

Relocation of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

Sambatu's journey.

In order to avoid conscription into the army, Sambatu decided to flee his country. After walking for many hours, he reached Ethiopia on foot. Tracked down by the police, he was taken to an Ethiopian refugee camp where he stayed for around three weeks. Later on, with the help of people traffickers, to whom he paid 1,500 dollars, he managed to get to Sudan. He stayed there for around one year, doing odd jobs (factory work, domestic jobs) and living with other fellow countrymen in an overcrowded apartment.

Sambatu had to wait while his father and brother saved up more money so he could continue his journey. Indeed, with another 1,600 dollars he was able to get to Libya after crossing the Sahara Desert. In Libya he was shut up in a kind of warehouse where he stayed for around two months. It was a terrible experience as migrants don't get much food and are often maltreated. It was finally time to leave and some members of the group got into two cars to drive to the port of embarkation. One of the cars overturned, resulting in the death of four people. During the journey violent skirmishes broke out, forcing them to halt. They were confined in another building for around two months. This was also a difficult experience as food was scarce. The traffickers tried to embark the group but once again, due to clashes, they were stopped. The migrants were locked up in another building where they stayed for around three months. After this lengthy wait, it was difficult for the traffickers to have them leave, so the voyage was postponed for a month and the migrants remained shut up in a building near Tripoli. Once the traffickers had received a sum of 2,500 dollars, once again sent by their relatives, they were boarded onto a vessel together with other migrants. After five hours at sea they were stopped by the Libyan police who, after receiving money from a trafficker, allowed them to continue their voyage. The migrants were rescued by an Italian vessel that took them to an Italian port, whose name he doesn't remember. After staying for a while in a reception centre (where he was photographically identified), he left without authorisation. After getting on and off trains without a ticket over five days, he reached Rome together with a fellow countryman. He had planned to continue his journey to Germany or Holland, but having found out in Rome from his fellow countrymen and the Civico Zero day centre that he could join a relocation programme, he opted for this course of action.

Sambatu (not his real name) is one of the young people who since the end of January 2017 have been accepted for the relocation programme promoted by the Department of Social Affairs, Subsidiarity and Health of the Municipality of Rome, in one of the reception centres run by the Rome Solidarity Cooperative, which is promoted by Caritas Rome.

The humanitarian crisis

Last year, **more than 25,846 unaccompanied minors** reached Italy's shores, more than twice the number who arrived in 2015 (12,360), a record year for arrivals in the Mediterranean and a year of deep crisis in Europe due to the steady flows of refugees and asylum seekers coming from the Middle East and Africa (Report on International Protection in Italy, 2016). Most of them arrived **from Africa**, accounting for 14.2% of all arrivals by sea (92% of all landed minors), whereas they represented 8% in 2015 and 7.7% in 2014, the year that saw exponential growth in migrant arrivals on Italy's shores (ISMU Foundation). The main countries of origin of unaccompanied foreign minors arriving in Italy last year were: **Eritrea, The Gambia, Nigeria and Egypt.**

At the end of 2016, 17,373 unaccompanied foreign minors were registered and present on Italian soil. During the first four months of 2017, 15,939 minors were registered and present in Italy (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). Almost all of them were males (92.9%), originating from The Gambia, Egypt, Albania and Nigeria (8.3%); many of the females are from Nigeria and Eritrea. Given the presence of only around 15,000 minors in the reception system, the number of those who have voluntarily left reception facilities is more significant: more than 6,561 minors were untraceable in the reception facilities surveyed in 2016. The numbers of invisible ones are definitely higher because many minors never enter the reception system, as may be deduced from the above figures. These are mainly young people who wish to stay in Italy free of official reception, or those in transit who wish to join relatives and networks of friends in northern European countries, which makes them even more vulnerable and likely to fall prey to criminal organisations. They often pass through big cities, where they await traffickers who can help them continue their journeys. Rome is one of the stopping-off points for many minors arriving from Sicily, and they sleep on the streets or in makeshift settlements until they can put together enough money to set off again. Last year, many young people died while attempting to cross Italy's borders.

