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PROTECTING CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

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Life-saving support for unaccompanied
and separated children arriving in Italy

Acknowledgements

UNICEF would like to thank our partners working with us in the reception centres and disembarkation and transit centres in Southern and Northern Italy.

We would also like to thank all those who help make this report possible, in particular the Italian Coast Guard, who hosted the UNICEF delegation on board during patrols, the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, and the prefectures at the local level, for allowing the team access to hotspots and other first reception facilities.

This report was produced as part of the “PROTECT – Protecting Children On The Move” project, funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (HOME). The contents of this report reflect the views of the authors. They are their sole responsibility and should not be regarded as reflecting the views of the European Commission or any other body of the European Union. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

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Cover image: One of the drawings made by an 8-year-old girl at the *Women and Girls Safe Space* in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

UNICEF works in over 190 countries and territories to save children’s lives, to defend their rights, and to help them fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. Since 2016, UNICEF has been working in Italy to provide critical and life-saving support to children and families seeking asylum, refuge, peace and safety in Italy.

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Photo 1. Close-up of the hotspot in Taranto, Puglia, November 2023



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Preface



Photo 2. F., playing, at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia

As Country Coordinator for UNICEF's refugee and migrant response in Italy, I have met dozens of girls and boys who have experienced the most challenging childhoods. The majority of children seeking safety, asylum and refuge in Europe travel alone, separated from their families. Many have experienced abuse, exploitation and violence in their home countries and along every leg of their journeys. On arrival in Italy they are faced with adapting to a new culture and environment, again, alone.

I have also met with people helping these children overcome the challenges they have faced and supporting them to settle into their new environment, including cultural mediators, volunteer guardians, reception centre managers, magistrates, border guards, prefects, health workers, teachers, and many, many leaders of local associations.

The data and stories featured in this report reveal the complexity of the situation of children seeking refuge, asylum and safety in Italy. Socio-political tension, conflict, and the devastating effects of the climate crisis have had an impact on people's movements in recent years. In 2023, we saw the number of unaccompanied and separated children increase steadily compared to previous years, but the increase was largely predictable.

The situation in Italy is often referred to as an "emergency" but it is more of a challenge. A challenge that requires action to protect the most vulnerable. And a challenge that can be overcome through a structured, sustainable and long-term approach, centred in children's rights.

The inclusion of refugees in national systems was the central theme of the recently concluded Global Forum on Refugees. There is no "magic wand" that can instantly resolve the difficulties related to the protection and social inclusion of unaccompanied and separated children.

Still, we know that an emergency approach does not allow for an orderly and rights-respecting approach. Efforts must be made to define and implement a long-term strategy that considers all the needs of children and adolescents on the move, starting with unaccompanied and separated children.

The uncertainty and temporary nature of emergency solutions including detention of children harms mental health and emotional well-being. A long-term strategy provides children with the stability and security essential for their development. Long-term planning can also facilitate the social inclusion of children, enabling them to build meaningful relationships, acquire language skills, and participate actively in social and economic life.

Accelerating progress for the inclusion of refugee and migrant children and their families in national and local systems and services is critical.

Despite the increase in numbers and vulnerabilities we have seen throughout 2023, the efforts of all the partners we work with demonstrate that it is possible to meet this challenge. Our work in the prefectures on the most vulnerable cases, with voluntary guardianships, in support of adolescent empowerment, are proof of this.

A structured strategy can reduce social and economic costs in the long run. This long-term approach must be integrated into a European solidarity mechanism and a European migration and asylum management system that guarantees the protection of all children and adolescents and combats all forms of exploitation.

No migration management system can be considered sustainable if it does not put the best interests of children at its centre. If a system for managing migration and asylum applications doesn't work for them, it simply can't work.

We owe this change to all unaccompanied and separated children, those who have lost their lives in avoidable shipwrecks, those fleeing conflicts, natural disasters, conditions of extreme poverty or simply in search of better conditions, and to their families. For them, UNICEF will continue its work to support national and local authorities that will help end many preventable tragedies and ensure the protection and inclusion of every child.

The challenge is complex, but the stakes are high: the future of these young people and the kind of society we want to build.

Nicola Dell'Arciprete

Country Coordinator, National Response
UNICEF Regional Office for Europe
and Central Asia

Introduction

Heading towards a children's rights emergency?

This report provides an overview of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in Italy and the main disembarkation and transit points where UNICEF provides critical support to children, from the southern borders to the land borders of Northern Italy.

