



---

# Expert Meeting on Challenges and Promising Practices in Facilitating Family Reunification of Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Adolescents

## Summary Report

9 October 2025

*Hosted by the Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN) Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Adolescents (UASC)*

---

The Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN) is the first global platform devoted to family reunification for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection. The FRUN draws together key stakeholders, experts and academics with the collective purpose of promoting and facilitating greater access to family reunification procedures. This Summary Report has been prepared by the Co-Leads of the FRUN Working Group on UASC. The views expressed in this report are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the FRUN.

## 1. Background

Based on the right of family unity, family reunification is the most relied upon third country solution for refugees. Yet despite an enabling international legal framework and robust UN and civil society support in facilitating family reunification, there remain legal and practical barriers that prevent many refugee families from reunifying.

To address these challenges, the Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN) was launched in December 2020. The FRUN draws together key stakeholders with the collective purpose of promoting and facilitating greater access to family reunification. The FRUN provides States and other relevant stakeholders with a common space for advocacy, sharing good practices and exchanging ideas. In 2025, the FRUN established a Working Group on UASC in recognition of the specific challenges and complexities in securing family reunification for this population. The Working Group is intended to facilitate coordination, including promoting research, documenting and sharing good practices and exploring practical solutions that help to safely reunite refugee children and adolescents with their families.

## 2. Purpose & Objectives

This Expert Meeting was convened to bring together practitioners, academics, civil society experts, and UN actors to identify barriers and promising practices in facilitating access to family reunification for UASC to inform a mapping of promising practices being compiled by the FRUN.

Specific objectives included:

- Exchange perspectives on challenges and promising practices in facilitating UASC access to family reunification.
- Identify concrete interventions in policy and practice to expand family reunification for UASC.
- Inform a forthcoming mapping of promising practices in family reunification for UASC being undertaken by the FRUN Working Group on UASC.

## 3. Format

The discussion took place under Chatham House Rules and was structured around two interactive sessions focusing on (1) legal/policy frameworks and (2) the practical implementation of family reunification law, policy and procedures. Each session was introduced by two discussants who provided expert perspectives on each topic as a foundation for open discussion.

## 4. Meeting Summary

### *Session 1: Defining family reunification pathways and identifying legal and policy challenges*

#### A. Defining family reunification pathways

The first discussant provided an overview of human rights frameworks that underpin family reunification, including specifically for children and UASC, definitions of family reunification pathways, and the prevalence and impact of family separation in the refugee and migration context.

##### *The definition of "family"*

They highlighted that international law does not provide a single standard definition of "family". The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) has affirmed that family encompasses different structures, shaped by cultural practices and evolving social norms. Under Article 5 of the CRC and related Human Rights Treaty Body jurisprudence, States must adopt a **broad interpretation of "family"** when preserving or restoring the family environment.

##### *The Right to Family Life and Unity*

They also noted that the right to family life is a **fundamental human right** enshrined in core international and regional human rights treaties. These instruments recognize the family as the natural environment for a child's growth and well-being, entitling it to State protection and assistance. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) safeguards the child's right to know and be cared for by their parents, to maintain family relations central to their identity, and to be protected from unnecessary family separation. Accordingly, States must not only refrain from actions that separate families but also take proactive measures to maintain the family unit, including by ensuring accessible family reunification procedures and handling family reunification applications positively, humanely, and expeditiously (Art.10, Para.1).

The right to family life is a fundamental human right enshrined in core international and regional human rights treaties.

##### *The Best Interests of the Child*

The principle of the best interests of the child, a cornerstone of the CRC (Art.3, Para.1), was highlighted as a **primary consideration in all decision making impacting children**, including in decisions of whether, where and how to facilitate family reunification, as well as in decisions impacting parents, family members or other caregivers that may result in family separation.

### *Family Separation*

The first discussant also drew attention to diverse migration contexts in which family separation occurs—not only among refugees and asylum seekers, but also children whose family members are in an irregular status. It was observed that **family separation has become normalized** in many migration pathways (e.g. temporary labor migration), creating “permanently incomplete families.” This normalization erodes the centrality of the family as a protected and protective unit and increases pressure on children to migrate irregularly to reunite with their families.

