



PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

Italian Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Title page: Italian Red Cross volunteers with child
Photo credit: Italian Red Cross

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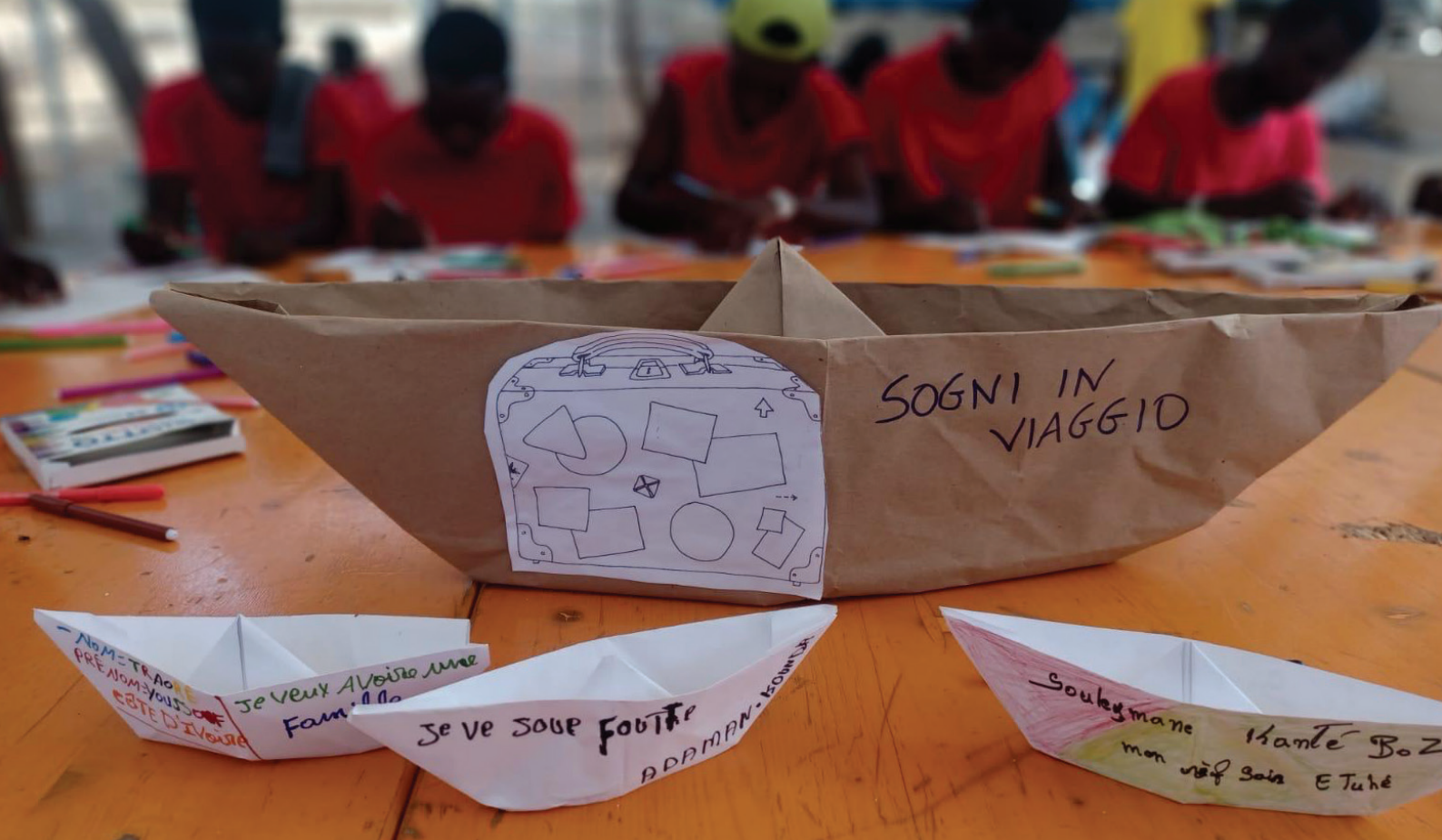


Photo description: Artwork from children participating in Italian Red Cross services
Photo credit: Italian Red Cross

Advice

The Italian Red Cross (CRI) prioritizes the best interests of Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC), among the most at risk to harm migrants it supports. As part of its comprehensive protection mandate, CRI engages in various interventions such as disembarkation, reception, search and rescue, and disaster response, in consideration of its auxiliary role in supporting authorities and being part of Civil Protection.