The report provides a summary of the latest available data on the arrival and reception of children in Italy, recent events, and legislative measures that have been put in place. Among these was the declaration of a "State of emergency due to the exceptional increase in migrant flows entering the national territory via the Mediterranean migratory routes," which led to a series of events related to the protection and reception of unaccompanied and separated children and families.

The report aims to unpack the different contexts in which UNICEF works with its partners and how our response has adapted to respond to the changing and growing needs of children. UNICEF implements and adapts its programme to support all children on the move, women, families and people with specific vulnerabilities, modelling interventions on a case-by-case basis according to emerging needs.

The report covers two geographical areas where UNICEF operates. The southern border, in Lampedusa, Sicily as the main point of arrival and disembarkation, and Calabria and Puglia, which are points of arrival and areas which have seen an expansion of emergency structures to cope with the increase in numbers. The northern border, specifically Ventimiglia, is one of the main transit points to Northern Europe.

The report highlights the driving factors for children to leave their home countries. These driving factors are often not given as much weight in the narrative as the number of people arriving.

This section of the report also highlights how the synergy between the different actors of the protection and reception system can provide real support in cases of increased vulnerability.

The report also makes several observations and recommendations based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Ongoing crises and the persistence of extreme poverty suggest a possible increase in flows and prompt reflection on the effectiveness of current policies and the necessary measures to be implemented. This year there has been a reduction in transfer times from places of first arrival, but this has not always resulted in transfers to appropriate facilities, so further efforts are needed to ensure that all children, especially those travelling alone, can fully benefit from the rights set out in the CRC.

The state of emergency, and the measures resulting from it, risk becoming an emergency for the rights of children and adolescents.

In this context, models of intervention have also been tested that demonstrate how it is possible to manage even the most complex cases of vulnerability in an emergency in an orderly and respectful manner. UNICEF's work in collaboration with the prefectures and guardians, who can facilitate and accelerate the necessary steps of protection and inclusion, is an example of this.

Photo 3. Close-up of a boat at Molo Favalaro, Lampedusa, Sicily, September 2023



Unaccompanied and separated children in Italy in numbers

152,272

people arrived in Italy by sea between 1 January and end of November 2023¹

17,088

of them are Unaccompanied and Separated children (UASC). According to Article 2 of Law 47/2017, an UASC is a child or adolescent who does not have Italian nationality or the nationality of a European Union Member State, who is for any reason present on the territory of the state or otherwise under Italian jurisdiction, who is without care and representation by his or her parents or other adults legally responsible for him or her according to Italian legislation)²

70%

of arrivals in 2023 were to the island of Lampedusa, with a peak - recorded in September - of around 7,000 people at the local hotspot³

25,673

August recorded the highest number of arrivals



Photo 4. An unaccompanied minor at the Lampedusa hotspot, Sicily, September 2023

23,480 and 19,149

the other two peaks of the year, recorded in July and September respectively

+61%

total increase in arrivals compared to the previous year

+21%

the increase in arrivals of unaccompanied and separated children from the previous year

2,211

people who lost their lives at sea along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 alone, many of them minors,⁴ **11 every week** according to the latest UNICEF estimates⁵

While arrivals by sea are constantly monitored by the Ministry of the Interior's statistical dashboard, arrivals via the Balkan route and Northern Italy are overlooked.

/

There is no data on the number of people crossing the northern borders, where the flows, especially outgoing ones, remain constant

23,798

unaccompanied and separated children were recorded in reception centres in Italy.⁶ Of these, 88.3% are male and 11.7% female. Around 71% are aged between 16 and 17, of which 6% are girls. The proportion of girls increases the younger the age, reaching 49% in the 0-6 age group. The countries with the greatest number of arrivals include Egypt, Ukraine, Tunisia, Guinea, Gambia and Ivory Coast

687

abscondments of UASC from the reception system (they were 629 as of December 31, 2022, 406 at the end of 2021)



Photo 5. Close-up of boats at Molo Favalaro, Lampedusa, Sicily, September 2023

¹ Source: Ministry of the Interior, 'Statistical Dashboard', http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_30-11-2023.pdf

² Source: Ministry of the Interior, 2022, *Vademecum operativo per la presa in carico e l'accoglienza dei minori stranieri non accompagnati*, https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2022-08/24_vademecum_per_la_presa_in_carico_dei_minori_stranieri_non_accompagnati.pdf

³ UNICEF processing of prefecture data and spontaneous landings recorded during the year

⁴ Source: OIM, https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?region_incident=All&route=3861&year%5B%5D=11681&month=All&incident_date%5Bmin%5D=&incident_date%5Bmax%5D=