### *Conceptualizing Family Reunification Pathways*

Participants noted that family reunification remains a relatively nascent protection pathway or third country solution compared to traditional refugee resettlement. While strongly affirmed under the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Supporting Refugee Family Reunification, family reunification lacks the robust operational ‘infrastructure’ (policy frameworks, soft law, guidance tools) that underpins refugee resettlement. Several participants noted that family reunification pathways **need not be limited to refugee-specific or child-specific mechanisms**. They noted a broad toolkit of complementary and/or safe and regular pathways that can be leveraged to support family unity. Beyond family reunification specific pathways, these can be leveraged to include refugees as eligible beneficiaries, therefore supporting refugee family reunification. These include:

- **Humanitarian visas and stay permits** (e.g., for victims of trafficking, enforced disappearance, or climate induced displacement).
- **Educational grants and stay permits** that enable family members to enter and remain legally.
- **Regularization mechanisms** that allow for secure legal status and family unity for individuals already on the territory.

### *Additional Considerations*

Participants emphasized a need for better **data, evaluation, and benchmarking**, noting that there is limited systematic research on the social impacts of family separation, and benefits of family reunification, which weakens advocacy efforts. Participants also urged stronger **monitoring and documenting the lived experiences of children and families** as a foundation for strengthening access to family reunification procedures. Finally, several participants underscored the need to strengthen **age determination procedures** and to address the situation of **children transitioning to adulthood**, who may be ineligible for child-focused family reunification or other pathways when they turn 18.

## B. Legal and policy frameworks for family reunification

### *Short application timeframes*

The second discussant highlighted the legal and policy frameworks in the European context, noting that applications for family reunification often **must be submitted shortly after receiving refugee status** (e.g. three months), which is often unmanageable for UASC, particularly those without legal assistance.

### *Celibacy requirements*

They also noted that **some national laws require the child to be unmarried** in order to sponsor family reunification. This has been challenged at the Court of Justice of the EU but remains in place in some jurisdictions, in tension with international obligations.

### *Geographical limitations*

The third discussant also highlighted that some national laws limit the ability of minors to request family reunification for **siblings or other family members who are not located in the same country as their biological parents**, effectively excluding the reunification of families dispersed across different countries.

### *Ageing out*

Participants noted that in many jurisdictions if a child turns 18 before receiving a final asylum decision, they may **lose eligibility to apply for family reunification under national law**. Participants stressed the importance of addressing the “continuum of vulnerability” for adolescents aging out of childhood status during lengthy procedures and recalled a **Council of Europe** resolution encouraging Member States to create a transition category for 18–25-year-olds, recognizing their ongoing vulnerabilities.

### *Bureaucratic and administrative barriers*

Additional bureaucratic and administrative barriers to family reunification were noted, including **lengthy and complex procedures, high financial costs, financial sponsorship requirements, and strict evidentiary requirements** to prove family ties. It was noted that these can exacerbate inequalities, delay reunification, and place a heavy financial, administrative and emotional burden on many UASC.

### *Failure to prioritize the best interests of the child*

Finally, several participants noted that although the principle of the best interests of the child is enshrined in national law in most jurisdictions, in practice **immigration control often outweighs children’s welfare and best interests** in decision-making around family reunification.

## *Session 2: The application of legal frameworks in practice - challenges and promising practices*

### C. Research findings on family reunification for UASC

The third discussant shared insights from their qualitative empirical research on the viability of family reunification as a rights-based third-country solution within the broader migration governance of the GCR and GCM. Their research methodology combined a literature review, participant observation, and thematic analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and child protection actors, including fieldwork in Nairobi, Kenya.

