

Situation Overview: Unaccompanied and Separated Eritrean Children Outside of the Reception System in Rome

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CONTEXT

In 2016, more than 25,800 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) arrived in Italy via the Central Mediterranean sea route, accounting for 14 per cent of the total arrivals. If compared to 2015 figures, in 2016 the number of UASC arrivals has more than doubled.¹ Among them, 15 per cent (3,800 UASC) were Eritrean and represented the main nationality of UASC who arrived in Italy in 2016.²

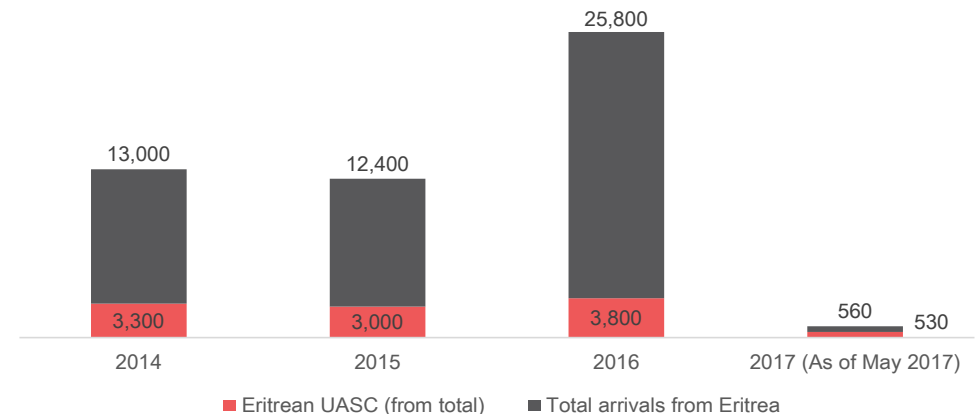
Eritrea is a country with a long-standing migration history, recently described as one of the “world’s fastest emptying nations”.³ In the past years, the proportion of UASC among Eritrean arrivals in Italy has increased dramatically. Between 2015 and 2016, their percentage rose from eight to 18 per cent of these arrivals.⁴

Eritrean migration fluctuates according to the season, with higher arrivals during the summer months.⁵ In this view, the low rate of arrivals recorded in the first months of 2017 (see figure 1) should not be considered indicative for the rest of the year. It is expected that the number of arrivals in summer 2017 will at least equal the 2016 figures.

The increase in arrivals since 2014 did not translate, however, in an increased presence of Eritrean UASC within the Italian reception system. Available data suggest that Eritrean UASC are likely to drop out of Italian reception centres to reach other European countries through informal channels. Across the 28 European countries, 3,335 Eritrean UASC applied for asylum in 2016; of these, only 60 applications were submitted in Italy.⁶ As of April 2017, according to the Ministry of Labour 907 Eritrean UASC were accommodated in official facilities in Italy, while an almost equal amount (905) have dropped out of the reception system. **Eritrean children thus represent the second top nationality of UASC who have reportedly exited the official reception system and whose whereabouts are now unknown**, second only to Egyptians (1,056).⁷

In the framework of a partnership with UNICEF, REACH conducted an assessment on the profile of UASC arriving in Italy. Between January and May 2017, REACH team undertook data collection in a statistically representative sample of specific facilities for UASC in Sicily. According to this assessment, Eritrean UASC presence in facilities is likely to be overestimated; in its sample, Eritrean

Figure 1: Eritreans arrivals in Italy, 2014-2017, by age group¹⁰



UASC were found to make up less than one per cent of the total UASC population in Sicily,⁸ compared to 12 per cent reported by the Ministry of Labour.⁹

There is little information available on where Eritrean UASC stay after they drop out. According to NGO representatives interviewed for this assessment, a significant presence of Eritrean UASC was recorded in informal gathering sites in Rome, especially in summer 2016. Little is known about why Eritrean UASC decide to leave the reception system, and why many choose to stay in informal gathering sites in Rome.

This situation overview aims to explore

the dynamics which shape the decision making of Eritrean UASC who remain outside the official reception system. The assessment finds that most of the Eritrean UASC interviewed dropped out of reception centres because of a lack of awareness and understanding of legal procedures, even if the majority of them stated their willingness to travel legally. Their decision to do so was often based on a mix of rumors and hearsays. Once out of the official system, Eritrean UASC experienced precarious living conditions and an increasingly limited access to the desired legal pathways.

METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS

This situation overview draws on a rapid assessment carried out in informal gathering sites in Rome between 8 and 10 May 2017. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with Eritrean UASC in informal gathering sites, as well as four in-depth interviews with key informants (KIs), including representatives of international Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and local activists. Eritrean UASC in informal gathering sites were identified through snowball sampling;¹¹ KIs were selected purposively on the basis of their expertise and knowledge of the topic. Interviews were conducted in Arabic with UASC and in Italian with KIs. In line with Italian legislation, only 16 and 17 year-old children were interviewed. Male respondents represented the vast majority of interviewed children, as only one girl could be interviewed. As a result, the perspectives of girls are underrepresented in this overview. Data saturation was reached on the third day of data collection when no additional Eritrean UASC could be found in this age group in selected sites. Information collected was triangulated and complemented with secondary data. Results are indicative only and are not representative of all Eritrean UASC staying outside of the reception system in Rome.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to Italian law, once in Italy, UASC are entitled to undertake two types of legal procedures to legally reside in Italy, namely (1) request a residence permit as a child, which, in consideration of the best interests of the child, is granted until they turn 18,¹² or (2) submit a request for international protection in Italy.¹³

However, the limited presence of Eritrean UASC registered in Italy suggests that they are not so interested in staying in Italy, but often have another destination in mind. In this view, two legal pathways apply to Eritrean UASC who wish to reach other European countries, namely: (1) family reunification and (2) relocation.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

According to the European (EU) Council Directive of September 2003, third country nationals who have family members residing lawfully in the EU may join them, provided they fulfil certain conditions.¹⁴ Article 10 of the directive stipulates that in the case of UASC not having relatives in the direct ascending line or whose relatives cannot be traced, Member States should allow family reunification with the legal guardian or any other member of the family. Eritrean UASC arriving in Italy are therefore entitled to the right to request family reunification – provided the families are legally residing in another EU country.

RELOCATION

Launched in September 2015 as a responsibility-sharing measure among EU countries, the emergency relocation mechanism is a two-year plan to relocate asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other EU Member States.¹⁵ Those who are relocated have their asylum claims processed in the EU state that accepts their application. Under this scheme, 39,600 asylum-seekers were foreseen to be relocated from Italy. Eligibility for relocation is restricted to certain nationalities, which have at least a 75 per cent recognition rate across the EU.¹⁶ As such, Eritreans are among the eligible nationalities for relocation.

Vulnerable persons, including children, should be given priority during relocation procedures. However, the implementation of the relocation mechanism for UASC has been heavily delayed, as the procedure for the activation of the legal guardianship scheme and child protection measures for relocation have not been streamlined yet. Furthermore, upon arrival in Italy, refugees and migrants who are eligible for relocation should be transferred to designated facilities called “regional hubs” and then sent to the main hub in Rome, a few days before being relocated.¹⁷ In practice, the transfer mechanism from port of arrivals to the hubs has not yet been fully

implemented.¹⁸ Very few cases have been dealt with successfully so far. As of May 2017, one separated child and two UASC have been relocated to the Netherlands, two requests are awaiting transfer to Norway, three requests are waiting for approval from Germany and eight are waiting for the EU state to be identified.¹⁸

LIMITED ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN RECEPTION CENTRES

The vast majority of interviewed UASC had been accommodated in specific facilities for UASC in Sicily, and dropped out of the system within the first month of arrival. Limited access to information on legal procedures and isolation in reception centres in Italy, where the Eritrean UASC were hosted, were the most commonly reported factors leading to the drop out. In reception facilities, information on legal procedures was not provided and the only accessible news – a mix of rumors and hearsay spreading by word of mouth – encouraged Eritrean UASC to exit the official system.

Three children interviewed mentioned that they decided to leave the centre because they had not received any information about how to access legal channels to reach other European countries through the relocation scheme. Ten out of twelve UASC indicated

INTERVIEWED ERITREAN UASC'S REPORTED JOURNEY TO ITALY AND FUTURE PLANS

FAST FACTS

- All interviewed Eritrean UASC arrived through the Central Mediterranean sea route, departing from Libya;
- They all arrived in Sicily, between March and April 2017, and were disembarked at the Hotspot in Pozzallo, or at the ports of Syracuse, Augusta and Catania.
- The large majority of them (10 out of 12) were accommodated in specific UASC reception facilities in Sicily, where they stayed for a maximum period of one month.
- After the drop out, interviewed UASC arrived in Rome either by train or bus.
- Interviewed UASC wanted to reach Northern Europe, and six of them hoped to join their family in Switzerland, Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden.



the lack of translation service provision as the main barrier limiting their understanding of legal procedures. By law, UASC should have access to information on legal procedures after disembarking and upon arrival at the dedicated reception facility. However, none of the interviewed UASC reported having benefited from any sort of legal counsellings or information provision services after disembarking, as foreseen by national legislation. Furthermore, once in reception facilities for UASC, information on legal procedures - when provided - was reportedly rarely available in Tigrinya.

