



# OVERVIEW OF THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FACING CHILDREN IN NORTHERN FRANCE

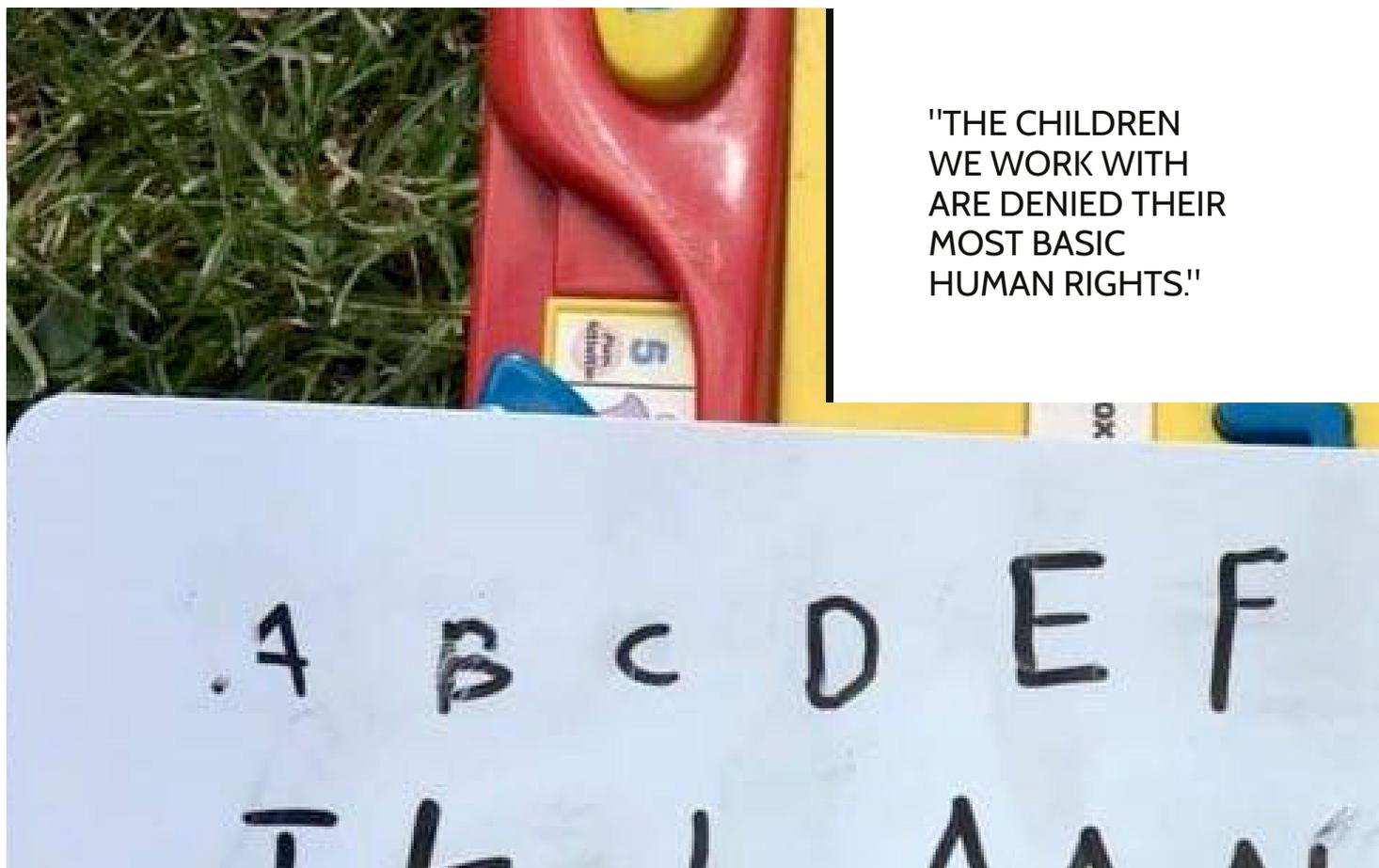
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# INTRODUCTION



"THE CHILDREN  
WE WORK WITH  
ARE DENIED THEIR  
MOST BASIC  
HUMAN RIGHTS!"

A growing number of displaced children are growing up in makeshift camps across Calais and Grande-Synthe in Northern France.

These camps are characterised by precarity, rough sleeping, and high levels of state violence. The mental and physical exhaustion of this living environment are further exacerbated by the lack of safe, legal routes of passage, forcing families to undertake incredibly dangerous journeys in their attempts to reach the UK. The juxtaposed border agreement between France, Belgium, and the UK means that those seeking safety in the UK are denied the right to submit a claim for asylum at the UK-France border. The children we work with are denied their most basic human rights, forced to spend their formative development years growing

up in an increasingly hostile environment. The UK and French government have employed a deterrence-based approach, including evictions of living sites multiple times per week, limited to no access to sanitation facilities and food, no indoor sheltering options, and an increasingly high presence of police forces. There is a complete lack of safeguarding and protection mechanisms in place, despite the national and international obligations to uphold the rights of the child.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this report will be on the denial of the right to education, a right that is protected in multiple international and national conventions and laws.

