

Childhoods on the move

Twelve researches on unaccompanied minors in Italy

Andrea Traverso
(Ed.)



Educare

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Chapter 2

Models and innovative practices for welcoming and safeguarding unaccompanied migrant minors¹²

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2.1 An overview of the phenomenon

The number of unaccompanied minors (Uams) arriving in Italy, and in all parts of Europe, has been rising significantly in the last few years, and constitutes a particular phenomenon that has demanded considerable re-organization of the welcoming system and, more generally, the welfare system.

While the first unaccompanied minors started to arrive at the end of the 1980s, the first significantly large influx of immigrants occurred between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the second millennium, comprising under-age children from Eastern Europe. Of course, these minors had their own specific needs and expectations, distinguished mainly by a certain characteristic: the fact that they were migrating alone, without their families or any adults as travelling companions (Consoli, 2015).

In order to deal with this category of migrant, distinguished by the very fact of having to be protected principally because they were minors, Italy launched a specific system of welcoming, also laying down regulations regarding the protection of unaccompanied minors, in which the needs of the migrant minors would be integrated with those of all minors safeguarded in Italy.

The organization of a dedicated welcoming system was established over a certain period of time, through an approach of adaptation and experimentation. The first interventions were characterized by a continuous state of emergency, which prevented effective activation of programmed action. This critical situation still exists in certain Regions up to the present day. Despite the recent development of a national welcoming model, there are still significant differences in their application in local contexts, from which there emerges an overall picture of rather fragmentary and fluctuating interventions that depend on local variations as regards both access to resources and Regional social policies (Di Rosa, 2017).

¹² This paper refers to data from the project up to 31.12.2017. The project ended on April 14, 2018.

Because of their particular vulnerability, the Uams require specific protective measures and there emerges the need to improve methods regarding disembarkation and the initial welcoming phases (Save the Children, 2017). Preliminary evidence suggests that collaboration with the social players involved in the various stages of welcoming the minors is a determining factor in the success of the operation. Quite often there is a lack of opportunity to compare and integrate interventions; actions geared towards safeguarding and integrating the minor run the risk of overlapping with each other or leaving areas uncovered.

The minor receives information from various sources, but not always in a co-ordinated manner, nor in accordance with logical continuity between the various phases and the persons responsible for their welcoming programme.

The need to ensure that every minor is listened to adequately, receives an accurate assessment and is accompanied effectively on his journey into the community, has been put to the test both by variations in the characteristics of the phenomenon, as linked to geopolitical events in recent years, and the growing number of arrivals, which reached a peak in the year 2016. Monitoring of the phenomenon in Italy was assigned to two accountable ministries (i.e. Home Affairs and Social Policy); the former logs data regarding arrivals¹³, and the latter logs data regarding numbers present in the whole country¹⁴.

Up to December 2017, there were 18,303 unaccompanied migrant minors present in Italy. This figure showed an increase of 5.4% over the same period surveyed in 2016 and a 53.5% increase over figures for 2015. On the other hand, with regard to the number of arrivals, there was an evident fall in numbers in the last year (up to December 31, 2017), with 15,731 minors against a figure of 25,846, up to December 31, 2016.

Tab. 1. Minors present and officialized by the Census
(Source: Annual Reports by the Ministry for Labour and Integration Policy, personal processing)

Year	Minors present and officialized by the Census
2013	6,319
2014	10,536
2015	11,921
2016	17,373
2017	18,303

¹³ Ministry for Home Affairs, Daily Statistical Instrument Panel, curated by Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2017.pdf.

¹⁴ The Director General for Immigration and Integration Policy conducts a census of data regarding Unaccompanied migrant Minors in the data-base set up in accordance with Article 4 of the d.p.c.m. n. 535/1999. The Director General processes and publishes monthly Statistical Reports with data regarding Unaccompanied migrant Minors, <http://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/minori-stranieri/Documents/Report-MSNA-mese-dicembre2017-31122017.pdf>.

Fig. 1. MSNA in Italy
 (Source: Annual Reports by the Ministry for Labour and Integration Policy)