Due to the lack of official sources of information, Eritrean UASC found out about legal pathways through rumors and hearsay and accessed very partial and often misleading information. Five children interviewed were told by other Eritreans that it was very difficult, or even impossible, to be relocated from Sicily. In two cases, family members in Northern European countries suggested that UASC should leave the primary reception centre to go to Rome, in order to ask for relocation from there. Interviewed UASC added that they decided to go to Rome, because like any capital city, they expected to gain greater access to information.

Interviewed Eritrean UASC reported that their limited language skills – usually Tigrinya as mother tongue and basic Arabic – meant they

were isolated from other children staying in reception centres. Three interviewed UASC declared that they would have considered staying in the UASC facility in Sicily if there was someone who could speak their language. Therefore, children appeared to be highly reliant on co-nationals throughout their stay in Italy, as the language barrier and lack of interpreters prevented effective communication with Italian authorities.

CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING LEGAL PATHWAYS

All UASC interviewed in informal gathering sites in Rome reported that they wanted to reach other European countries. The majority of UASC interviewed (10 out of 12), reported that they preferred to travel legally, and were therefore waiting in informal gathering sites in order to be relocated. Eritrean UASC thought that it would be easier to access the relocation scheme from the informal gathering site in Rome, rather than from the official reception facility for UASC in Sicily.

LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT THE RIGHT TO FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Half of UASC interviewed declared to have close family members living in Germany, Sweden or Switzerland. However, **none of the children with families in other European**

THE EXPERIENCE OF AN UNACCOMPANIED 17 YEAR OLD BOY FROM ERITREA IN AN INFORMAL GATHERING SITE

“ I arrived on 17th of April in Augusta. I was with other Eritreans, but none from my family. When I landed in Augusta nobody explained to me what was happening. My fingerprints were taken, but I did not go to the police. I do not know what happened to the other Eritreans who were on the boat with me.

I was sent directly to a small centre [reception centre]. I stayed there for two days; then I decided to leave because nobody understood what I wanted to do. The conditions in the centre were good, but nobody understood me, because there were no other Eritreans and nobody spoke my language.

I left because I was told that I would get documents for Italy, but that is not what I want: I want to be relocated, and that was not possible in Sicily. I want to go to Switzerland to my sister who told me that there the situation is better. I wanted to have relocation, and my sister who is in Switzerland, told me that Rome is the place to go to start the process. Coming to Rome was not my plan when I arrived in Italy, but I was stressed at the centre, so I decided to leave.

When I arrived at Termini, I met some Eritrean people who I asked what I could do and they told me to come here. But also here nobody asks me what my plan is, what my problems are. This is not different from the centre where I was staying in Sicily.

My plans now are to start the process for relocation. I know how this process works from other Eritreans, I also know of Eritreans who managed to be relocated this way. The best way to do it is to wait here at the camp for the police to come and take us all to the “Questura”. There, I will have the interview for relocation. I do not want to go to the “Questura” alone because they would not understand me, so it is better for me to go in a group. ”

countries were aware of their right to ask for family reunification. While many children had received advice regarding the relocation scheme from these family members, no family members reportedly gave advice to apply for family reunification. All interviewed UASC considered relocation as the only legal option that would allow them to move safely across Europe and join their families.

LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELOCATION SCHEME

All UASC interviewed referred to the relocation scheme as the main legal pathway that would allow them to join family and friends in specific European States. All children interviewed were confident that they would access the relocation scheme within a few months and be

transferred to their country of choice. Firstly, interviewed UASC tended to compare their situation to that of Eritrean adults, who had already benefited from the relocation scheme. Children interviewed believed that they would be relocated as quickly as adults, apparently unaware that very few Eritrean UASC have yet been relocated from Italy. Secondly, all interviewed UASC reported that they were relying on the relocation scheme in order to reach their destination, seemingly unaware that they could not choose their country of destination. Interviewed UASC consistently reported that they thought they could only register for relocation in Rome. Their decision to stay outside the formal system and wait in informal gathering sites was considered the most effective way to register for relocation. UASC had received this information either from friends or other Eritreans living in Italy (six cases) or in Northern European countries (three cases).