Participants in the research consistently underscored several systemic gaps and needs:

- Data and evidence on UASC and family reunification are extremely limited. This includes quantitative data on the level of need and eligibility, and UASC accessing family reunification, as well as qualitative data on outcomes or 'successful' family reunification. Strengthening quantitative and qualitative data collection is crucial to build the evidence base to inform policy, practice, and advocacy.
- There is a need for UASC-specific operational or practical guidance, including guidance on how best interests procedures are undertaken in the context of family reunification, tailored safeguarding measures that reflect the unique nature of family reunification as distinct from resettlement, and child and adolescent-centered practice in the context of family reunification.
- Family reunification needs to be institutionalized in a similar way that resettlement has over decades, with 'infrastructure' (an integrated system or 'ecosystem') - including clear tools, guidance, coordination mechanisms.

Despite current constraints, the research findings point to strong foundations on which to build: existing practitioner expertise, established and clear normative legal frameworks and commitments, and promising practices and pilot programs.

In an era of shrinking resettlement opportunities, family reunification presents a vital and underutilized mechanism to expand safe and regular pathways for UASC and their families.

The third discussant concluded by noting that family reunification already operates as a rights-based protection pathway, even in the absence of comprehensive infrastructure. In an era of shrinking resettlement opportunities, family reunification presents a vital and underutilized mechanism to expand safe and regular pathways for UASC and their families.

**Key practices** identified from the research include:

- **Holistic, child- and adolescent-centred support** is essential along the entire continuum of the family reunification process—from early identification and eligibility assessments to post-arrival support in the destination country.
- **Free legal assistance and specialized casework support** were highlighted as indispensable for navigating highly complex, lengthy and costly procedures.
- **Strategic litigation** has played an important role in driving systems change and improving access to family reunification.
- **Capacity strengthening** for State (child protection/welfare) agencies, civil society, and refugee-led organizations is a key enabler—helping build awareness of family reunification as a protection pathway/solution for UASC, facilitate referrals and strengthen case management capacity.
- **Cross-sector and transnational coordination** is essential for facilitating access to documentation (including travel documents), upholding safeguarding, and providing continuity of support from departure to destination countries.
- **Flexible evidentiary approaches** from States can lower barriers to accessing family reunification.
- **Dedicated coordination mechanisms at the global, regional and national levels** play a critical role in facilitating referral pathways, knowledge sharing, peer learning and support, and advocacy for systems change.

#### **D. Identifying promising practices**

The fourth discussant provided practical insights from a departure country perspective. They highlighted major gaps in awareness of family reunification procedures among refugee children and families, particularly those attempting to navigate procedures without legal assistance, noting the process can be costly, complex, and prolonged, with many UASC at risk of aging out of eligibility.

In response to these challenges, the fourth discussant described how their organization has adopted a decentralized service delivery model, which integrates legal services with education, psychosocial support, safe housing, and basic needs assistance. This approach has proven particularly valuable in high-displacement contexts where access to centralized legal services can be limited, and refugee communities are geographically dispersed.

Participants also recognized the role of strategic litigation to help overcome legal and procedural barriers as well as the importance of strengthening legal assistance ecosystems through pro bono partnerships and capacity building, and of elevating advocacy through international forums to push for systemic legal reforms

Participants highlighted a broad array of **promising practices and support services** to facilitate and overcome barriers to UASC family reunification, including:

***Flexible evidentiary requirements***

Participants noted that State flexibility in accepting alternatives to birth certificates or other vital records, which are often unobtainable for refugee children and families, was critical. Additionally, the provision of alternative and/or temporary travel documents in lieu of passports is key to facilitating family reunification.

***Waiver of financial requirements***

Participants noted the importance of providing hardship exemptions to financial requirements in cases involving children and families in precarious situations, including UASC.

***Expedited processing***

Participants highlighted positive practices in expedited processing for children seeking family reunification, including children in immigration detention, in conflict zones, or facing imminent deportation. In these cases, close collaboration between civil society, UNHCR, and diplomatic missions has enabled fast-tracking family reunification applications and coordination to halt deportations while applications are being processed.