⁵ Source: UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.it/media/migranti-undici-bambini-muiono-ogni-settimana-nel-tentativo-di-attraversare-la-rotta-migratoria-del-mediterraneo-centrale/>

⁶ Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Dashboard Monthly data on Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM), <https://analytics.lavoro.gov.it/t/PublicSIM/views/HomePage/HomePage-SIM?%3Aembed=y&%3Aiid=1&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y>

Key facts in 2023 and the evolution of the regulatory framework

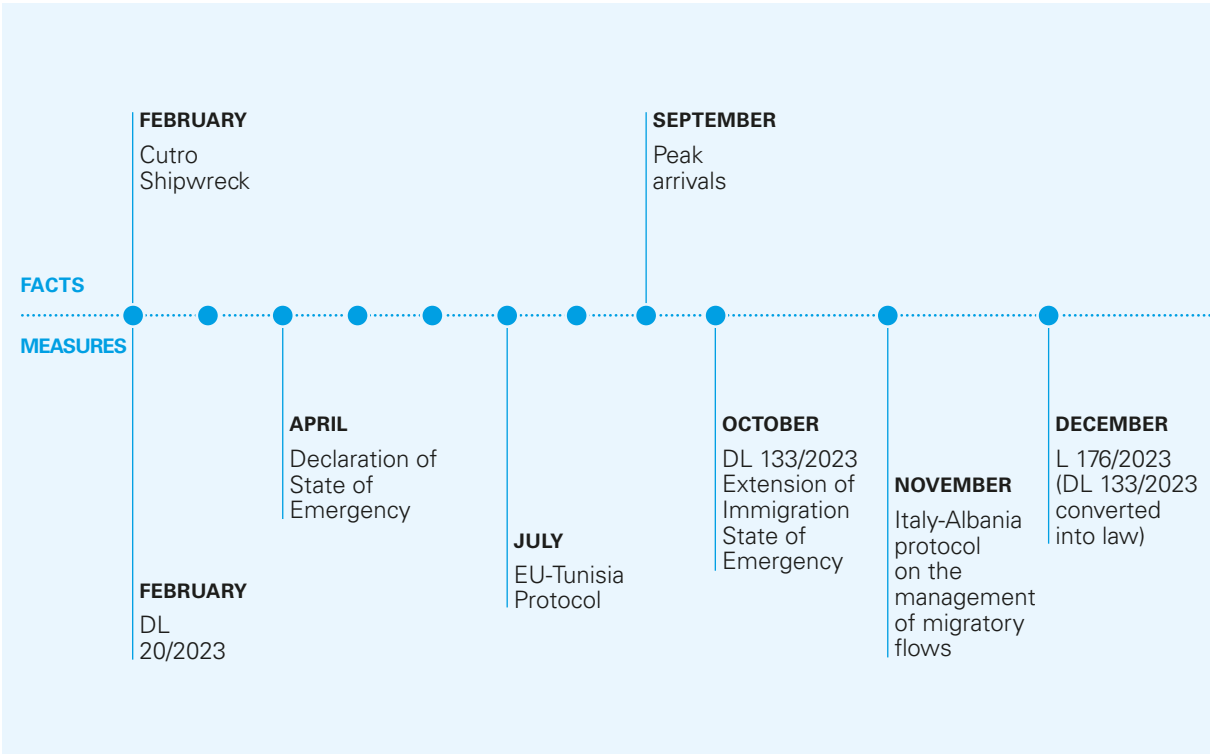


Chart 1. Key events in 2023 and the evolving normative scenario, prepared by UNICEF

In February 2023, a boat carrying around 180 people, including children, capsized and sank off the Calabrian coast at Steccato di Cutro. This was the first major shipwreck of 2023. Poor weather and sea conditions hampered rescue efforts, resulting in a tragic toll. More than 90 people were confirmed dead and many more missing, including children. While the search continued at sea, the Pala Milone - Crotone's sports hall - was set up as a funeral parlour. Child-sized coffins, some of which remained nameless, were lined up.

The day after the shipwreck, the Italian Government issued the Legislative Decree

20/2023,⁷ better known as the Cutro Decree, later converted into law (Law 50/2023).⁸

Measures included strengthening the initial reception system and the creation of new hotspots and government centres throughout the country. The measure also modified the type of services that must be provided in these structures. Concerningly, this excluded psychological assistance, the management of Italian language courses and legal and local orientation services. In April 2023, following the declaration of a state of emergency due to the exceptional increase in the number of people arriving in Italy via the Mediterranean

7 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/05/05/23A02665/sg>
8 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/05/05/23G00058/sg>

Sea migration routes, the management of the Lampedusa hotspot has changed.⁹

After this, there was an overall improvement in conditions and an acceleration of transfers to other centres. Despite this, initial reception facilities in Sicily, Puglia and Calabria, where children and families can remain for months, continue to cause concern including a lack of access to basic services, combined with the failure to comply with the minimum standards required.

