



OXFAM MEDIA BRIEFING

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Children alone

Pulled from the sea, fallen by the wayside

Background

Alone, confused and scared. Their rights curbed and hopes crushed. This is the state of far too many children who make it across the Mediterranean to “safety”.

The latest data estimates that more than 10 million people – around half of all the refugees worldwide – are “minors” (that is children under 18-years-old). At the same time, nearly 100,000 children who lodged an asylum request were unaccompanied - that is by definition those who are not assisted or represented by their parents or any other adult¹.

In Italy, according to the UNHCR, the number of unaccompanied children has risen significantly in 2016, and are now 15% of all arrivals. By the end of July, 13,705 unaccompanied children² had landed in Italy, more than the whole of 2015 (12,360³ children).

Italy is once again the principal arrival point for irregular migrants (this is people who enter a country without the documentation required by authorities) to Europe after governments decided to close the Western Balkan route and the European Union entered into its deal with Turkey.

However, the Italian reception system has turned out to be inadequate for protecting lone refugee and migrant children and their rights. Even worse, during the first six months of 2016, 5,222 unaccompanied children were reported missing, having run away from reception centers. They become invisible, under the legal radar and are therefore even more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

To put it another way, in Italy alone, on average during each and every day in this past year, more than 28 unaccompanied children are “lost” from a broken system and into an unimaginable fate.

¹ UNHCR Global Trends 2015.

² UNHCR: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

³ Ministry of the Interior.

Fleeing hardship and a grueling journey

More than 94% of unaccompanied children are male; 82.2% of them said they were between 16 and 17 years old; 10% said they were 15 years old; and 7.8% under 14 years old. This data is based on the age they gave when they were first identified – so it may not be their real age. Like all refugees and migrants in Italy they come from very different places. Most of these children are Egyptian (21%); Gambian (12.3%); Albanian⁴ (11.4%); Eritrean (7.1%); Nigerian (6.2%); and Somali (5.2%).⁵

There are many complex underlying reasons that unaccompanied children arrive into Europe, including to escape war, conflict, insecurity and poverty.⁶

“My brother slid into to the sea. I never saw him again”

Galo, 16 years old, from Gambia



Photo: Luigi Baldelli for Oxfam

“I left Gambia a year and a half ago with my brother. It wasn't safe there anymore, the police threatened us. Some of our neighbors had been killed in gunfights. We first crossed Senegal, then Mali. We spent three weeks in Agadez in Niger, where the people who are going to leave all come together. Then we got to Libya, where we were kidnapped and held for two months. There were more than a hundred of us, all from sub-Saharan Africa. We managed to escape and a smuggler helped us find a place on the boats that were leaving.

We left on an inflatable boat with 118 other people. After a few hours there was something like an explosion, a fire, and in the confusion my brother slid into the sea. I never saw him again. He'd given me his lifejacket. When the boat started to take in water I thought we'd all die. Seven other people died before the Italian ship came to save us. They were the ones who were sitting at the back, in the part that deflated first.”

⁴ The Albanian minors are a different case. They obviously follow different routes, mainly crossing the Adriatic sea, and they do not normally apply for asylum.

⁵ Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs

⁶ Save The Children, 2014; Giovannetti, 2008; Amnesty International, 2015; ANCI Report, 2016.

A failing reception system: Extended detention and no room in reception centers

According to the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies⁷, around 40% of the unaccompanied minors who arrive in Italy – that is close to 4,800 children – are in Sicily at the moment. According to the law, these children are supposed to be looked after automatically by the social services of the municipalities where they land⁸.

But this causes big problems.

“The municipalities where people land are often small, like Pozzallo or Augusta, which do not have enough facilities and resources to respond adequately⁹”, says Iolanda Genovese from AccoglieRete, an Oxfam partner in Sicily.