<sup>1</sup> [https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/RRE\\_ChildrenInCalais-web.pdf](https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/RRE_ChildrenInCalais-web.pdf)

# ON THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LAW

The right to education has been recognised as a universal human right under a number of international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>2</sup> the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education,<sup>3</sup> and the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990<sup>4</sup> (CRC).

Article 28 of the CRC demands that "State Parties recognize the right of the child to education," through making primary and secondary education "available and accessible to every child." Both France and the UK are signatories to the CRC, but failing to adhere to its terms.

Under French law, all children residing within the French state are required to attend compulsory education from ages three to sixteen.<sup>5</sup> The preamble to the French constitution states that it is the "states' duty to provide free, non-religious public education at every level."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, displaced children living in makeshift camps in Northern France have the enshrined right to go to school. However, this right is undermined by a number of barriers that prevent children from accessing school.



DISPLACED CHILDREN LIVING IN MAKESHIFT CAMPS IN NORTHERN FRANCE HAVE THE ENSHRINED RIGHT TO GO TO SCHOOL.



<sup>1</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12949&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12949&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000038829065>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank\\_mm/anglais/cst3.pdf](https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/cst3.pdf)

# BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN NORTHERN FRANCE

There are a number of barriers in place which prevent displaced children in Northern France from recognising their right to education. Language is a substantial barrier, as parents who cannot speak French may not understand the procedure for enrolling their children in local schools.

There is no accessible, translated information provided by the state to inform families that their children have a right to go to school, about the procedures for enrollment, and how to enrol. Furthermore, children face difficulties accessing schools when they don't speak French, as there is a limited number of specialised language training or initiation classes and a limited number of resources dedicated to these schemes.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, in order to evade their obligation to schooling children, some French municipalities improperly require parents to provide undue administrative justification, while others use the illegal nature of the family's housing as a pretext and require an address in order to enrol. This serves as another barrier, as those growing up in camps do not have a fixed, permanent address in France.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there are no transportation links from their living spaces to the schools, making attending school difficult and often inaccessible. There is no outreach from the state to make this process easier for families, who are purposefully kept on the fringes of society. For families on the move, these barriers act as a powerful deterrent to keep their children out of the protective mechanisms of the education system.

One of our team members spoke with a father in Grande Synthe who was very distraught that his older son, ten years old, is not in school. Having previously worked as a college professor, he told them that *"one of the most important things for my children is that they*

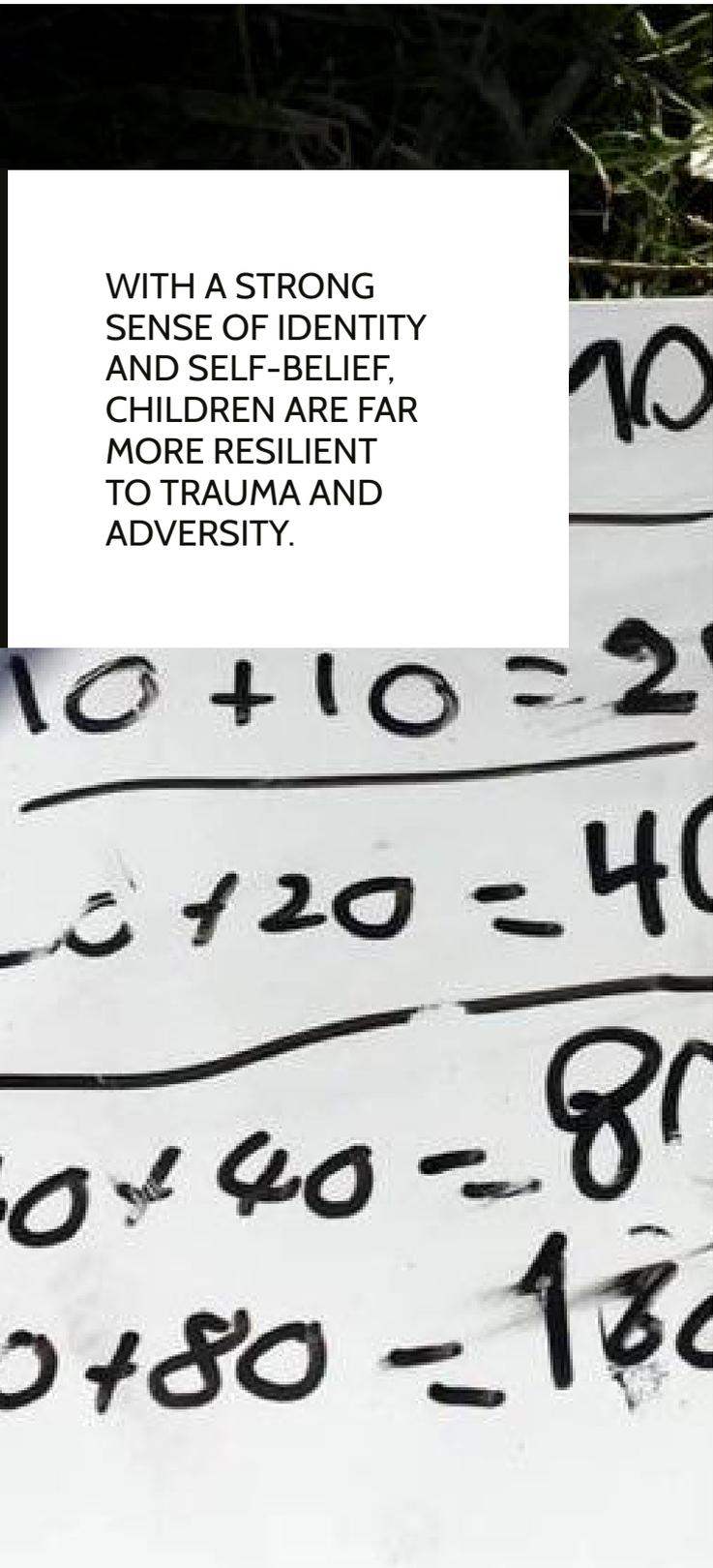
*have good schooling."* He told them that if they are to reach the UK, *"the very first thing I will do is find a way to get my son back in school,"* because he is very clever and is incredibly understimulated and bored without having access to formal education at this time. It is a real struggle for the father because he wants to educate his sons himself but they are faced with so many difficulties in the camp on a daily basis that it is hard to make the children feel comfortable and focused enough to give lessons where they are living.