During the summer of 2023, the number of shipwrecks and landings off the coast of Sicily increased, particularly off the coast of Lampedusa, the first port of call for many people crossing the sea. Arrivals peaked during the summer between July to September. In September, 110 landings were recorded in 24 hours - many from Sfax, Tunisia - accounting for a total of 4,867 new arrivals.

As of October, arrivals from Tunisia significantly reduced and there was a shift in departure routes. The regulatory framework also changed again with the recent Legislative Decree 133/2023 - known as Legislative Decree Immigration, then converted into Law 176/2023 on 1 December¹⁰ which introduces measures regarding the reception of adolescents and age assessment.

Although Italy has been able to count on an advanced and protective regulatory framework for children and adolescents arriving alone in Italy since 2017, with Law 47 - the so-called Zampa Law¹¹ - the latest legislative acts - not least the recent Decree Law 145/2023 reducing resources for UASC reception - risk compromising the guarantees provided for UASC.



Photo 6. Close-up of a room in the Taranto hotspot, Puglia, November 2023

9 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/05/08/23A02609/sg>
10 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/10/05/23G00145/sg>
11 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/04/21/17G00062/sg>

These measures allow the accommodation of adolescents aged 16 years or older in adult facilities but these centres were not designed to accommodate children. These overcrowded centres put children at risk of gender-based violence and deprive them of access to basic services. They are often in poor condition and unhygienic, posing a risk to children’s health.

The state of emergency and exceptional measures has recently been extended until April 2024.¹²



Photo 7. Minors at the Taranto hotspot, Puglia, November 2023

12 Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2023/10/13/240/sg/pdf>



Photo 8. Close-up of boats in Lampedusa, Sicily, September 2023

In-depth analysis: UNICEF's support for children, women and families arriving in Italy



Photo 9. A UNICEF worker talking to a child at CARA Sant'Anna, Crotone, Calabria, November 2023

At the end of 2016 UNICEF resumed operations in Italy, for the first time since the Second World War, to support children and families seeking asylum, safety and refuge, with a focus on unaccompanied and separated children.

UNICEF continues its work in the southern and northern borders at landings and in hotspots, to facilitate the identification of children and the referral of the most vulnerable cases, including cases of gender-based violence, and to provide initial psychological and legal support.

UNICEF also works across the main transit points in Central Italy and the north-western land borders, where, in collaboration with Save the Children, they ensure identification, referral and support for children and families.¹³

UNICEF's programme focuses on child protection, including mitigating and responding to gender-based violence, and skills development, listening and participation.



Child protection measures include legal and psychosocial support and referral to specialised services, and measures to address the specific needs of girls and women at risk of exploitation and violence.



UNICEF has set up skills development pathways to ensure children can prepare for the challenges of adulthood and the path to independence that follows.



Priority has been given to forms of support and reception at the community and family level through the direct involvement of civil society, family-based care including foster care, or family support for families with children.



UNICEF has implemented initiatives and actions - including online - to encourage children's listening and direct participation in the processes that affect them. This includes through the digital platform U-Report On The Move,¹⁴ an anonymous and free messaging tool for young migrants and refugees, through which requests can be collected and information provided.



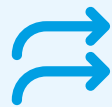
Photo 10. Minors queuing for the canteen at the Taranto hotspot, Puglia, November 2023

¹³ Source: UNICEF, 2019, <https://www.unicef.it/pubblicazioni/a-un-bivio-la-transizione-all-eta-adulta-dei-minori-stranieri-non-accompagnati-in/>

¹⁴ Source: UNICEF, <https://onthemove.ureport.in/>



Following reports received through the platform, in 2021 UNICEF launched Here4U to provide psychosocial support to children and young people. The platform is supported by ARCI and APPRODI.



In 2023, UNICEF strengthened its response action with PROTECT, a project financed by the European Commission through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). This enabled UNICEF to increase its support in Sicily, Puglia, and Calabria. The Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia to support children in transit is also supported by the project.



UNICEF has six case managers to support local authorities in managing and supporting unaccompanied and separated children, families and women who have experienced violence and/or are at risk of gender-based violence, and to promote a coordination mechanism between the main actors and child protection services present in the area.