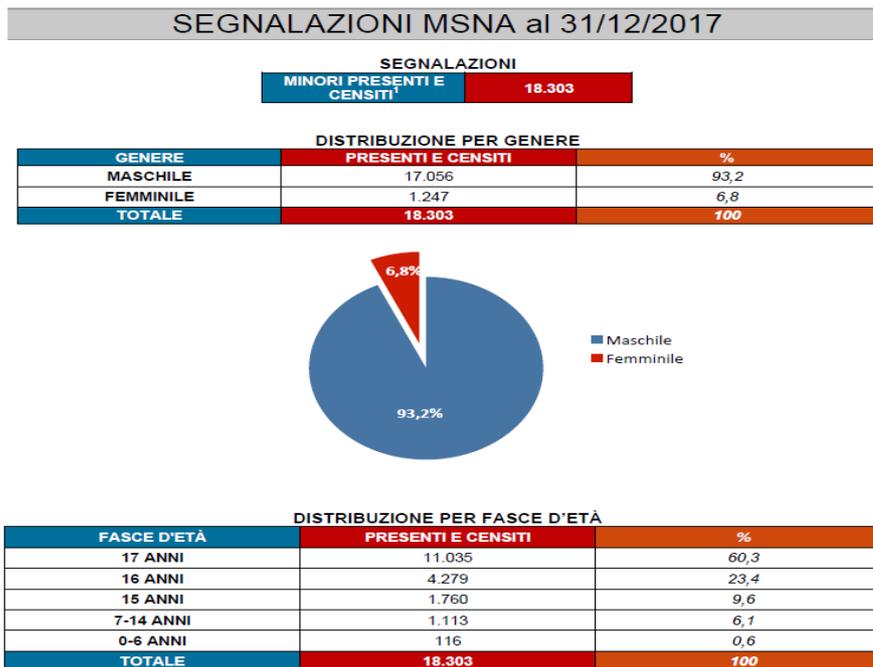
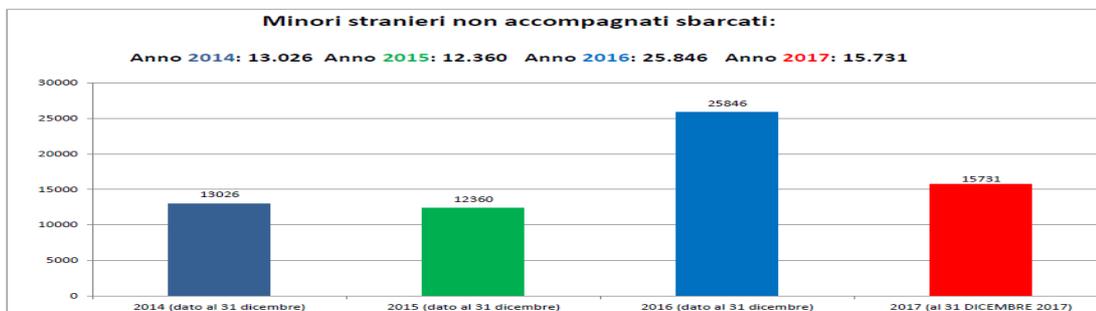


Fig. 2. MSNA in Italy 2014-2017
 (Source: Ministry for Home Affairs, Daily Statistical Instrument Panel)



In 2015, but, more specifically, as from 2016, the services assisting Uams were proving insufficient in responding to the innumerable landings on the coasts of southern Italy. The most important indicator as regards the need to implement new measures is the number of untraceable minors:

Tab. 2. Untraceable Minors
 (Source: Annual Reports by the Ministry for Labour and Integration Policy, personal processing)

Year	Untraceable Minors	Untraceable % of the total
2013	2,042	32.3
2014	3,707	35.1
2015	Data not available	-
2016	6,561	37.7
2017	5,838	31.8

Ever since this phenomenon started to grow, the functions of protecting and safeguarding minors on the part of the Italian state have been integrated with numerous organizations working in the field of safeguard of minors and immigrants; these have given their contribution to tackling emergency situations and the growing problems of taking charge of the Uams.

2.2 The P.U.E.R.I. project– *Pilot action for Uams: Early Recovery Interventions*

In 2016, the Ministry for Home Affairs presented the European Commission with the P.U.E.R.I. – *Pilot action for Uams: Early Recovery Interventions*, which was approved and financed with funding from the “Fondo asilo, migrazione e integrazione (Fami)”; it was set in motion in February 2017, and run by the National Association for Social Assistants and the Centro informazione ed educazione allo sviluppo.

P.U.E.R.I. is an experimental project, whose aims are to improve the welcoming system by personalizing it at the moment of arrival of the Uams; this would be done through an initial, professional evaluation to forestall any risk of trafficking and exploitation and prevent the minors from abandoning the welcoming centres. The project was conceived in full compliance with the law: L. 47/2017, “Disposizioni in materia di misure protezione dei minori stranieri non accompagnati”, and provides for guarantees and specific support measures as stated (Triestina, 2017).