***Access to information and legal assistance***

Participants noted that access to accurate information and legal assistance are essential to avoid/overcome procedural barriers and lengthy appeals. Providing child-friendly information and training lawyers in trauma-informed, child-centered approaches were noted as key approaches.

***Community-based approaches***

Participants noted that decentralized and community-based approaches, often led by refugee-led organizations (RLOs), can help to identify eligible cases and facilitate access to needed legal and other supports.

***Cross-border coordination***

Participants noted that strong cross-border and diplomatic coordination is crucial, particularly in time-sensitive and/or high-risk cases.

### *Family tracing services*

The use of community-based family tracing and reunification in emergency settings, leveraging partnerships with local actors, was also emphasized.

## 5. Recommendations

### *Legal and Policy Frameworks*

- **Prioritize the best interests of the child** in all family reunification decision-making.
- **Review and revise national legal frameworks**, as needed, to ensure they align with international human rights and refugee law obligations and global commitments on family reunification (e.g. GCR and GCM).
- **Simplify and broaden eligibility criteria for family reunification**, including by ensuring that UASC are eligible to sponsor their family members.
- **Recognize broader definitions of "family"**, including de facto caregivers, extended family members, and non-traditional family structures, based on the principle of dependency rather than biological family relations.
- **Expand the availability and flexibility of other legal pathways** (e.g., humanitarian visas, work and education pathways, regularization options) to explicitly include UASC and ensure family unity/facilitate family reunification for recipients of these pathways.

### *Procedural and Operational Measures*

- **Make procedures child-friendly and accessible**, including through simplified requirements, extended deadlines, and procedural safeguards against "aging out" and ensure safeguarding during the transition to adulthood.
- **Waive or reduce burdensome requirements** (e.g., financial, accommodation, language tests) for UASC and their families.
- **Adopt flexible evidentiary standards**, including acceptance of alternative documentation or other means of proving identity and/or family relationships.
- **Provide expedited processing** in urgent or high-risk cases, including all cases involving UASC.
- **Develop dedicated policy guidance and/or operational tools** to facilitate these measures.

## *Support Services, Coordination & Systems Strengthening*

- **Invest in holistic, and child-centered supports**, including case management, legal aid (including pro bono legal services), psychosocial support, education, and housing.
- **Strengthen decentralized and community-based models**, including those led by NGOs and RLOs, to improve outreach and access to family reunification.
- **Facilitate transnational and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms** (e.g., formal “Working Groups” and/or informal diplomatic coordination) to unblock complex cases.
- **Enhance data collection and evidence generation** (quantitative and qualitative), including the voices and opinions of UASC, and the perspectives of States, to inform family reunification law, policy, and programming.
- **Participate in and support global and regional coordination platforms** to contribute to greater peer learning, to facilitate referrals, to support joint advocacy and to strengthen regional and global commitments on family reunification (e.g. the Global Family Reunification Network and Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Refugee Family Reunification).

# Annex: Promising Practice Examples

---

## Examples of enabling legal and policy frameworks

- **Australia** – Australia’s Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minor Program provides targeted support for UASC and facilitates family reunification within Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Australian law also defines family broadly, including cases based on emotional dependency, and there is a positive practice of waiving welfare waiting periods and providing financial support to families once refugee status is recognized.
- **Belgium** – The EU Court of Justice ruling in *Afrin* (Case C-1/23 PPU) provides an expansive interpretation of family reunification rights for UASC and extended family.
- **European Union** – Implementation of the EU Family Reunification Directive in some Member States allows flexible interpretation of family membership and provides procedural safeguards for UASC.
- **France** – A 2018 legal reform expanded family reunification eligibility to include minor siblings, which significantly increased accessibility of reunification for children.
- **Uganda** – The Uganda Refugee Act (para. 27) includes provisions recognizing the right to family reunification for refugees, which can extend to UASC.
- **Global** – Participants referenced the GCR and GCM as key instruments reinforcing States’ commitments to facilitating family reunification as a third country solution and a safe, regular pathway.