Through border interventions, UNICEF and Save the Children reached over 6,783 people, including over 6,100 UASC and over 491 gender-based violence survivors.



Through staff located in the prefectures, UNICEF has supported 320 children with additional specific vulnerabilities. An additional 33,517 people were reached through the U-Report on The Move platform. More than 300 children were supported with psychosocial support through Here4U with partners ARCI and Approdi.

People supported at the border with PROTECT*

+6,783

Migrants and refugees reached in partnership with Save the Children

+6,100

Unaccompanied Foreign Minors supported

+491

People who have survived or are at risk of gender-based violence

33,517

People reached by UNICEF via information from the U-Report platform on the Move

+320

Vulnerable cases taken over by UNICEF staff working with Prefectures in just 4 months

*The results achieved refer to the period November 2022-October 2023. These figures do not include results achieved through other resources.

AREAS OF INTERVENTION IN ITALY



Chart 2. Map of UNICEF emergency centres and intervention areas in Italy, prepared by UNICEF

Photo 11. Close-up of Taranto hotspot, Puglia, November 2023

AT THE BORDER

Southern Border: Sicily, Calabria, Apulia

Lampedusa is often the first port of call when arriving in Sicily. Given the prevalence of arrivals, it is also where most shipwrecks are recorded.

The Coast Guard and the Guardia di Finanza patrol boats are nearly always carrying out search and rescue missions. In Lampedusa, the hotspot is located in a strip of land in Contrada Imbriacola, away from the town centre. The area is gated and guarded by military personnel.

In addition to the Lampedusa **hotspot**, there are others located in Messina, Pozzallo, Taranto and Vibo Valentia. In some locations including Porto Empedocle, Augusta and Roccella Jonica, **tensile structures** have been set up. These tents, often located in port areas, are unsuitable in both summer

and winter as they lack any form of ventilation or heating, making them unbearably hot in summer and cold in winter. The structures, which have camp beds for people to sleep on, are often unhygienic and unsanitary and children and families do not have access to basic necessity including clothing and blankets. Children cannot let their families know they have arrived safely as mobile devices are banned and other means of communication are not provided. The hotspots and tensile structures were intended to accommodate people for identification procedures, but children can be held here for months in poor conditions.



Photo 12. Close-up of CARA Sant'Anna, Crotone, November 2023

Similarly, the **emergency centres** are often buildings that are no longer in use, such as the old school complex in Ardore or the sites in Stilo, Siderno, and Portigliola, which are used as temporary reception centres during periods of increased arrivals.

Among other emergency structures are **government centres, reception centres for asylum seekers (CARA), first line reception centres (CPA) and other reception facilities (CAS)**. Designed for a short stay - not exceeding 30 days, recently extended to 45 - these centres, often isolated, do not provide the essential services needed to protect children, denying them access to language courses and legal information, mediation and other specialised services.

UNICEF's on-site teams often find gaps in the effective identification and referral mechanisms, putting children at risk. This is partly because the number of children is high and there are not enough operators on the ground to support.

Through the Here4U service, UNICEF has collected several reports from adolescents in initial reception. Many children report travel-related trauma, constant flashbacks, negative thoughts and difficulty sleeping. Many children experience anxiety and disorientation, exacerbated by the lack of mediation and adequate information.



Photo 13. UNICEF worker listening to a child, CARA Sant'Anna, Crotone, November 2023

Lives on hold



Photo 14. Close-up of CARA Sant'Anna, Crotone, November 2023

A gate opens and closes immediately behind us as we walk through. We are in a hotspot. The scene is the same in Lampedusa and Taranto as it is in many of the government and emergency centres that accommodate unaccompanied and separated children arriving in Italy by sea. It's a scene of chaos, confusion and a visible fear among children.

Although transfers have become quicker since the management change at the Lampedusa centre last June, the same cannot be said for the other centres where children are often transferred.

Last September in Lampedusa I met M., 16 years old, from the Ivory Coast. She had fled her home country after escaping an early and forced marriage. She needs immediate help. At that time we also met M., a 16-year-old from Gambia. He talks about his dreams of going to school and studying. Knowing that he will be transferred soon, he hopes he is able to start his journey in Italy. However, it is not known whether or not he will be transferred to another closed facility, where his dreams will be put on hold.

It's the same in the Taranto hotspot. Transfers can be quicker for vulnerable cases and children under the age of 15, but due to a lack of space in secondary reception centres the overall waiting times are long for everyone. Older children sometimes have to wait for months.

