



PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

IFRC Ocean Viking / Humanitarian Service Point@Sea

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Children rescued at sea enjoying a moment of relaxation while blowing soap bubbles into the sunset
Photo credit: Jordi Cortes, IFRC

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Photo description: Overcrowded fiberglass boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea.
Photo credit: Tess Barthes, SOS-Mediterranee.

Background

The Central Mediterranean migration route from North Africa (primarily Libya, but also Tunisia and Algeria) to Italy is one of the most active and dangerous routes for people crossing to Europe by sea.

While having experienced a significant increase in the number of people arriving until 2023, last year there was a significant drop in these numbers, followed by a small increase in 2025 (compared to 2024).

The IFRC is operating a Humanitarian Service Point in the Central Mediterranean in partnership with international NGO SOS Méditerranée. The cooperation aims at reducing human suffering and preventing loss of life through a fully able-to-assist rescue ship (Ocean Viking).

Onboard the Ocean Viking, SOS Méditerranée focuses on the Search and Rescue side of the operation, while IFRC teams provide humanitarian assistance in the form of relief, protection and health care services, like first aid, maternal healthcare, provision of food and non-food items, referral services, psychosocial first aid and information about rights and asylum processes, as well as Restoring Family Links (RFL) services.

Who was Supported and How

The IFRC team implements activities with Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) that are rescued by the Ocean Viking. The work of the IFRC with UASC falls within the Post-Rescue services, conducted by the Protection and Medical teams.

Specialised activities for UASC, conducted following the principle of Best Interest of the Child and a child-centred approach, include:

- Immediate provision of food, clothing and other non-food items.

- Targeted information provision on International Protection in Europe and Italy, UASC rights and duties as well as Italian reception system.
- Provision of SALAMAT (delivery of Safe and Well Messages to families of survivors) in close collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other RFL services.
- Information sessions on Sexual Violence and Torture, shaped accordingly to the vulnerabilities of the UASC.
- Identification of vulnerabilities and safe referrals to authorities and international humanitarian organisations and NGOs (including UNHCR, Save the Children and the Italian Red Cross), to ensure that UASC receive appropriate services and a continuity of care after disembarkation.
- Delivery of targeted activities focused on the psycho-social wellbeing of the child and designed to increase the resilience and coping mechanisms of children (including Psychological First Aid, language lessons, recreational activities, storytelling and sports). These activities are facilitated in safe spaces onboard the Ocean Viking where children can express themselves and be provided with emotional support.
- Distribution of Information Management form, which states specific vulnerabilities disclosed onboard and can be presented to other stakeholders on land at the discretion of the survivor.

Successes

In 2024, within the framework of the partnership between IFRC and SOS Med, the Ocean Viking rescued and brought to safety 282 UASC. Since the start of the Ocean Viking 1,800 UASC have been reached (and a total of 2,245 children overall). A majority of UASC are between the ages of 14-17 years and male.

The operation manages to support UASC in reconnecting with family members they lost contact with. This is done through both the RFL system and the referral of their cases to Italian Red Cross for a proper take charge.

The IFRC team plays an active role in advocating for the protection and rights of UASC through dedicated procedures, presence, and case-by-case follow-up. The IFRC ensures that UASC are identified early, treated with dignity, and supported according to their specific protection needs. The team also raises awareness among crew members and wider humanitarian actors of the heightened risks of exploitation, violence, and trafficking that UASC face during their migratory journeys. This ensures UASC are appropriately referred to child protection actors upon disembarkation and are not overlooked in coordination with authorities and stakeholders on land. Indeed, survivors are addressed to appropriate services and welcomed upon arrival in adequate reception facilities designated to their needs.

The provision of clear and accessible information to UASC on board aims at assisting them with the first legal steps they will face after disembarkation. Information sharing brings empowerment to survivors to make informed decisions and navigate the post-rescue process with greater confidence.

Challenges and Difficulties

Some of the key challenges faced by HSP@Sea onboard the *Ocean Viking* include:

- **Communication and Coordination Gaps:** Persistent difficulties in communication and coordination with maritime authorities on distress cases, including designation of distant ports, significantly hinder the timely provision of life-saving assistance to individuals in distress at sea.
- **Hostile Interference:** The operation is regularly affected by repeated intimidating and aggressive behaviours from certain maritime authorities. This includes threats and gunshots fired, remaining in the area during a rescue, approaching at high speed or following the ship for prolonged distances.

Such actions endanger the safety of both rescue crews and survivors, while contributing to create an environment of fear and uncertainty for those attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean.

- **Forced Returns and Protection Risks:** Survivors, including UASC, continue to be forcibly returned to Libya or Tunisia, where they face again inhumane conditions, often within detention facilities, from which they tried to escape before.
- **Restrictions Undermining Humanitarian Response:** The increasing complexity of the Italian immigration and disembarkation framework has resulted in:
 - Extended navigation times due to the repeated assignment of distant ports of disembarkation, delaying the vessel's return to the area of operations and limiting its ability to save lives.
 - Administrative detentions of rescue vessels such as the *Ocean Viking*, due to alleged non-compliance with orders of other official stakeholders at sea, including coast guards and Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC) such as those in waters around Libya. These measures not only obstruct ongoing rescue missions but also pose a significant deterrent to humanitarian actors committed to upholding the right to life and dignity at sea.

Lessons Learned

Operationalizing protection and assistance for UASC through the HSP@Sea has led to several lessons learned.

- 1- Providing support to UASC goes beyond addressing their basic physical needs. **A well-rounded approach** that emphasizes their psychological, emotional, and social well-being is crucial. This includes ensuring access to mental health services, reliable information, Restoring Family Links (RFL) support, and recreational opportunities. By focusing on their overall well-being, UASC can rebuild a sense of stability, security, and normalcy in their lives.
- 2- Ensuring effective support for UASC depends on **close collaboration** with local authorities, NGOs, international organizations and national humanitarian organisations. Establishing solid partnerships enhances the ability to provide comprehensive assistance and navigate legal and administrative complexities.
- 3- As migration dynamics continue to shift, it is essential to **remain flexible in strategies, policies, and interventions**. Regular reviews of operational procedures, legal frameworks, and emerging trends, help tailoring support and assistance to the evolving needs of UASC in the Central Mediterranean.