At the beginning of this year, the Minors Unit of the Department of Social Affairs, Subsidiarity and Health of the Municipality of Rome set out to provide a response to protect these youngsters, most of whom are Eritrean; the number passing through the capital last year amounted to around 2,000, according to some organisations operating in the city. Having arrived in Italy after long and exhausting journeys, and wishing to travel on to countries in northern Europe, they prefer not to go to the police so they can avoid photographic identification. Instead, they opt to stay on the streets and live from day to day, and then agree to continue their journeys to northern Europe with unscrupulous traffickers to whom they hand over large sums of money that at some point have to be paid back. Therefore, a specific programme has been launched to encourage the relocation process, regarding which a specific intervention strategy has been developed via networking.

The relocation programme

The relocation programme **is one of the initiatives promoted by the European Union as part of the European Agenda on Migration, adopted via two Decisions (2015/1523 and 2015/1601) of the Council of the European Union.** These decisions have provided for temporary measures in the international protection sector on behalf of Italy and Greece, the Member States most affected by the growing pressure of migration. However, not all asylum seekers may access the programme. The system provides for the relocation of **persons clearly in need of international protection, with nationalities whose protection recognition rate is equal to or greater than 75%**, based on Eurostat data. Such persons, having requested asylum in the country of arrival, may be transferred to the country of relocation for examination of their international protection application.

In this context, the relocation procedure for persons in need of international protection, **in partial waiver of the Dublin III Regulation (no. 604/2013), provides that international protection applicants with nationalities, or stateless persons, for whom the international protection recognition rate is equal to or greater than 75% – based on Eurostat data from the last four-month period – after identification and photographic identification in Italy or Greece, may formalise their international protection application in one of these two countries and then be relocated to a Member State** in accordance with the **quotas made available** by countries that have joined the relocation programme, **where their application will be examined.**

Currently, the **eligible nationalities** for the relocation programme are: citizens or stateless persons from **Antigua and Barbados, Bahrain, British overseas territories, Eritrea, Grenada,**

Guatemala, Syria and Yemen. They are defined every three months (information updated at police headquarters or on the EASO website).

Unaccompanied minors may also join the relocation programme, if this corresponds with their best interest, as assessed by the guardian.

The **Member States that currently accept unaccompanied foreign minors via the relocation programme** are: Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria.

Minors may be included in the relocation programme if:

- they are among the nationalities eligible for the relocation programme
- they have entered Italy irregularly
- they have a guardian
- they have formalised their international protection application
- their greater interest in participating in the programme has been ascertained.

The interest of minors should be assessed on the basis of their willingness, age and overall maturity, and also in order to avoid them resorting to illegal channels in order to follow their own wishes.

The relocation of unaccompanied minors in Rome

Many public and private social welfare organisations are involved in this network that has been activated to facilitate the relocation procedure, including: the Municipality of Rome which is tasked with taking administrative and legal charge of the young people and promoting social care and protection initiatives on their behalf; the Civico Zero cooperative, whose workers aim to help the young people to join the programme by supporting them throughout the entire social and legal process; the Dublin Unit which, as an entity of the Ministry of the Interior, activates the process and enables full implementation of the programme, and also facilitates the coordination group for unaccompanied foreign minors applying for international protection; the workers from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) who deal with transferring the children; the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) which is responsible for conducting interviews in police headquarters to fill in the forms required and provide support to the minors including information and explanations regarding the procedures; the Rome Solidarity Cooperative emergency reception centres promoted by Caritas that accommodate the children with whom a helping relationship is established to provide social care, health and psychological support; and many teaching and recreational activities provided by workers and volunteers from the centres. Alongside the relocation programme, we should also mention the possibility for children to be reunited with their closest family members who are present in various European countries. There is active collaboration with the Safe Passage Project, which facilitates the reunion of minors with relatives who reside in the United Kingdom.