A., a 17-year-old from Gambia, travelled through Senegal, Mali, Algeria and Tunisia before arriving in Italy. He has been in



Photo 15. One of the minors at CARA Sant'Anna, Crotone, waiting for Italian lessons. November 2023

the hotspot ever since. He shows us where he sleeps. He shares the space with other children and young people, most of whom arrived in the summer.

They ask us why they can't go out. He shows us an exercise book with some notes, but in the hotspot the presence of external teachers is not guaranteed, so A. studies using the internet, in the rare moments he is able to connect. A lack of wi-fi means that children cannot connect with their families back home. These children are housed in small prefabricated tents, which are placed close to each other. There is an external common area with tables, and a second set up under a tensile structure. Just a billiard table, as an

alternative to days that A. describes as "all the same, with nothing to do."

A., 16 years old, from Guinea, joins us. He left his country three years ago, following the earthquake that destroyed the village where he lived. He is wearing open shoes and a light short-sleeved shirt, even though the cold is starting to set in. They are the clothes he got when he first arrived; only a few have warmer clothing. The waiting is hard for everyone, and the question is always the same: "When can I be transferred, why not now?"

We move to CARA "Sant'Anna", Crotone... The high external gates,

controlled by the military corps, are repeated inside, isolating families from adults and from the area that houses unaccompanied children and young people.

B. shows us some photos on his phone, of a group outing organised by the structure. He describes it as a wonderful day, finally one that was different from the others. But he too has plans: to study, become a plumber, and save some money to help his mother and five younger brothers who stayed home.

Here UASC can learn Italian thanks to the presence of teachers from the CPIA, the

adult education centres that provide language courses. For those reaching adulthood in a temporary centre, once outside, there is little chance of being included in study and training courses, protection is limited and independent living is made more difficult by their lack of documents, fluency in Italian, and means to access employment opportunities in Italy.

The central area of CARA, the part near the offices, is transformed into a large football pitch in the afternoon, with baskets serving as goals. There are a lot of people on the pitch, and many watching.



Photo 16. Queue for the canteen at CARA Sant’Anna, Crotone, November 2023

For some, kicking the ball takes away their worries for a moment, or at least distracts them for a while; for others, it doesn’t, and they lock themselves up in the containers placed one after the other in the fenced areas.

I go to the area accommodating families, many of whom have been here for a year. We meet two young girls, one with her father and mother, who are still waiting to be transferred. The other is with her mother. The little girl is 8 months old and has spent half her life inside the gates.



Photo 17. Playtime, Taranto hotspot, Puglia, November 2023

Northern Border: Ventimiglia

Contrary to what happens on the southern border, Ventimiglia is mainly a transit point for people leaving the country. As often described by social workers, the city is a “funnel” through which people pass, mainly on their way to Northern Europe, often to join family and friends, but also to return, often after an unsuccessful attempt to leave the country.

During outreach activities, it is easy to find people on the move, who often stop for a day or so near the beach or along the bed of the River Roja near the cemetery, where some children and families on the move sleep for the night.

There are four main crossing points in Ventimiglia, often manned by traffickers: Ponte San Ludovico, on foot through the gap in the Ponte San Luigi, the railway

station, or even the mountain pass known as the “Death Pass” because of the many accidents that have occurred along the route. The railway station and the Grimaldi high border crossing are the most popular places where our teams on the ground concentrate their efforts to identify unaccompanied and separated children, women, and families in difficulty, to inform them of the dangers of transit and the possibility of reception, and to offer support to those who wish to stop in the Woman and Girls Safe Space set up by UNICEF and Save the Children.



Photo 18. UNICEF and Save the Children workers at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

We follow a section of the pass that opens up above the hamlet of Grimaldi. The initial stretch overlooks the motorway, from where you can see the French border. The road on the ground is long and soon becomes inaccessible. On pipes, trunks, and abandoned buildings, there are directions for the road that leads to France, and the one that returns to Italy. Backpacks, clothing and objects that have been left by others on the journey are found on the ground.

Very often people resume transit early, other times they choose to stop. But even this option does not find an easy path in Ventimiglia. Last June, local institutions signed an agreement for the management of Widespread Assistance Points (Pads)¹⁵ intended for people in fragile situations in the area. One of these is a small structure located near the area where most of the humanitarian organisations operate, which offers night shelter mainly to families and single women. However, unlike other places of arrival and transit, there are no centres in the city designed to receive asylum seekers in the medium to long term, and support - even temporary - for those in need is only guaranteed by the presence of civil society organisations and networks operating on both borders.

