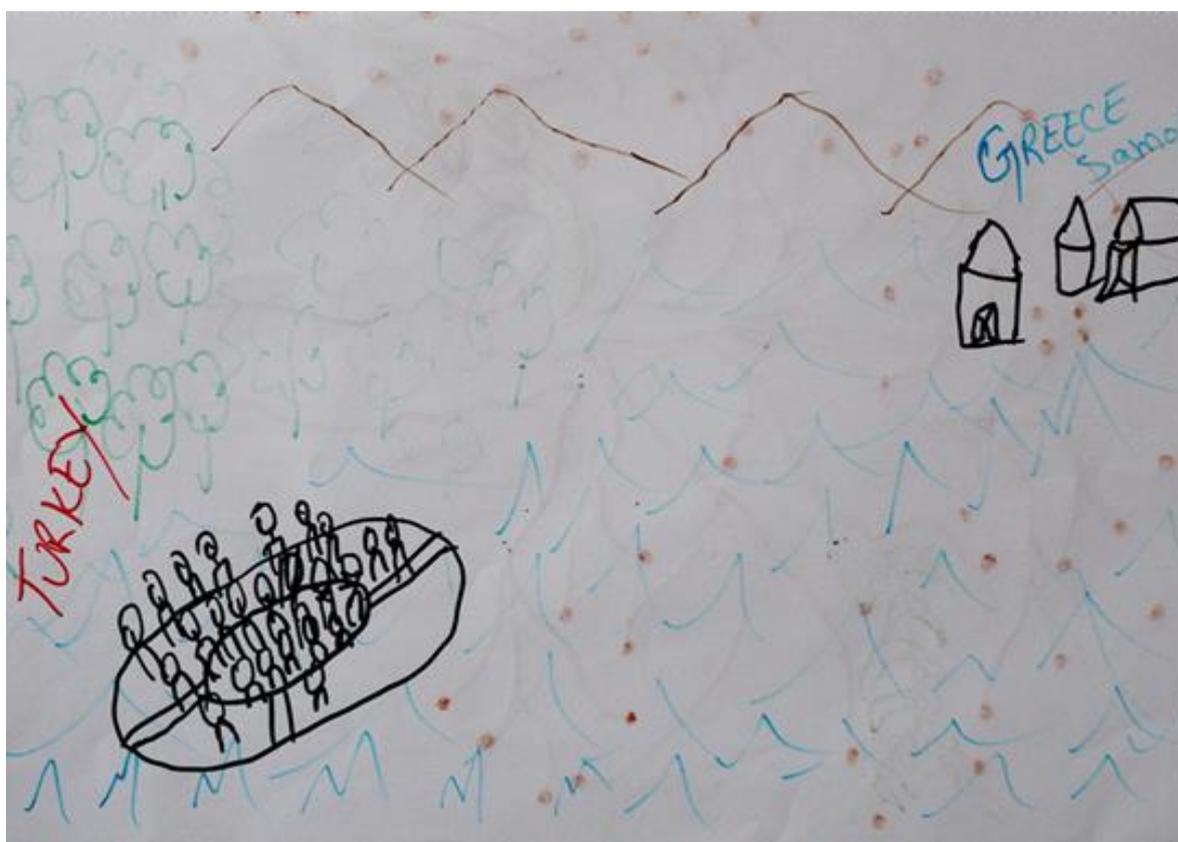


*“ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF  
UNACCOMPANIED MINORS (UAMs) IN  
GREECE”*



**International Organization for Migration  
Office in Greece**



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International Organization for Migration (IOM)

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## Foreword

Children are among of the most vulnerable members of our society and it is our shared responsibility to protect, nurture and care for them. Children separated from their caregivers are particularly susceptible to exploitation, abuse and neglect. Our collective duty of protection towards all children, especially those unaccompanied by an adult parent or guardian is recognized in various international and European legal instruments. It should be emphasized however that both the UN Convention on Rights of the Child, signed by every Member State of the European Union (EU), and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU provide children with specific inalienable rights. It is our obligation to ensure that these rights are fully respected. To achieve this we need to work together as organizations, as governments, as society and individuals. IOM Greece has been following the migration flows for more than 50 years by responding to the needs of the migrant population as they arise and differ over time.