The lack of safe, legal routes of passage to the UK acts as another barrier to education. A significant proportion of the communities we work with are hoping to seek asylum in the UK. However, as the borders become more securitised, their journeys towards the UK become increasingly precarious and dangerous. Thus, children are left living in these makeshift camps for indetermined periods of time. Whilst unable to safely travel to the UK, families do not wish to establish roots in France, meaning that children miss out on more vital months of education. The UK is also a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and therefore has a duty to uphold their rights and their best interests. It is, undoubtedly, within their best interests to be attending school, in a structured, stable environment. Therefore, as long as the UK prioritises securing its borders over protecting the lives of vulnerable individuals, these children will be left living in limbo, outside the formal education system.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/france/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.lacimade.org/publication/petit-guide-protoger-les-enfants-et-leurs-droits>

# THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND PLAY



WITH A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY AND SELF-BELIEF, CHILDREN ARE FAR MORE RESILIENT TO TRAUMA AND ADVERSITY.

The positive role of education and play on a child's emotional, physical, and cognitive development cannot be underscored.

The children we work with have been on the move for a number of years, walking thousands of miles in harsh conditions, in order to seek safety in the UK. Some of them have spent prior years in other countries, where, in transit, they were registered in school. For example, in July 2020, our teams met two Kurdish families, with two and four children respectively, aged between 2 and 15 years old. The respective children had been attending schools in Germany and Italy for almost three years. They spent time learning a new language, creating social bonds, and beginning the process of integrating into a new society. For these two families on the move, the barriers to education on the Franco-UK border constituted a total break in the children's schooling, much to the great regret of their parents.

Other children are either born in transit or forced to leave their home countries before school age, thus never having any experience of formal education. All of the children we work with have experienced disrupted access to education, leading to significant gaps in their development.

Through play, children learn to interact and communicate, express their emotions, explore their creativity, and grow their physical abilities. Play helps them figure out what they like, don't like, and what they're good at. With a strong sense of identity and self-belief, children are far more resilient to trauma and adversity. Playing with others teaches children to relate to those around them, understand themselves and the impact of their actions, as well as how other people's actions make them feel. These children need a space where they can build this social and emotional awareness in order to cultivate healthy relationships, as well as process and respond to distress.

At Project Play, we work to fill the gaps in disrupted education by providing children with a safe space to play, along with running activities centred around promoting healthy development. We run specific school-focused activities, and for three months last year, we provided Sorani-based maths lessons once every week. We bring an education bag with us on every session and all of our volunteers are eager to provide education lessons to children who are interested. We run arts and crafts activities, physical activities including football and sports days, music lessons, and drama workshops.

# PROJECT PLAY'S DEMANDS

## The French Government must:

- Uphold its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child through making decisions informed by the best interests of the child principle.
- Provide displaced communities with information on accessing schooling, to provide transport links from the camp, and to address current barriers which exist.

## The UK Government must:

- Open safe, legal routes of passage to the UK for those wishing to seek asylum or join family there. Further securitisation of borders has forced displaced individuals to take far more treacherous journeys, thus risking their lives in search of safety.
- Uphold their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and take joint responsibility with the French government for the children who are left in limbo at the UK-France border.

THE FRENCH AND  
UK GOVERNMENTS  
MUST UPHOLD THEIR  
OBLIGATIONS UNDER  
THE CONVENTION  
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