Starting from a formulation of the principle of “Child’s best interest” and all the hopes expressed in national, European and international documents of reference on this issue, the project proposes to *experiment a working methodology* that consents a structured approach to welcoming Uams, via an *all-round evaluation*; this would be capable of laying down the necessary preconditions to create an individual welcoming process that is more suitable for the under-age child, *interacting with all the players involved*: the NGOs, which are already collaborating with the Ministry for Home Affairs, *voluntary organizations* present at the moment of disembarking, together with *Central Police-stations, Prefectures and public services and the management of welcoming structures for Uams*.

2.3 Objectives and actions

The project aims to welcome the minor not merely in the sense of a material welcome, which is already being tackled through other funding and methods, but “*in taking charge of the child*” and *in support for the minor from the moment of his/her arrival, in order to corroborate a system of immediate welcome* for the Uam, who is then to be integrated in a structure operating throughout the country. The project envisages an initial interview with the minor in the *hotspot* and a further three in the centres for *immediate welcome*, to be carried out by a Team composed of a social assistant and psychologist, with the back-up support of a cultural mediator. This system of personalized accompaniment along the Uam’s path to social inclusion begins with the immediate welcome and an assessment of any potential vulnerabilities (to be passed on to local Prefectures and Social Services).

It is also proposed to try out and corroborate tools that will help to avoid dispersion of the Uam’s “history”, which is traced and traceable by means of a “*scheda di rilevazione*” (SdR), (data-collection instrument), in accordance with provisions laid down by the law, (legge 7 aprile 2017, n. 47); professional monitoring is guaranteed, along with assessment of the Uam’s progress, by professionally-trained and co-ordinated teams that, in the child’s best interest, will be able to provide support for under-age children from their moment of arrival in Italy and set in motion *Child protection* procedures.

In general, therefore, in order to guarantee the child’s best interests, a professional intervention is provided, which can give the minor some support from the moment of his/her arrival in Italy and can collaborate with the organizations involved in running the centres of immediate welcome.

Computerized “scheda di rilevazione” (SdR), (data-collection instrument)

This data-collection tool collects information regarding the minor, his/her background, his/her migratory route, a description of his/her strongpoints and weakpoints and a first prognostic assessment to help work out a realistic plan of accompaniment. This is handled by a team put together and organized in the *hotspots* and is detailed to collect information about the Uams on 4 occasions:

- a first meeting in the *hotspot* soon after arrival (1° assessment);
- three subsequent meetings at centres for immediate or secondary welcome (Final Assessment).

The specific aims of this tool are: to avoid the dispersion of the Uam’s “history”, which is traced and traceable; to encourage a rational dispatch to the structures in question, by using clearly-defined and agreed procedures; to ensure correct and professional monitoring and assessment of the Uam’s progress.

The elements present in the SdR have been conceived to interact and be integrated with the documentary instruments (the child’s personal file) already being used in the centres of immediate welcome and, in the system as outlined by the law L. 47/2017, with the social folder (art. 9); this is to be compiled by the staff in the welcoming centres, also on the basis of the first interview (as laid down by Article 5, which introduces Article 19-bis in the D. Lgs. 142/2015),

a documentation instrument considered central to the process of evaluation of the child's best interests.

The information obtained from the interviews and arranged in the SdR is to be shared with both the persons responsible for the Structures where the minors will be accommodated, and with the social assistants in the local bodies dealing with the safeguard of minors. This will constitute a tool that is useful in delineating the welcoming and inclusion processes, thus favouring the work of all those involved in subsequently taking care of the Uam (centres for secondary welcome, local bodies responsible for SPRAR projects, Prefectures and residential communities where the minors might be inserted).

Operational units

The units are made up of a social assistant, a psychologist and a mediator with a co-ordinating function, operating at the Prefectures of Taranto, Ragusa, Agrigento and Trapani. The support provided by the PUERI operative nuclei at the Prefectures has the objective of: organizing interventions; carrying out the linking-up role with the other components handling the reception of unaccompanied migrant minors; and setting up a network with the players from the other four welcoming areas that might contribute to improving the welcome given to these minors.

Professional teams

The (well-trained and co-ordinated) professional teams are made up of a social assistant, a psychologist and include the presence of intercultural mediators to back up the psychologists, social assistants and Uams in mutual language exchanges and in assessing ideas and behaviour linked to the minor's culture of origin. The Teams were mobilized in timely fashion by the OUs; as soon as they received news of the landing of minors, they hurried to assist the welcome at the actual moment of arrival. They also provided reassurance and orientation for the Uams. This offered valuable support and an interface after initial contact with the network of organizations involved in the local welcoming structure. The under-age children are subsequently always attended by the same Team in the three subsequent interviews at the immediate welcome centres for Uams (financed under the aegis of FAMI).