When children first arrive, they are taken to the so-called “hotspot” centers for initial registration. These facilities have been created by the EU together with the Italian and Greek authorities to expedite the processing of asylum claims in those countries and execute swifter returns of those rejected, although it should be noted that these hotspots have no legal foundation in national law¹⁰.

The maximum stay in these hotspots is meant to be 48-72 hours¹¹. **The children are therefore only given enough for a very short stay:** one set of clothes, a pair of flip-flops and a €5 telephone card. However, some children end up being stuck in a center for up to 5 weeks. This means never changing their clothes, even their underwear, and not being able to call their family. There is also chronic overcrowding and inadequate sanitation in these facilities. Such awful conditions for children who are de facto detained in these centers create an alarming picture.

“In the port of Augusta, in Syracuse, there are some little girls who even stayed in the Civil Protection tents for two weeks,” says Genovese, *“and this made it difficult to look after them properly, medically, when it was necessary... The doctors we talked to told us that they couldn’t administer antibiotics in a place where the temperature was 40°C.”*

Inadequate sanitation and overcrowding

“In the center I sleep in a big room with 150 other people, adults and children, men and women, all of different nationalities. Everyone in the center sleeps in just one room.”

Eyob, 15 years old, from Eritrea

“After a week I finished my personal hygiene products and I also asked the staff in the center for some different clothes so I could wash my original clothes, but I haven’t been given anything. There are two toilets, One for males and one for females and now there are about forty women here.”

Gebre, 17 years old, from Eritrea

⁷ Data updated to 30th June 2016. These data concern unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy, regardless of where they arrived.

⁸ In August the Ministry of the Interior announced a plan to redistribute unaccompanied foreign minors at a national level, using 36 facilities that responded to the AMIF 2014-2020 calls (one third of which are in Sicily in any case).

⁹ Augusta and Pozzallo are the first two ports of arrival in Italy, where over 26,000 people have landed since the beginning of 2016 (Ministry of the Interior).

¹⁰ Oxfam, 2016: EU “hotspots” spread fear and doubt. <http://oxf.am/Z7j3>

¹¹ Referring to the only law currently available on the subject, the Presidential Decree 394/99, which regulates detention in the closed Centers for Identification and Expulsion (CIE).

Once registered, new migrants are supposed to be moved to reception centers. There are initial reception centers for children in which they should be required to stay for no longer than 60 days, and secondary reception centers where people can stay for longer. However, there are not enough places for either adults or children. For example, in July 2016 only 14% of the people applying for asylum in Italy were hosted by the official secondary reception system of the Italian government, known as the System of Protection for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SPRAR) network¹².

In 2015, the SPRAR network only had 977 places for unaccompanied minors throughout the country¹³. In 2016 calls have been issued¹⁴ to increase the capacity in the initial reception system by 1,000 places, and the capacity of the SPRAR system by 2,000 places. Even if this is achieved, there will still not be enough places to house all new children.

“The Italian reception system doesn’t have enough room for unaccompanied children, despite the fact that this certainly isn’t anything new,” says Paola Ottaviano from Borderline Sicilia, an Oxfam partner. *“This means that children are stuck for a long time in facilities that are set up for stays of just a few days, or a few weeks¹⁵”*.

“These centers aren’t equipped for long stays, so they can’t offer services that facilitate integration, for instance daily Italian classes, school enrolment, sports activities and courses. These children are frustrated. They sleep the whole time because they don’t have much to do and they end up getting depressed,” says AccoglieRete’s Iolanda Genovese.

“Here in Sicily it is getting more and more difficult to find initial reception centers for children,” continues Genovese. *“But this is understandable. The payments are late, the children are never transferred after 60 days as they should be... and every now and then, in order to deal with the new arrivals, 20-30 more children than the planned capacity are sent to the centers”*.

¹² Ministry of the Interior, 2016.

¹³ SPRAR Atlas 2015.

