**CONTEXT**

As of February 2017, 15,058 unaccompanied and separated children are hosted in the Italian reception system. However, more than an additional quarter - 5,252 young people registered upon arrival, have dropped out of both primary and secondary reception centres since registration in order to continue their journeys or move elsewhere. The vast majority of these children drop out of primary reception centres. It is commonly thought that these children attempt to cross the border to other European countries, where they often have family members waiting. However, not all children who drop out of reception centres arrive in Italy already knowing that they want to reach another European country and not all of those who drop out cross international borders. Rather, some children arrive on Southern Italian shores and after a few months in primary reception centres decide to leave the centres to try their luck elsewhere.

This situation overview was conducted in the framework of a partnership between UNICEF and REACH. It aims to shed light on the experiences of some of these unaccompanied and separated children in Como and Milan, the decision making process behind dropping out, their travel in Italy and intentions to move elsewhere. Based on a total of 14 qualitative interviews, it finds that poor conditions in primary reception centres coupled with limited access to accurate information often lead to children leaving state assistance schemes without being fully aware of the consequences of dropping out. Due to a lack of trusted information through official channels, children rely on unconfirmed advice from informal channels, and make decisions on the basis of incomplete and potentially misleading information.

**LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

In Italy, the decentralized governance system means that national law only sets the general framework of unaccompanied and separated children’s (UASC) rights and the reception system. The detailed provision of services

**METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS**

This situation overview draws on a rapid assessment of the experiences of children in transit in the Northern Italian cities of Como and Milan, conducted on 7-9 February 2017. It aims to provide qualitative information on the dynamics which shape decision making amongst children dropping out of primary reception centres. It is based on 7 in-depth interviews with key informants, including service providers and activists, as well as 14 semi-structured interviews with unaccompanied and separated children from Guinea, Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt. Written informed consent was collected from children aged 16 to 17 in order to participate in the study. Due to the limited number of girls in the sites visited, the vast majority of respondents were boys, meaning that the views of girls in particular may be underrepresented. Children were interviewed in spaces which ensured privacy; interviews were held in English, French and Arabic. Information from both sources was triangulated and complemented with secondary data. The findings from this research brief are indicative only and not representative of the whole population of unaccompanied and separated children in Italy.
Children reported that their decision to leave reception centres was due to three main factors: 1. conditions in primary reception centres, including limited access to education and healthcare; 2. lack of clarity around asylum procedures; 3. mistrust of reception centre staff.

CONDITIONS IN THE PRIMARY RECEPTION CENTRES

For children with no pre-determined migration plan upon arrival in Italy, conditions in primary reception centres were a key factor affecting their decision to leave. Specifically, children explained that their decision was driven by limited access to basic services such as education and healthcare. In addition, the inability to work and a lack of pocket money - key for the children to maintain a certain degree of independence and dignity - was an important contributing factor.

APPLYING FOR ASYLUM

Overall, children displayed a concerning lack of awareness about how to claim asylum in Italy. Whilst some children reported not having been told at all how to apply for asylum in Italy, others explained that they did not trust the information received in primary reception centres.

The general lack of clarity around the correct

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The conditions of my centre were not good. We had little food. no school and no one to ask legal advice from. There was no way I could get documents there.

M 16, Egypt

In Palermo the manager always spoke of ‘commissione’, but I don’t know what is this ‘commissione’. Can you explain?

M 17, Guinea

You know, you can’t trust anyone in the centre. It was difficult to get information in the camp, no one listened to us there.

M 17, Guinea

I noticed that no one was getting their documents...

M 16, Guinea

They [reception centre staff] didn’t understand me well. They were not of any help.

F 16, Eritrea

My friend in Venice told me that I can go to Milan because there are good services and the procedures are rapid.