2.4 Project centres

The project envisaged the introduction of PUERI personnel in the *hotspots* in Trapani, Lampedusa, Pozzallo and Taranto and in the governmental centres for immediate welcome (funded by Fondo FAMI), where the minors in care are sent for an immediate welcome, through a coordinated system that has been integrated with the existing one. The choice of local areas is based on observation of previous landings, as well as an examination of national data regarding the welcoming process. Sicilia and Puglia, despite the differences linked to specific local aspects, are the key Regions in the Italian welcoming system. Sicily, for example, turns out to be the Region that receives the greatest number of Uams (43.6% of the total), followed

by Calabria (7.9%), Lombardy (6.6%), Lazio (5.7%), Emilia Romagna (5.6%) and Puglia (5%)¹⁵.

Comparing the number of minors received in the various Italian Regions up to December 31st, 2017, with the figures for the same period in the years 2015 and 2016 (Tab.2), it can be seen that the Regions with the greatest number of minors have remained more or less the same. It is worth pointing out that there was an increased number of minors accommodated by the Sicilian Region from 2015 to 2017, with a figure, in absolute terms, that had almost doubled, as well as a commensurate fall in numbers of minors accommodated in the other Regions (with the exception of Sardinia, Basilicata, Marche, Abruzzo and Molise).

2.5 A preliminary evaluation

The expected results as indicated in the planning phase were: to single out vulnerability, forestall the risk of trafficking and exploitation, create the conditions to be able to plan the unaccompanied migrant minor’s future life via suitable orientation (for an effective process of social inclusion), and to limit the phenomenon of abandonment of the welcoming centres on the part of the minors.

The innovative and decidedly experimental character of the PUERI project demanded a period of shadowing and identifying the phases and strategic steps in implementing the project. In the activation phase it was necessary to tackle the contingencies linked, on the one hand, to the need to launch the Operational Units at the Prefectures, and on the other hand, to the need for the professional Team to begin their interviews, often in improvised settings and in areas occupied by other public players and those from the third sector.

So far, a differentiation has been observed between the various centres, also owing to the environmental conditions that affect the work of the OUs. The networking has required varying amounts of time and different strategies in the various Regions; this is the reason why there are discrepancies among the centres with regard to an interchange of information with the agencies dealing with (institutional and non-) unaccompanied migrant minors; however, in all Regions it can be observed that there is a growing trend towards integration with the welcoming players.

The data that emerges from the experimentation highlights a clear reduction in voluntary abandonment on the part of the minors involved in the project, when compared to the average total abandonment figures (in the period June-December 2017, the percentage abandonment stood at 14.7%, compared to 30% abandonment on the part of new arrivals).

Tab. 3. Pueri project abandonments 2017
(Source: Pueri Monitoring Report, 31/12/2017)

Total abandonments 2017	Pueri project abandonments 2017
30 %	14.7 %

¹⁵ Ministry for Labour and Integration Policy, Director General for Immigration and Integration Policy – Div. II Monitoring Report, I Minori Stranieri Non Accompagnati (Msna) In Italia, Data up to Dec. 31st, 2017.

Furthermore, it emerges that time devoted to actually listening during the four interviews enhances personalized support and encourages the emergence of specific problems that can then be treated in a timely way, facilitating the minor's process of social inclusion¹⁶. Significant progress was observed in the relationship established between the minor and the Team, the latter proving to be good interlocutors for the minors, who generally accept them gladly and, over time, begin to consider them as reference-points. This can be observed in particular when the Team accompanies the minor from the *hotspot* to the immediate/secondary welcome structure. In this case, the opportunity to shadow the minor through these various stages helps establish a relationship of trust, which, if maintained over a period of time, helps the minor not to feel so much confusion due to these continual changes nor the fear of estrangement¹⁷.

The PUERI strategy does seem to be a winning one, in supervising the welcoming process from the initial phases until, if possible, entrusting the minor to a secondary welcome structure; this strategy does tend towards a successful outcome with regard to the under-age child's road to safeguard and integration.

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¹⁶ Q.v. M. P. Castro, Monitoring Report for Pueri project, 31/12/2017.

¹⁷ Cfr. G. Busso, R.T: Di Rosa, Supervision Report - Pueri project, 31/12/2017.

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This book is a collective work that collects some of the research papers (in translated and expanded form) that have already been presented in the Italian version (Traverso, 2018).

In Italy, UMs (Unaccompanied Minors), despite a drop in landings and arrivals, remain an urgent social and educational thought because that thought is about a fragile part of the population that lives in towns and cities alongside us.

These childhoods are in motion, because we imagine tears and jolts (the painful and violent migration they had to undergo); leaps and shoves (which have shoved these children away from their homes), chases and escapes (from something or someone); because to be accepted they need educational movement based on creativity, on expressiveness, and on emotion.

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