In Ventimiglia, UNICEF and Save the Children have set up a Women and Girls Safe Space designed as a safe place for children and young people, women and families in need. UNICEF is present in major transit areas including the station and on the border with Menton on the French side.

Among the activities carried out in these areas is the identification of unaccompanied children and children and families with specific vulnerabilities. Access to legal information and local services are offered to families.



Photo 19. Informal settlement on the banks of the Roja river, Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

¹⁵ Source: Ministero Interno, <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/imperia-accordo-prefettura-e-comune-ventimiglia-lassistenza-immigrati-vulnerabili>

The taste of sea water, the sounds of the street at night



Photo 20. Drawing by E., 8 years old, in the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

"Sea water doesn't taste good. I didn't know it didn't taste good," says E., 8 years old. For a moment it seems like we have returned to the southern border but instead we are at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, sitting at a table where E. is drawing the sea and boats. She smiles as if it were a game, says that she remembers that the sea was bad and that both she and her mother swallowed a lot of water. Born in Sudan to an Eritrean mother, E. travelled to Egypt, then to Libya, until she finally arrived in Lampedusa. E. arrives at the Women and Girls Safe Space together with her mother. She was met by the mobile team after an unsuccessful attempt to cross the border to reach France; her mother would like to get there because she already has family friends there, a way for her not to feel lonely.

On the same day, the Women and Girls Safe Space receives two more young children. One of them is B., 3 years old; he arrived in Italy with his mother, who left Nigeria when she was 16 years old. The two are returning to Italy from France, where they cannot access a reception programme because they are already identified in Italy. They are waiting to be reintegrated into Italy and while waiting they being supported in a shelter. They spend a lot of time at the Women and Girls Safe Space. B. knows everyone in the space, he runs and jokes, is called several times by his mother. He plays with a scooter that is bigger than him, gets distracted easily, smiles a lot. His mother smiles less, saying she is worried about herself and her child. She tells us that she wants to work; she wants peace for herself and her little boy, which so far she has been unable to have.

Then there's Karem from Morocco who is travelling with his parents. Their journey was long and took them through Turkey and then to Italy via the Balkan route. His mother tells us they travelled here to give her son a better future. "I owe it to him, we have been travelling for months, we have been sleeping on the street for months. Karem still wakes up at night at the slightest noise, he has a lot of trauma to overcome," she says. She wants to work as a seamstress, a job she did in her country, and thus try to guarantee a better future for her little one.

We hear voices behind us. This time there are no bad noises, nothing to frighten Karem - we smile. It is B., who has gone off again to play, and his mother who is calling him.

With the Save the Children team, a partner organisation at the border, we move to the border for outreach activities that are repeated throughout the day.

We meet a family from Eastern Europe: a mum and dad with four children, three of them very young. Unlike the other faces we often meet on this route, all the children are very well dressed, and do not bear the signs of a long journey, despite having faced it. They say they want to move to France where relatives can help them. They set out to take care of their children; one of them has diabetes, the other needs heart surgery. They were sent back to the border. We show them a place to sleep and they decide to accept. We don't find them the next morning. They left very early, trying to cross the border again, to look after their children.

Karem and B. are back in the Women and Girls Safe Space, sharing breakfast; they are ready to liven the space up again.



Photo 21. UNICEF worker playing with a girl at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

Photo 22. Close-up of the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023



A key to protection challenges



Photo 23. UNICEF worker listening to a woman at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

If emergency reception solutions often prove inadequate to guarantee full protection to UASC, timely collaboration between those who work to protect migrant and refugee children and adolescents can help achieve the protection provided by law. The work carried out by UNICEF within the prefectures shows how an effective synergy between the child protection services present in the area

combined with multidisciplinary work can become the key to overcoming the challenges of protection and reception paths. From July to the present day, thanks to the work of case managers, over 320 cases of specific vulnerabilities, including situations of gender-based violence, have been taken care of by the authorities at local level with the support of UNICEF.

In Amir's bag

When Amir*, a 12-year-old Syrian, arrives in Sicily among a group of 600 other people, he is visibly scared, has tears in his eyes and clutches a small bag. He crossed the Mediterranean by earning some money in Libya with small jobs, living with neighbours who took care of him.

UNICEF, through the case manager operating in the field, takes charge of the case and thus begins the procedure of reporting the case to the services called to provide assistance and protection. Following an interview, Amir opens up and tells his story. He also asks to speak to his mum on the phone and takes a roll of paper out of his small bag. It is a list of contacts to call and documents that prove family relationships with these people.

