order to produce community gardens and examine the question of food security in their households during COVID 19 where many of them were impacted by income loss significant income loss within their households.

Deanna Johnson: Fantastic, both of those initiatives sound just truly fantastic, and I have been able to see the story of hope book and the drawings are beautiful. Brianna McCarthy has done a great job and the story is wonderful, so I can only imagine how much that is doing amongst the children to really help with integration. And to help host community children, as well as migrant children settle better into their Trinidad and Tobago community.

Kamilah Morain: It was really great, and I think also that PADF did not just stop there, we did a lot of work locally, but we also reached out to engage with many experts. We touched base with Professor Baba, for example, who works out of Harvard and she's an expert in working with children on the move, and we discussed in depth issues that affect migrant children and how we should probably integrate those issues or address those issues in our programming. And the exchanges with her were deeply insightful and helpful in us being able to understand how we should not just formulate our programs but approach the topic with children but also within the wider community. And I think that those things are also very helpful. Finding information and assistance from people who really do have that experience and that track record working in this field.

Deanna Johnson: Right so as you're going through these conversations with experts and practitioners working in the field. What kinds of short and long term activities are you thinking that we're going to be needing to make sure that children Internet and Tobago, are protected and can really build prosperous lives and their new homes?

Kamilah Morain: I think that we should not neglect the importance of inclusion focused work. We still need to do a lot in the area of ensuring that children who are Venezuelan migrants or born to Venezuelan migrants are integrated. As much as possible into the society into the communities and where they live and also are encouraged to have exchanges with local community members and other children of their age. And one of the things that is really important, for that is ensuring that access to school, so, while we are having these attempts to provide immediate access education for them it is primordial that we continue to work towards their full integration into the local school program that exists, so that they will then be part of a community and feel that sense of belonging and be able to, I think, will be able to better assimilate to the society that has welcomed them, thus far. Another thing that I would say is, we need to look at the question of ending the detention of migrant children, and this is very important because, during the COVID 19 pandemic Trinidad and Tobago, had a very strict rule with respect to border closures and this meant that people who were seeking family reunification, or who was seeking asylum were denied the right to apply for international protection. And this was a very sad state of affairs and children in these circumstances were detained and some of them were also deported, as a result of these exercises, so we do need to work consistently and alongside the relevant authorities, but we also need to mobilize efforts among other local NGO or CSO entities to take a stand against child detention and also to allow children to reunify with their families where this is actually something that is being sought actively by many families that have been separated between Trinidad Tobago, and Venezuela. We need to I think look more closely as a country that is not just the signatory, but that has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We need to look more closely at how we implement our obligations to children. And we need to put the best interest of the child first. When making any decisions that concern that child. Be it a question of guardianship be it a question of shelter, be it a question of, it's not right that this child returned to Venezuela right now. Maybe, even if they don't have family here that we can identify simply because returning them to Venezuela, we may not be able to identify any family members over there, to welcome them. So these are things that I think really need to be considered, we need to do. We need to have a mechanism that determines what is the best interest of the child and then provides guidelines to different entities on how they should then go forward with meeting the needs of these children that have been separated, that are unaccompanied, or maybe here, but are living in very deplorable situations. And finally, I would say, one of the things that we have been noticing, and it came out in a survey that was done by the IOM recently, is that you have a large number of children that are being born to Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago, and these children have the right to a nationality and they have the right to Trinidad and Tobago, nationality, however, because of COVID but also a lot of other bureaucratic barriers, I think, in procedural for the most part, many children who are born and who entitled to nationality by birth in Trinidad and Tobago, have not been able to access that nationality in a meaningful way that allows them to also benefit from the rights that are attendant to that nationality. And this problem needs to be resolved because these children should be treated like any other child in Trinidad and Tobago. They should have access to all of the services that are due to them, by virtue of being a Trinidad and Tobago national, and this is something that we can only do if we ensure that our legislation, our procedures and our policies are in alignment with standards and norms that have been established that we have adhered to and that the capacity and the resources are made available to agencies that have to implement these actions. And yeah I think that those are a few of the things that we would need to work on in the longer term.

Deanna Johnson: Thank you so much Kamilah. That really gives us a lot to think about. That gives us a great roadmap on how we should be moving forward as we're engaging with stakeholders and partners within Trinidad and Tobago, and the broader Caribbean. And so I do want to just thank you for this really, really fruitful conversation I know we're going to continue having these conversations internally, about

how we can continue to support migrant children and their families, as well as integrate them into Trinidad and Tobago, and make sure that they can access their rights fully. And then we also are going to be talking about how we can take the important lessons learned from Trinidad and Tobago, and apply it to other countries within the region or within the broader Latin America, so thank you so much, this was excellent.

Kamilah Morain: Thank you, it was a pleasure speaking to you today.

Deanna Johnson: Thank you very much for tuning in to our conversation today. You can learn more about our work to support migrant children and families in Trinidad and Tobago, and other countries across the hemisphere by visiting www.padf.org and by following us on social media @PADForg. The music you heard in this episode is Positive Fuse by French Fuse. If you have any questions about this podcast or the information you heard on it, you can contact us at migration@padf.org. Thanks again for listening.