OUTSIDE THE RECEPTION SYSTEM

All interviewed UASC had moved to informal gathering sites in Rome through word of mouth, believing that, in Rome, they could access the relocation scheme. Interviewed UASC intended to stay in these sites until they would be relocated, or until they could decide whether relocation was a viable option. This

meant that children were spending weeks, if not months, without access to appropriate shelter, sanitary services, with limited availability of food and drinking water, and exposed to potential protection risks.

Considering these precarious conditions, **five out of twelve children interviewed declared that they would have preferred to stay in the UASC facility in Sicily if they knew they could apply for relocation from there.**

None of the Eritrean UASC interviewed declared to have dropped out of the reception system in order to hide from the authorities. In some cases, children reported relying on other Eritreans in informal gathering sites to mediate their interaction with the authorities. For example, two children reported that, rather than going directly to the Questura (police authorities) to ask for an appointment, they would wait for the police to come to the informal gathering site. In this way, other Eritreans would help them to better understand the situation and interact with the policemen. When children did go to the Questura, this did not lead to their reintegration into the official reception system, as suggested by law. Four out of 12 UASC interviewed voluntarily went to the Questura in Rome to submit the request for relocation, and reported that police authorities undertook identification procedures without either reporting the children to the social

service department of the municipality or to the juvenile court. They added that the police also did not file in their requests for relocation.

CONCLUSION

This situation overview finds that the decision of Eritrean UASC to leave centres and stay in informal gathering sites may sometimes be prompted by a general lack of information regarding procedures and legal options available to them, including family reunification and relocation. Upon arrival in Italy, Eritrean UASC face a language barrier that prevents effective communication with the Italian authorities, and other refugees and migrants. This can prompt Eritrean UASC to rely on rumours from other Eritreans about relocation, and to drop out of the official reception system because of a misunderstanding that this will speed up procedures. Interviewed UASC were often not aware of their right to family reunification, and hence referred only to relocation hoping that they could reach their family through this legal pathway. Once outside of the reception system, Eritrean UASC often find themselves living in precarious shelter arrangements and left without a legal guardian. This means that legal pathways are more difficult to access, and there is a greater risk that children will decide to continue their journey through irregular means, exposing them to risks of abuse and exploitation.

End Notes

- ¹ Italian Ministry of Interior, [Daily statistics](#), 19 May 2017.
- ² UNHCR, Italy - [UASC Dashboard](#), December 2016.
- ³ The Wall Street Journal, [African Dictatorship Fuels Migrant Crisis](#), February, 2016.
- ⁴ UNHCR, Italy - [UASC Dashboard](#), December 2016.
- ⁵ UNHCR, [Refugees and migrants sea arrivals in 2016](#), December 2016.
- ⁶ Eurostat, [Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors by citizenship, age and sex](#), May 2017.
- ⁷ Italian Ministry of Labour, [UASC Monthly Statistics](#), April 2017.
- ⁸ REACH, [Children on the Move in Italy and Greece](#), forthcoming.
- ⁹ Italian Ministry of Labour, [UASC Monthly Statistics](#), April 2017.
- ¹⁰ UNHCR, Italy - [UASC Dashboard](#), March 2017 and December 2016.
- ¹¹ Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances.
- ¹² Law n 47/2017.
- ¹³ Decree n. 286, 25 July 1998.
- ¹⁴ Council of the European Union, [Council directive 2003/86/EC](#) of 22 September 2003.
- ¹⁵ European Commission, [Twelfth EU Relocation and Resettlement Report](#), May 2017.
- ¹⁶ As of 1 April 2017, the following nationalities are eligible for relocation: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain, British overseas countries and territories, Eritrea, Grenada, Guatemala, Syria and Yemen or a stateless person previously residing in one of these countries. For more information on relocation see <https://www.easo.europa.eu/questions-and-answers-relocation>.
- ¹⁷ Italian Ministry of Interior, Italian Roadmap, 28 September 2015.
- ¹⁸ European Commission, [Twelfth EU Relocation and Resettlement Report](#), May 2017.

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