

Situation Overview: Unaccompanied and Separated Children Dropping Out of the Primary Reception System

Italy, February 2017

CONTEXT

As of February 2017, 15,058 unaccompanied and separated children are hosted in the Italian reception system. However, more than an additional quarter - 5,252 young people - registered upon arrival, have dropped out of both primary and secondary reception centres since registration in order to continue their journeys or move elsewhere.¹ The vast majority of these children drop out of primary reception centres.² It is commonly thought that these children attempt to cross the border to other European countries, where they often have family members waiting. However, not all children who drop out of reception centres arrive in Italy already knowing that they want to reach another European country and not all of those who drop out cross international

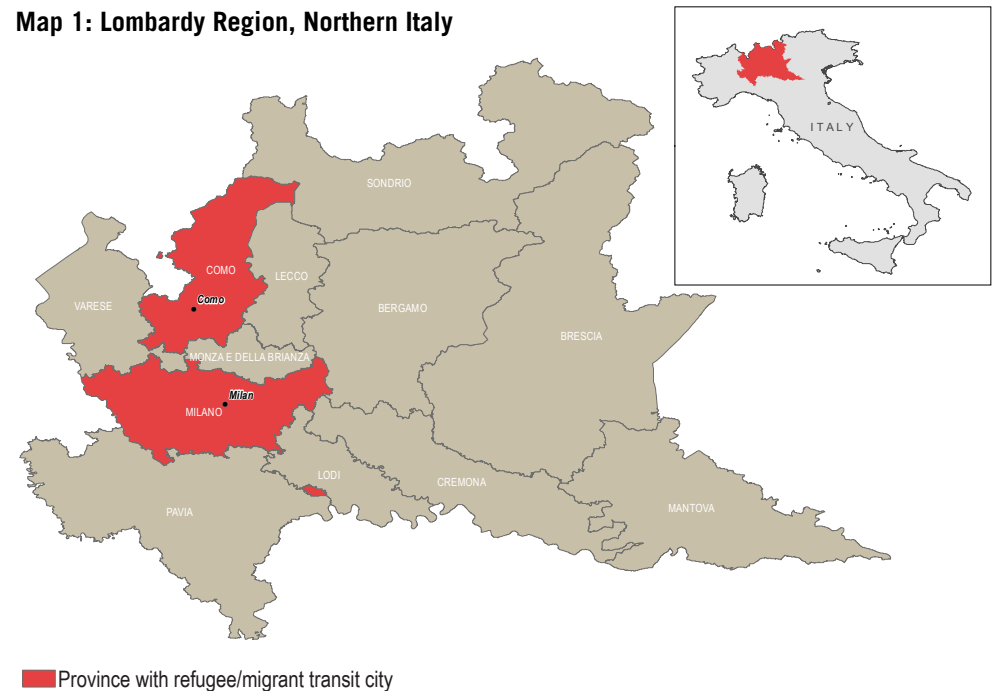
borders. Rather, some children arrive on Southern Italian shores and after a few months in primary reception centres decide to leave the centres to try their luck elsewhere.

This situation overview was conducted in the framework of a partnership between UNICEF and REACH. It aims to shed light on the experiences of some of these unaccompanied and separated children in Como and Milan, the decision making process behind dropping out, their travel in Italy and intentions to move elsewhere. Based on a total of 14 qualitative interviews, it finds that poor conditions in primary reception centres coupled with limited access to accurate information often lead to children leaving state assistance schemes without being fully aware of the consequences of dropping out. Due to a lack of trusted information through official channels, children rely on unconfirmed advice from informal channels, and make decisions on the basis of incomplete and potentially misleading information.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

In Italy, the decentralized governance system means that national law only sets the general framework of unaccompanied and separated children's (UASC) rights and the reception system. The detailed provision of services

Map 1: Lombardy Region, Northern Italy



METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS

This situation overview draws on a rapid assessment of the experiences of children in transit in the Northern Italian cities of Como and Milan, conducted on 7-9 February 2017. It aims to provide qualitative information on the dynamics which shape decision making amongst children dropping out of primary reception centres. It is based on 7 in-depth interviews with key informants, including service providers and activists, as well as 14 semi-structured interviews with unaccompanied and separated children from Guinea, Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt. Written informed consent was collected from children aged 16 to 17 in order to participate in the study. Due to the limited number of girls in the sites visited, the vast majority of respondents were boys, meaning that the views of girls in particular may be underrepresented. Children were interviewed in spaces which ensured privacy; interviews were held in English, French and Arabic. Information from both sources was triangulated and complemented with secondary data. The findings from this research brief are indicative only and not representative of the whole population of unaccompanied and separated children in Italy.