Specifically, in these early months the street unit of Civico Zero (cultural mediators and legal advisors) was involved in an initial phase of the programme; the children became aware of the relocation programme thanks to initial contacts in the streets. Once an adequate trusting relationship had been built up, they then agreed to join the Municipality of Rome's reception system and seek legal means for reaching other European countries. The intervention procedure is based on the active engagement of the youngsters who are able to closely follow developments in the procedure and actually be involved in the process that concerns them. Once they have entered an emergency reception centre, after a few days (maximum of two weeks), public guardianship comes into force thanks to which the procedure to apply for international protection and to join the relocation programme may be launched. On the first occasion the children are accompanied to the police

headquarters for photographic identification and subsequently for formalisation of the actual international protection application. The Ministry of Interior's Dublin notifies the country of destination regarding the child and, depending on the outcome of the application, a transfer order is issued. When clearance from the judge supervising the guardianship and a laissez-passer from the police headquarters have been received, the child may leave accompanied by IOM staff who assist him or her until the country of destination is reached.

So far, 18 Eritrean young people have been accepted:

10 boys and 8 girls, with an average age of sixteen and a half, who are applicants for international protection.

So far, 4 children have been relocated.

One of them has already completed the procedure and has left for Norway.

Two other Eritrean youngsters, one from a municipality in Vibo Valentia and the other from a municipality in Asti, were accommodated for a few days in Rome. Both have been transferred to Holland.

A five-year-old child has been placed in a foster home.

One boy was transferred to a centre for adults when he reached the age of 18 and will continue his application procedure as an adult.

An English course has been launched for the children in the emergency reception centres, given that they will be transferred to countries where English is a lingua franca. As a normal procedure, all the children are given a thorough health screening at public healthcare facilities and a clean bill of health is issued.

During recent months, efforts have been made to ensure that the children always receive adequate information, so that they can be promptly updated on their own personal situations. The use of cultural mediators is vital in supporting the educational relationship, not only to have clearer and more comprehensive communication, but also to raise mutual awareness of each other's cultures.

However, the situation is still rather complicated, as some of the youngsters are very sceptical about the actual possibility of being transferred to other countries. We suppose that contact with their fellow countrymen, who gather together and hang out in certain places in the capital, including traffickers who are ready to intervene and promise easy passage to northern European countries, is very often a destabilising factor. The periods needed to complete the various phases of the procedure are deemed to be very long (we have noted an altered perception of the passage of time), and therefore it is very easy for those who have an interest in doing so to cast doubt on the idea that the promise of legally reaching the country they wish to get to is merely an illusory lie.

Responsibility and solidarity

The above figures, regarding the young people who have been accepted for the relocation procedure as well as those who have left, are insignificant when compared with the more than 5,000 unaccompanied minors who disappear without trace every year, who often lose their lives under a

train or in the back of a lorry while attempting to cross the border. But every life is precious, and we well know how difficult it is for good practices to turn into effective planning. In this case, however, we are up against bureaucratic hurdles and the failure of European countries to assume their responsibility. Indeed, even though the Council of Europe committed itself to guaranteeing the objective of 120,000 relocations of adults and minors, and the European Parliament requested states to give priority to unaccompanied minors and other "vulnerable applicants", we are a very long way from achieving this outcome. Strasbourg has asked the Commission to go ahead with sanctions against countries that do not comply with the migrant relocation programme, as is the case when the budget deficit is exceeded. Every European state is requested to have a common responsibility and solidarity in respecting the rights of every human being, **even more so with regard to a minor arriving from a country alone who is clearly in need of international protection.** Access to the procedures for the recognition of international protection status should be as rapid as possible, as should the one regarding all protection processes. Integration stems from recognition by the state of a person's rights. If these continue to be violated and injustices are perpetuated, it will not be possible to build peace.