¹⁴ These were calls for the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIFI) - http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/avviso_fami_i_accoglienza_msna.pdf

¹⁵ The initial reception centers for minors, provided for by the “National Plan to handle the extraordinary flow of non-EU citizens, adults, families and unaccompanied foreign minors” (Agreement approved in the Single Conference of 10th July 2014) and included in the Legislative Decree 142/2015, are intended for a maximum stay of 60 days.

For me that center was hell

Nour, 18 years old, from Egypt*



Photo: Luigi Baldelli for Oxfam

"I was in an initial reception center for 8 months. For 8 months I was never given any clothes, except for when I arrived. When they did give me a change of clothes they were too small, I couldn't wear them. Me and the other Egyptian boys used to go out at night and look through the garbage for clothes that we could wear... we looked for them in the garbage bins. I never thought I'd have to do anything like that.

For two months all we did was eat and sleep. We didn't do anything at all during the day. Nobody said anything to me about papers, residents' permits. When I started asking, because I could see that my friends were asking, they told me that my guardian had resigned and that I had to wait. I never even knew that I had a guardian - I never met him."

** Upon his arrival in Italy, Nour was still a minor.*

Sometimes detention, sometimes no oversight at all

Reception centers also sometimes turn into de facto detention centers, report staff of Oxfam's "OpenEurope" program, which focuses on equal rights for migrants, targeting those excluded from the reception system and unaccompanied minors. They met children detained in the Pozzallo Center for First Assistance and Reception in May, and gathered several statements about the fact that it was impossible for them to leave the center¹⁶.

While a visit in May of the president of the Human Rights Commission of the Italian Senate seems to have changed the situation in Pozzallo, at least for the moment, the problem continues in other parts of Italy, including in centers for children.

¹⁶ Oxfam: EU "hotspots" spread fear and doubt.

https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/mb-eu-hotspots-spread-fear-and-doubt-18042016-en.pdf

“Since I’ve been at the Lampedusa migrant center, I’ve only been able to get out through a hole in the wire fence around the center, because we can’t go out or come back through the main gate”, said, Daaud, a 15-year-old Somali boy, who presented a complaint to the Juvenile Court of Agrigento through OpenEurope.

“If we are sick, rather than take us to the hospital, the staff give us pain killers - for any symptom. They are afraid we’d run away,” said Ahmad, 18 years old, who is now at the Pachino center, a better facility made available by the Waldesian Diaconate for the OpenEurope project.

The reverse can also be the case – children are left alone without any oversight. The OpenEurope team met a group of about 15 children, aged between 12 and 17, near the station in Catania, on several evenings in succession.

“They are staying at a center near here”, says Andrea Bottazzi from Oxfam, who is in charge of the project. *“Nobody checks on them, in the evening they go out and they stay out until very late. Who knows who they may meet? In this area of town there are often people who try to recruit labor for illegal work, or worse... so they drift around aimlessly and can fall prey to anyone.”*

Rights? What rights?

In this context it is not surprising that children are largely unaware of their rights. When asked whether anyone has informed them of the possibility of presenting a request for international protection, or of the right to have a legal guardian, many of them are completely taken aback.

“Since we have been in the Pozzallo center nobody has ever talked to us what our situation in Italy is, or about our rights,” say Ermias, 16 years old and Gebre, 17 years old, both from Eritrea, who filed a complaint through OpenEurope.

From speaking to children at a center in Catania, Oxfam can confirm that many of them are never properly informed of their status or rights.

“We asked them if they had heard about asylum, if they knew who their guardian was. They don’t know anything at all... but in the center they are being interviewed about the reasons that made them leave. We think it’s in order to formalize their applications for asylum, but they obviously don’t know why they are asked these questions. They don’t understand anything that happens to them,” says Bottazzi.

Another problem is the lack of supervision by the management of the facilities and the lack of response to allegations of abuse, or actual violence.