REASONS FOR LEAVING PRIMARY RECEPTION CENTRES

1. Conditions in primary reception centres, incl. limited access to education & healthcare
2. Lack of clarity around asylum procedures

REASONS FOR HEADING NORTH

1. Mistrust of primary reception centre staff
2. Reliance on social media & anecdotal information

to which UASC are entitled to and relevant procedures are determined by each Regional Government.³

On the national level, the legislation sets out three main functions of UASC primary reception centres: (1) identification, (2) age assessment, and (3) family reunification.⁴ Further, as per national legislation, UASC have the right to healthcare and the obligation to attend school until they turn 16 years old.⁵ The practical implementation of this framework is carried out by each region and relevant regional legislation. As such, implementation may vary from region to region.

Because of their temporary function, primary reception centres are supposed to host UASC until they can be assigned to secondary reception centres, which should happen within a legally prescribed maximum of 60 days. However, in practice children often stay much longer, as the secondary reception capacity falls short of accommodating all requests. Primary reception centres, unlike secondary reception centres, are not obliged to ensure that children attend school. Once UASC have been assigned a place in secondary reception centres they remain there until they turn 18. UASC Secondary reception is provided by the Support Network for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SPRAR), FAMI, Comunita Alloggio, and Case Famiglia.⁶

On a regional level, each region sets its own requirements for primary reception centres and decides on the minimum standard of service provision to be ensured. In Sicily for instance,

where 40% of UASC in Italy are hosted, the regional presidential decree 600/2014 sets minimum standards for primary reception centres.

According to regional law, primary reception centres are not obliged to provide in-house healthcare but have to refer children to the National Health System. The decree encourages reception centres to devote specific attention to Italian language classes, legal information, and psycho-pedagogical support, but does not prescribe these services as obligatory. Despite being explicitly mentioned in national regulation as a main function, primary reception centres are not required by regional law to employ staff to provide legal information and paralegal assistance. Further, the decree does not specify a duty to provide education or psychological services.

In order to submit an asylum claim, UASC must first be appointed a legal guardian by the Juvenile Courts.⁷ This process currently lasts an average of two months, and when UASC move to another region they must apply for a new guardian, further delaying the procedure. The law 'Provisions for the protection of foreign unaccompanied minors', passed on 29th March 2017, is set to allow for the application for international protection to be submitted before the legal guardian is officially appointed.⁸

REASONS FOR LEAVING RECEPTION CENTRES

Children reported that their decision to leave reception centres was due to three main factors: 1. conditions in primary reception centres, including limited access to education and healthcare; 2. lack of clarity around asylum procedures; 3. mistrust of reception centre staff.

CONDITIONS IN THE PRIMARY RECEPTION CENTRES

For children with no pre-determined migration plan upon arrival in Italy, conditions in primary reception centres were a key factor affecting their decision to leave. Specifically, children explained that their decision was driven by limited access to basic services such as education and healthcare. In addition, the inability to work and a lack of pocket money - key for the children to maintain a certain degree of independence and dignity - was an important contributing factor.

APPLYING FOR ASYLUM

Overall, children displayed a concerning lack of awareness about how to claim asylum in Italy. Whilst some children reported not having been told at all how to apply for asylum in Italy, others explained that they did not trust the information received in primary reception centres.

The general lack of clarity around the correct

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The conditions of my centre were not good. We had little food. no school and no one to ask legal advice from. There was no way I could get documents there.

M 16, Egypt

In Palermo the manager always spoke of 'commissione', but I don't know what is this 'commissione'. Can you explain?

M 17, Guinea

You know, you can't trust anyone in the centre. It was difficult to get information in the camp, no one listened to us there.

M 17, Guinea

I noticed that no one was getting their documents...

M 16, Guinea

They [reception centre staff] didn't understand me well. They were not of any help.

F 16, Eritrea

My friend in Venice told me that I can go to Milan because there are good services and the procedures are rapid.