M 17, Somalia

REASONS FOR LEAVING RECEPTION CENTRES

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The general lack of clarity around the correct
procedure and children’s sense that their claim was not progressing were key in shaping children’s decision to leave the primary reception centres and go elsewhere. All children believed that further north in Italy the procedures would be faster, which prompted their decision to leave. However, this belief was often based on a misunderstanding of the Italian reception system: the majority of reception centres in the North of Italy are secondary reception centres, to which children are transferred after having completed their stay in a primary reception centre. Almost by default, secondary reception centres host children who have been in Italy longer and who, as a result, are more advanced in their asylum procedures. Children heading north from the South of Italy, however, were not aware of this distinction and only heard from children in the North that they were progressing in their asylum claims. On the basis of this incomplete information, children decided to move north.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION & TRUST BETWEEN CHILDREN AND PRIMARY RECEPTION CENTRE STAFF

In general, children said they could not trust site managers in the primary reception centres and they did not see local staff as a reliable source of information. This was aggravated by language barriers, as reportedly often reception staff did not speak children’s languages, including English and French. Most children held that they did not receive

I stayed in Milan for two hours, just enough time to get the train to Como with the others.

The journey didn’t take long. Not even 5 days.

In Palermo I wanted to go to school and I couldn’t. I had to wait. No one explains how it works: the others [migrant children] tell you what you have to do, where to go, when to eat, how to ask to go to school. But you can’t believe everything!

[The camp authorities] told me I had to wait and if I didn’t like that I could leave. So I left for the North. I followed the others.

The problem is that no one in the centre listens to you.

I didn’t know much [about Milan], but people from my country have put photos on facebook of them playing football and going to school [in Milan]. I just wanted to study.

I don’t know [about Como]; if I get to a place where I can study I’ll stay there. I don’t want to stay like this... The only thing that scares me is to have done all this [the journey] for nothing, I mean to get nothing and to stay on the street.

In Palermo we looked for other camps but no one wanted us. So we slept on the street for two days and then we asked at the station.

I took the bus to Milan.

I took the bus to Milan.

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STRANDED IN CITIES OF TRANSIT

Upon dropping out, children arrived in the North of Italy to realise that they had to recommence their asylum application procedure from zero. This meant that children lost valuable months in their applications. This was of particular concern to children who were already 17 years old, as they ran the risk of turning 18 by the time their application as a child for international protection was processed. Upon arrival in cities such as Milan and Como, children had no clear reference points on how to proceed. They then had to wait for a space in official sites, with limited means of sustaining themselves, potentially at risk of exploitation. In one case, a child reported having waited for two months to be assigned to a reception centre in the North of Italy.

Once in this situation, some children started considering to move to other European countries. However, the majority felt that, as long as they were able to access services and international protection – the very reasons why they came to the North in the first place – they did not see the need to leave Italy.

CONCLUSION

It is commonly assumed that unaccompanied and separated children drop out of reception centres in the South of Italy because they had already planned to leave Italy before arriving in the country. However, this rapid assessment found that some children drop out of the Italian reception system because they do not know the correct procedure to claim asylum and legally stay in Italy. In lieu of official trusted information, children follow hearsay and anecdotal advice on social media, hoping to have better access to protection and services, such as education and health care, by heading to the North of Italy.

Children who drop out of the reception system in this way lose valuable months in their asylum application, and while waiting to be assigned to a new centre in Northern Italy, stay in precarious shelters with limited means to sustain themselves. This group is at particular risk of exploitation, which is exacerbated due to their lack of knowledge about international protection procedures and their rights.

End Notes
4. Law no. 142/2015.
6. The SPRAR is a network of accommodation centres managed by the municipality associations (ANC); FAMI centres are also part of the secondary reception system and funded entirely by EU funding. Committà Allogio and Case Famiglia are the traditional institutions of the child protection system in Italy and also host Italian children.
7. Legislative decree no 142/2015.
8. Disegno di legge n° 1658-B ’Disposizioni in materia di misure di protezione dei minori stranieri non accompagnati’.