Background

CRI's key activities include:

- Reception
- Restoring Family Links programme
- Healthcare and Psychosocial Support
- Legal Assistance: Social Integration

CRI operates within a robust institutional framework and partners with various organizations to implement programs for unaccompanied and separated children. This includes working closely with Italian government bodies like the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Justice, and Juvenile Court to ensure compliance with national child protection laws and policies.

CRI's expertise is often sought because of its extensive experience in migration support. The organization contributes to policy development and provides insights on child protection. It participates in the Working Group on Vulnerabilities to implement the "Handbook for the identification and referral of persons living with vulnerabilities entering Italy," where there is a main focus on how dealing with children and their vulnerabilities. Collaborations with international organizations, including UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, Save the Children, and the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA), help ensure a coordinated and effective response to the needs of migrant children. CRI's involvement in the Community of Practice on Family Reunification highlights its commitment to upholding family unity for unaccompanied and separated children.

In terms of context, as of June 30, 2024, Italy hosts 20,206 unaccompanied children, with a significant increase in numbers over the past two years. The majority are over 16 years old, with notable populations from Egypt, Ukraine, Gambia, Tunisia, Guinea and the Ivory Coast. This growing influx underscores the need for robust support systems to ensure their protection and integration.

Who was Supported and How

CRI tailors its interventions to address the unique needs of each child and collaborates with humanitarian organizations and authorities. By concentrating efforts on key entry points and places of reception, the CRI ensures that children receive appropriate care from the moment of arrival through to their integration into society. This child-centred approach underscores CRI's commitment to upholding the rights and best interests of every child in all its protective actions.

Children are assisted at the following points:

- CRI reception
- at disembarkation
- when directly contacting the CRI
- through referrals from other organizations or authorities
- enquiries for RFL services

For CRI advocating for policies that protect the rights of UASC is a priority, particularly focusing on family unity rights and the tracing of family members of children arriving alone. The CRI is frequently called upon to provide expertise and contributions on the issue of migrant children due to its frontline involvement in various aspects of migration support. As a leading organization actively engaged in the reception, care, and protection of migrants, CRI's extensive experience and commitment make it a key advisor on this critical issue. Authorities rely on CRI's insights and recommendations to enhance policies, improve protective measures, and ensure that the needs of these children are effectively addressed. For instance, CRI has contributed to the position paper of the Italian Guarantee for Childhood and has participated in a parliamentary hearing on the issue of children fleeing Ukraine. CRI has also been part of the working group coordinated by the Office of the Special Commissioner of the Government for missing persons.

Activities in Reception

Managing the reception of children in different types of facilities, according to the legal framework concerning the reception of UASC in Italy and the specific Framework Agreements with Authorities.

Immediate provision of food, clothing, medical care, psychological support, RFL services, and legal assistance to navigate the asylum and protection process and regularization as well as vocational training. CRI has also provided a specific accompaniment from the Lampedusa migration hotspot to different Italian regions by ad hoc personnel.

Facilitate long-term integration:

Providing children access to educational opportunities, including language classes and vocational training.

Facilitating social integration through cultural orientation programs and community engagement activities.

RFL programme

Working with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in coordination with multiple actors, including Juvenile Court and legal guardians, the CRI contributes to tracing families and reunifying separated children with their families, collecting warnings of separation from family members looking for their children and promoting the reunification of children according to the specific evaluation of the authorities.

Psychosocial Support

Offering counselling and mental health services to address trauma and stress linked with experiences during migration, including survivors of shipwrecks. Creating safe spaces where children can express themselves and find emotional support.

Central to this approach is the collaboration within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, enabling CRI to coordinate efforts effectively, share best practices, and implement high-quality interventions across borders.

A main aspect of CRI's work is volunteer training. CRI emphasizes equipping volunteers with the skills and knowledge required to address the complex needs of unaccompanied and separated children. Training includes child protection principles, psychological first aid, and a legal framework. This ensures that every child receives care tailored to their specific circumstances

Successes

Through its programming the CRI has achieved a number of successes.