M 17, Somalia

procedure and children's sense that their claim was not progressing were key in shaping children's decision to leave the primary reception centres and go elsewhere. All children believed that further north in Italy the procedures would be faster, which prompted their decision to leave. However, this belief was often based on a misunderstanding of the Italian reception system: the majority of reception centres in the North of Italy are secondary reception centres, to which children are transferred after having completed their stay in a primary reception centre. Almost by default, secondary reception centres host children who have been in Italy longer and who, as a result, are more advanced in their asylum procedures. Children heading north from the South of Italy, however, were not aware of this distinction and only heard from children in the North that they were progressing in their asylum claims. On the basis of this incomplete information, children decided to move north.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION & TRUST BETWEEN CHILDREN AND PRIMARY RECEPTION CENTRE STAFF

In general, children said they could not trust site managers in the primary reception centres and they did not see local staff as a reliable source of information. This was aggravated by language barriers, as reportedly often reception staff did not speak children's languages, including English and French. Most children held that they did not receive

THE JOURNEY OF AN UNACCOMPANIED 17 YEAR OLD BOY FROM GUINEA



Map 2: Route taken from primary reception centre in Sicily to Como

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any information or guidance on accessing services and international protection or, even where they did, that they felt they could not trust the information provided to them.

Instead, children reported that they were 'introduced' to the procedures inside primary reception centres by other children who had been there longer. As a result, even when children had been informed about potential consequences of dropping out – as reported in one case – the child disregarded the advice.

DECIDING TO HEAD NORTH

All children reported having chosen to come to the North of Italy upon advice from friends or other migrants whom they had met on facebook or other social media platforms, rather than on official information provided. Through a combination of hearsay, rumours and information from others, they were led to believe that children in the North of Italy would have access to schooling, better services, as well as speedier access to asylum. This is most likely due to the fact that children in Northern regions had been in Italy for longer and were mostly staying in secondary reception centres.

Crucially, these social information sources created expectations which were not fulfilled upon arrival in the North of Italy. Whilst all children reported that they themselves made the final decision to move to the North, they repeatedly expressed surprise at the situation upon arrival, which was not as expected.

STRANDED IN CITIES OF TRANSIT

Upon dropping out, children arrived in the North of Italy to realise that they had to recommence their asylum application procedure from zero. This meant that children lost valuable months in their applications. This was of particular concern to children who were already 17 years old, as they ran the risk of turning 18 by the time their application as a child for international protection was processed. Upon arrival in cities such as Milan and Como, children had no clear reference points on how to proceed. They then had to wait for a space in official sites, with limited means of sustaining themselves, potentially at risk of exploitation. In one case, a child reported having waited

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

My condition is getting worse as I have to start again from the beginning and I don't have now a place to stay. I am getting back to the same situation I was before and maybe worse than that.

- M 17, Somalia

I thought it would be better here [in Milan], but it is just as difficult as in Cagliari. I don't really understand what I have to do and I'm waiting to go to a centre. I don't mind if I stay in Italy, I just want to be able to study.

- M 17, Guinea

for two months to be assigned to a reception centre in the North of Italy.

Once in this situation, some children started considering to move to other European countries. However, the majority felt that, as long as they were able to access services and international protection – the very reasons why they came to the North in the first place – they did not see the need to leave Italy.

CONCLUSION

It is commonly assumed that unaccompanied and separated children drop out of reception centres in the South of Italy because they had already planned to leave Italy before arriving in the country. However, this rapid assessment found that some children drop out of the Italian reception system because they do not know the correct procedure to claim asylum and legally stay in Italy. In lieu of official trusted information, children follow hearsay and anecdotal advice on social media, hoping to have better access to protection and services, such as education and health care, by heading to the North of Italy.

Children who drop out of the reception system in this way lose valuable months in their asylum application, and while waiting to be assigned to a new centre in Northern Italy, stay in precarious shelters with limited means to sustain themselves. This group is at particular risk of exploitation, which is exacerbated due to their lack of knowledge about international protection procedures and their rights.

End Notes

1. Italian Ministry of Labour, Monthly report on unaccompanied and separated children in Italy, 28 February 2017.
2. ANCI, I comuni e le politiche di accoglienza dei minori stranieri non accompagnati: un'analisi longitudinale a guida dei percorsi futuri, 2016. <http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Notizie/Documents/2016%20MSNA%20Rapporto.pdf>.
3. Law no. 142/2015 and legislative decree no. 308/2001.
4. Law no. 142/2015.
5. Legislative decree no. 286/1998.
6. The SPRAR is a network of accommodation centres managed by the municipality associations (ANCI); FAMI centres are also part of the secondary reception system and funded entirely by EU funding. Comunità Alloggio and Case Famiglia are the traditional institutions of the child protection system in Italy and also host Italian children.
7. Legislative decree no. 142/2015.
8. Disegno di legge n° 1658-B 'Disposizioni in materia di misure di protezione dei minori stranieri non accompagnati'.

About REACH

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