Shewit, 17 years old, from Eritrea, says: *“Together with us in the Pozzallo center there is also a group of adults who treat us Eritreans badly. They beat us up and insult us. Despite the fact that we have repeatedly reported them to the police and to the staff at the center, the adults just carry on, and nobody does anything about it.”*

Living in stations, car parks, on benches



Photo: Luigi Baldelli for Oxfam

Some children end up running away from the centers that receive them. There are several reasons for this. Some run away because they do not feel they are protected and the reality is that they are extremely vulnerable and exposed to great risks.

Other children come to Italy determined to continue their journey towards northern Europe. In the summer, the parks and gardens around the train station in Catania are full of children who spend the whole day waiting to get on a bus for Rome or Milan, from where they hope to continue their journey further on into mainland Europe. After a couple of days in hotspots or in initial reception centers, they run away, sleeping in the open at night or in an abandoned car park – a flat cemented area full of garbage on which they spread cartons and blankets to sleep. They wash in the basin of the public fountains and eat at the Caritas Help Center.

“It’s not only the ones who had already decided to continue their journey who run away, but also the ones who would have liked to stay [in Italy]. If they stay in an initial reception for months without anyone telling them what awaits them, whether there is a future for them, what prospects they have... in the end they obviously run away,” says Salvatore Maio, Oxfam Program Coordinator for Sicily.

“They didn’t let us go out, we didn’t have access to the internet and we couldn’t talk to our families,” says Nour, 18 years old. *“There wasn’t enough food. It wasn’t enough to fill us. For example, a roll was divided into four portions, and it was supposed to be enough for four people. So some people started running away... My friends Amadi and Salim, they ran away... They said, ‘better out there than here’.”*

“While we were checking the streets, we met ten Nigerian underage girls walking around Syracuse on their own. They wanted to go to the police to report the center where they were staying which they had just run away from,” says Iolanda Genovese from AccoglieRete. “They complained that they were left alone and were completely ignored by the center’s managers. These girls should be looked after very carefully, because they are potential victims of trafficking.”

Running away, living on the street

“After we landed, they took our fingerprints then they took us to a center... A flat, outside town, in Syracuse. There wasn’t anyone there during the night to check up on us, so we ran away, all 11 of us. There was no way to contact our families from there or to have money sent to us¹⁷... We came to Catania, we walked here”.

Dehab, 15 years old left Eritrea over a year ago. She wants to go to Norway since her older sister, who lives in Switzerland, told her to go there to look for people who their parents know.

“I ran away from the center two days after I arrived, with other children from my country... Some very young children left on their own, too. The police came after us, but they didn’t catch us. Now I sleep on the ground, here, near the station... I’m waiting to be able to leave, I don’t know how long I’ll be here, I’m waiting for some money to arrive. Then I’ll go to Milan, then... I’ll see what I can do, I don’t know.”

Hayat, 16 years old, wants to go to Germany because he has some relatives who he thinks can help him.

“They are really determined to continue their journey. It’s often their parents, on the phone, who encourage them not to stop. They appreciate our help, the fact that we are there for them, that we give them information... But they’re afraid we want to force them to stay in Catania,” says Bottazzi from Oxfam’s OpenEurope project.

A police investigation in Catania also revealed trafficking of children. *“The same dynamics as in Libya,”* say staff at AccoglieRete. *“Children are kidnapped by people from their own country and kept hidden in apartments or basements in Catania, while they wait for families to pay the ransom.”*

Abandoned by the system at 18 years and one day old

If the situation of children is critical, that of those who turn 18 is no less so. On 20 January 2016 a circular issued by the Italian Ministry of the Interior made it clear that national funds can only be provided to municipalities for hosting unaccompanied children until the day they turn 18.

They come in the morning, they come at night

“One morning during breakfast, the staff told Saadya, who had turned 18, to put his things in a black garbage bag and to go with them. They tried to take him away but we all fought against them and they stopped. But that very night, there were noises in the apartment, so my companions and I woke up and we realized that they’d come to get Saadya, and they were taking him away.”