## Examples of coordination and support services

- **Kenya** –The Inter-Agency Family Reunification Working Group (IAFRWG) was established on June 13, 2024, in Kenya as a collaborative platform bringing together key actors engaged in family reunification. A key feature of the IAFRWG is its structured referral mechanism, which facilitates efficient case management and avoids duplication of efforts.
- **Mexico** – Mexico’s National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA) was noted as a promising example of diplomatic and inter-institutional coordination, including an informal working group (“Mesa de Trabajo”), which is convened periodically to troubleshoot individual cases and liaise with consular officials from other countries.

- **United Kingdom** – In certain humanitarian situations, authorities may waive consular appointment requirements, providing greater procedural flexibility.
- **Germany** – The Family Assistance Program (FAP), which was suspended for subsidiary protection holders as of 24 July 2025, was nevertheless noted as a promising practice for its geographic breadth and in-country processing approach, as well as for the (case management) support provided in collecting necessary evidence, compiling documentation and completing relevant procedures.
- **United States** – The Central American Minors (CAM) Program, no longer in operation as of 2025, was nevertheless noted as a successful model targeting UASC family reunification which could be replicated in other contexts. The program provided broad, child-centered eligibility criteria; in-country processing; multiple pathways to protection; and access to legal assistance.
- **UNHCR** – The Central Mediterranean Family Reunification Project was noted as a promising example of identifying cases for possible family reunification and in facilitating logistical and other support to beneficiaries.
- The **Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN)**, and its Working Group on UASC were noted as a key global forum for collaboration, mapping of good practices, and information sharing.
- The **International Red Cross and Red Crescent Family Reunification Working Group** was noted as a successful example for enhanced operational collaboration and joint advocacy.
- The **UNHCR 2021 Best Interest Procedure (BIP) guidelines** were noted as a helpful framework to facilitate family reunification where national systems are limited.
- The role of the **Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action** and its **UASC Task Force** in developing global guidelines for family tracing and reunification and in preventing family separation during crises.
- The role of **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** such as Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) and the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) in providing specialized legal assistance to UASC through direct services and capacity building of pro bono law firms was highlighted.

# Annex: Key Resources

---

## Reports, Studies & Guidance

- Council of Europe (CoE), *Family Reunification for Refugee and Migrant Children: Standards and Promising Practices* [Link](#)
- European Migration Network (EMN), *Family reunification of third-country nationals: State of play of law and practice (2024/2025)* [Link](#)
- Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), *Lawful Pathways for Family Reunification: The Central American Minors (CAM) Program (2025)* [Link](#)
- OHCHR, *Enhancing the Human Right to Family Life for Migrants and Their Families in the Asia-Pacific Region (2025)* [Link](#)
- OHCHR, *Leveraging Regular Migration Pathways for Human Rights (2025)* [Link](#)
- UNHCR, *UNHCR Guidelines on international legal standards relating to family reunification for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection (2024)* [Link](#)
- UNICEF, *Working Paper: Family Unity in the Context of Migration (2025)* [Link](#)

## Case Law & Legal Developments

- CJEU – Afrin (Case C-1/23 PPU) [Link](#)
- CJEU – E. v Staatssecretaris van Veiligheid en Justitie (Case C-635/17) — available at European Database of Asylum Law (EDAL) [Link](#)
- CJEU – SM (Child placed under Algerian kafala) (Case C-129/18) — available at CURIA [Link](#)
- CRC Communication 12/2017, C.E. v. Belgium — available at Leiden Children’s Rights Observatory [Link](#)
- CRC intervention in Switzerland (AsyLex case) [Link](#)

## Projects, Initiatives & Coordination Mechanisms

- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action — UASC Task Force [Link](#)
- Central Mediterranean Family Reunification Project [Link](#)
- Family Assistance Project (FAP) [Link](#)
- Global Family Reunification Network (FRUN) [Link](#)
- International Red Cross and Red Crescent – Family Reunification Working Group [Link](#)