Amir is finally put in contact with his family and the competent local authorities also manage to have a conversation with the child's family. It is his mum who tells the story, in tears: "Amir was sent to Europe after the earthquake because here we don't have enough to support our five children," she says, "There is a niece of ours in Germany and we asked our neighbours to take him there because she can take care of him." In his condition, the child has the right to access family reunification through a free, legal and safe channel. Today Amir is welcomed in a shelter for UASC in Sicily, waiting to receive all the support to reach his cousin in Germany.

In the meantime, UNICEF continues to work with the relevant services and actors to support the child and the entities involved at the local level to facilitate transitions in the child's best interests.

**fictitious name*



Photo 24. A mother with her baby in transit, at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023



Photo 25. Close-up of objects left behind during transit through the mountain pass connecting Italy and France, Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

“I crossed the sea to cure my son”

At just 10 years old, Mohamed*, Tunisian, discovered that he had developed a rare degenerative syndrome. For him the only hope of survival is a bone marrow transplant. For N., Mohamed’s mum, the only possibility was to cross the Mediterranean, risking her life and that of her children to ensure that Mohamed could survive. It is at the Port of Catania that one of the UNICEF case managers comes into contact with the family. Response procedures are activated. The child, already reported to the health services, begins treatment at a local hospital while his mother and brother are hosted in a facility in the area.

Mohamed needs treatment and interpreters to help him understand what is happening and explain to him what the next steps will be. His mum and brother, asylum seekers in serious economic difficulty, have the right to be helped,

have access to accommodation, and receive legal and financial support.

But no adequate structures can be found and, once the child’s health has stabilised, possible discharge begins to be considered. The risk, however, is that the family be reunited in the temporary structure which has received them, in health and hygiene conditions which are not adequate, especially for someone who, like him, is undergoing a course of treatment.

Through the action in support of the prefectures, UNICEF staff in collaboration with the hospital’s social services and other organisations present, activate a response machine that involves different actors in different regions. Today Mohamed is being treated at a children’s hospital in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, known for the quality of scientific research and the excellence

of paediatric care, while N. and her brother are staying near him in free accommodation made available by a local association. UNICEF continues to follow the case and remains in contact with the organisations activated to support the family.

**fictitious name*



Photo 26. Close-up of a drawing in the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023



Photo 27. Worker playing with a girl at the Women and Girls Safe Space in Ventimiglia, Liguria, November 2023

Photo 28. Close-up reflection of migrants on the move, November 2023



Conclusions and Recommendations

The report traces the main events that took place in 2023 in Italy on the migration front, with particular reference to unaccompanied and separated children, and the main measures that have affected the reception system, put in place to manage the recent increase in migration flows affecting Italy. The emergency response approach adopted runs the risk of turning into an emergency of children's rights, often undermined by untimely transfers and the lack of activation of services necessary to ensure the protection of children and adolescents who arrive in Italy, often fleeing conflicts and conditions of extreme poverty.

Over the years, UNICEF has experimented with a number of models that have proved effective in supporting the protection, reception and inclusion of unaccompanied foreign minors. The interventions launched this year in particular, in collaboration with national and local authorities, including the prefectures in six territories in Southern Italy, have shown that by promptly activating the network of actors and services already present in the territory, it is possible to guarantee a more respectful management of rights, in line with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Systematising this type of intervention can enable migrant and refugee adolescents and young people to build meaningful relationships, train themselves and play an active role in the societies in which they live.

UNICEF therefore reaffirms the urgency of overcoming the emergency approach by favouring a long-term strategy that respects the rights of children. This means guaranteeing speedy transfers to appropriate places, activating guardianship services or, where possible, the possibility of access to foster care, and inclusion in training and participation programmes that can contribute to the child's inclusion in the new context in which he or she lives. Therefore, in line with its obligations under international law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF calls on the Italian Government to strengthen the protection of child migrants and refugees by:

- Providing safe and legal pathways for children to migrate and seek asylum, including expansion of family reunification quotas.
- Strengthening the child protection system to better protect children and adolescents at risk of exploitation and violence, in particular unaccompanied and separated children.
- Promoting community-based reception solutions, for example - in line with the provisions of Law 47/2017 - favouring solutions such as family foster care.
- Ensuring the timely appointment of a guardian to guarantee the respect of the child's rights.
- Ensuring that children and adolescents have access to information and guidance to make safe and informed choices.
- Ensuring that all adolescents and young refugees and migrants have access to educational and training paths and giving them access to health and other essential services.

Photo 29. UNICEF worker at the Lampedusa hotspot, Sicily, September 2023



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