Nour, now also 18 years old

“When it was nearly my own birthday, I was very worried. On the evening of the 19 May, the manager let me know that the next day I’d have to leave the center. That’s just what happened. On 20 May, the day of my 18th birthday, at around eight in the morning they kicked me out.”

Ali, 18 years old

¹⁷ Normally minors receive the money they need to continue their journey from their parents through money transfers, by identifying people on the place who the families can send the necessary sum to. At this point, while they are looking for intermediaries, the risk of being cheated is very high.

Who can make the difference? The legal guardian

All unaccompanied children arriving in Italy have the right to a guardian - someone to act in their best interests and protect their rights. Guardianship plays a vital role in determining the extent and quality with which the institutions fulfil their responsibilities in taking care of children who are unaccompanied.

Shockingly, it can take up to eight months until a guardian is appointed. This is especially true in Sicily, due to the vast number of arrivals. This deprives children of guidance on their rights and how to secure these through Italian law, and consequently jeopardizes their future chances.

“Our association has been promoting the role of the voluntary legal guardian for a long time, by involving and training civil society activists,” says Genovese from AccoglieRete. “Our guardians become a point of reference for the children because they create a personalized path for them, really personalized... So much that over the years, the presence of the guardians has led to a reduction in the number of children running away from the communities in Syracuse.”

“Sirif, a 17 year old from Gambia, was living in an initial reception center for eight months, although by law he should not have stayed there for more than two months. A guardian was only appointed recently and in the interview with the guardian, during which we were present, it turned out that O. could have applied for a residence permit for medical treatment, which would have protected him much more since he needed to have an operation,” says Federica Bonifacio from AccoglieRete. “That’s why a guardian should have been appointed quickly, so they could have taken individual care of his case as soon as he arrived. This is impossible for a reception center that has to take care of 90 cases at the same time.”

Recommendations for action

The experience of children in Italy is a stark indicator of the failure of European governments and the Italian authorities to protect children coming in search of safety and dignity. It also shows the failure of Europe’s wider policy approach to place the responsibilities of managing a common external border upon only a few European countries. Oxfam and its partners call for immediate action to be taken.

The Italian government should:

- Set up a **national reception system** that can support all arriving unaccompanied children, increasing the number of places available both in initial and in secondary reception (SPRAR), ensuring standardized services are provided, and guaranteeing the monitoring of the standards of the facilities and adequate selection and training of the staff.
- Guarantee dignified and safe temporary reception for children moving across Italy by setting up supervised dormitory services, which don’t require children to have documentation to stay, where the minors can rest in a protected environment.
- Guarantee the **rapid appointment of legal guardians** for all unaccompanied children, support the **recruitment** and **training** of the guardians, and encourage the use of adequately selected and trained “voluntary guardians”.

- Standardize the identification and **age assessment processes** so that they are always carried out in a child's best interests and in agreement with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. In particular, age assessment should be carried out with a multidisciplinary approach, involving specialists from various fields. When in doubt, the younger age should always be taken as valid.
- Promote continuous support for particularly vulnerable children (for example, victims of trafficking and of abuse or those applying for asylum.)
- Promote **school and professional integration for all children**, including support to become partially independent and to access services to benefit from the right to health.

The European Union and its Member States should:

- **Prevent any risk of exploitation, trafficking, abuse or violence** towards migrant children by guaranteeing rapid and effective procedures for identifying legal guardians for children and to invest in policies and projects to counter the trafficking of minors.
- Eliminate and prevent every form of **detainment** of children in the Member States. There is no circumstance in which detention of a child is acceptable; it always represents a violation of the rights of a child.
- Develop common age assessment procedures across Member States in line with the good practice promoted by the relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations.
- Ensure that the right to receive an adequate education is respected in all Member States, both transit and destination countries, for all migrant children, which is an essential step towards future integration.

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