- Ensured a comprehensive approach to child protection for children in both frontline and long-term reception assistance.
- Raised awareness about child protection among volunteers and practitioners.
- Implemented a training course covering the general overview of migration, as well as specialized courses on topics such as RFL, trafficking in human beings, and reception systems, in addition to data protection, and legal and ethical considerations when interacting with children.
- Implemented a crosscutting approach to working with UASC, including specific psychological and emotional support sessions.
- Engaged experts and stakeholders to develop ad hoc training courses, particularly focused on the issue of trafficking of human beings, including children.
- Drafted Standard Operating Procedures for working with UASC.
- Organized regular roundtables with the CRI reception system to update on specific issues including the reception of UASCs and sharing common challenges.
- Strengthened the approach to assisting UASC, including through tracing family members in collaboration with authorities.

Challenges and Difficulties

The CRI has encountered several significant obstacles in its work with UASC. These have been met with strategic solutions.

- **Increased demand for services:** The substantial increase in the number of UASC and their needs posed a challenge to the capacity of reception facilities and support services. Many children were at risk of being accommodated with adults, although in dedicated areas. To address this, CRI is adapting facilities, services, standard operating procedures, and increasing the number of trained volunteers.

- **Diverse needs of children:** UASC come from varied backgrounds and have diverse needs, including different languages, cultural contexts, and psychological states. CRI has tackled this by offering tailored support, including cultural mediation and promoting direct involvement of young adults in Red Cross activities promoting peer-to-peer and social inclusion.
- **Complex legal and bureaucratic processes:** Navigating the legal framework for asylum, family reunification, and protection can be complicated. CRI has overcome this obstacle by supporting some children to access legal support, by working with partner organizations, and by integrating legal support into CRI reception and care services. This has ensured that children can receive timely and accurate assistance throughout their legal processes.
- **Family Tracing and Reunification:** Tracing and reuniting children with their families is often complex and time-consuming, especially for children from conflict zones. CRI has addressed this by working through a multidisciplinary approach, involving multiple stakeholders and taking into consideration the psychological aspects in all procedures involving children.
- **Voluntary departures and risk of exploitation:** One significant issue is the high rate of voluntary departures by UASC, often due to dissatisfaction with their living conditions in the reception centres, family pressures, cases of exploitation, or desperation. The added value of the Red Cross and Red Crescent lies in the possibility of being present and reachable in every stage of the journey of the children, providing assistance in departure and transit zones, and informing about risks and opportunities of receiving protection through informative sessions and referral mechanisms.

Lessons Learned

The CRI's experience in supporting UASC has revealed several important lessons critical to improving its approach and ensuring the well-being of children who are alone.

- **Specialized training for volunteers:** One of the most significant lessons learned is the necessity for volunteers working with UASC to receive specialized and regular training. This training equips them with the knowledge and skills required to address the unique and complex needs of unaccompanied and separated children, including understanding trauma, cultural sensitivity, and legal procedures. Regular updates to this training through workshops are essential to keep pace with the evolving challenges on the ground. These workshops should be tailored to reflect specific needs and collected from the different territories, ensuring that volunteers remain effective and responsive to the changing scenario.
- **Importance of a holistic approach:** Supporting UASC requires more than just addressing their immediate physical needs. A holistic approach that considers their psychological, emotional, and social well-being is crucial. This includes providing mental health support, facilitating integration into the community, and ensuring access to education and recreational activities. By addressing the child's overall well-being, children can rebuild a sense of normalcy and security.
- **Strengthening collaboration and partnerships:** Effective support for UASC is only possible through strong collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and international organisations. Lessons learned have shown that building robust partnerships enhances capacity to provide comprehensive care and navigate complex legal and bureaucratic challenges.
- **Adapting to evolving contexts:** The migration scenario is constantly changing, which requires adaptability in procedures, strategies and approaches. Regular assessments of SoPs, local and international trends, legal frameworks, and the specific needs of UASC in different Italian regions are essential for ensuring that support remains relevant and effective.