The European Union has faced unprecedented migratory pressures at its borders in the past years, characterized by complex mixed migratory flows. For instance, in 2011, more than 56.000 migrants arrived to Greece by land and sea, and more than 34.000 in 2012. As a result, in January 2013, the European Commission entrusted IOM Greece to address the challenging issue of unaccompanied minors in Greece. The 21-month Programme “Addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors in Greece” included enhanced family tracing and family assessment procedures which, along with the views of the children, could be used in determining whether it was in their best interest to be provided with assistance to voluntary return and be reintegrated in their country of origin. Throughout the implementation of this programme, our main objective was to ensure that each child exercised his or her right to be heard, provided with the necessary care and support they needed and, that ultimately, *the best interest of the child was taken into consideration throughout the assistance process and that the outcome of each case was based on the best interest of that child as well.*

For the purposes of this programme, IOM Greece worked with many committed organizations and individuals, in Greece and abroad, assuring cross-border multi-disciplinary cooperation. Working closely with the Prosecutor for Minors in Greece and with other relevant national authorities, our office also

received support from IOM missions in the countries of origin, from Embassies and diplomatic missions, as well as from civil society organisations.

Equally significant factor for the implementation of this Programme, IOM Greece was able to support the Government of Greece in establishing and implementing common standard operating procedures to find durable solutions and ensure the right to the safe and dignified return as part of the protection of unaccompanied children.

The Programme “Addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors in Greece was funded 90% by the Emergency Funds of the European Return Fund and 10% by the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden. We are grateful to all donors of the project for their support in managing migration in Greece in the context of international migration and protection of children, and in providing with viable alternatives the unaccompanied children, their families and their communities.

Thanks to this Programme, IOM Greece was given a unique opportunity to learn more about unaccompanied children in Greece. We gained valuable insight about the motivations which led children to leave behind their families and countries, and what motivated them to choose Europe as their final destination. It also provided us with evidence that almost all unaccompanied children view Greece as a transit country on the way to other European countries.

With this report, we attempt to capitalise and document our experience and findings from the implementation of this Programme, and provide an in-depth understanding of the situation of unaccompanied children in Greece and the related migration trends, in the hopes that the lessons learned will be a useful guide for other countries.

Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission (DG HOME), Mr. Bernd Hemingway then Regional Director of IOM, H.E. John Kittmer, Ambassador of United Kingdom in Greece, Mr. Ben Nicholls International Partnerships Manager of United Kingdom Home Office, Mr. Thomas Thompsen Chief Advisor and Team Coordinator from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Ms. Linda Fuchs from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark , Ms. Harke Heida Director Migration Policy Department of the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, Annemarie Dunlop Advisor for International Migration from Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, Ms. Emelie

Eliasson from the Kammarkollegiet of Sweden, the Ministry of Justice of the Government of Sweden. I would also like to thank our Missions worldwide and the local organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, the Prosecutor for Minors in Greece for their valuable collaboration and continuous support allowing us to provide assistance to unaccompanied children in Greece.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at the IOM Office in Greece for their continuous professionalism and commitment to the Organization's mandate related to child protection matters and particularly Natassa Arapidou, Maggie Lazaridis, Sonia Ampartzidou, Zoi Vanikioti, Maria Malapetsa, Natassa Vourtsi and Alexandra Flessa that contributed in the drafting of the report.

Daniel Esdras

Head of Office

IOM-Office in Greece

## Abbreviations and acronyms

AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BIA	Best Interest Assessment
BID	Best Interest Determination
CoO	Country of Origin
EU	European Union
FA	Family Assessment
FRS	First Reception Service
FT	Family Tracing
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MS	Member State
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NCCM	National Council for Childhood and Motherhood
NCSS	National Center for Social Solidarity
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PARA	Post-arrival Reintegration Assistance
RA	Reintegration Assistance
UAM	Unaccompanied minor <sup>1</sup>
UMC	Unaccompanied Migrant Children <sup>2</sup>
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Directive of the European Parliament and the Council 2013/33/EU an unaccompanied minor is defined as “a third country national or stateless person below the age of eighteen, who arrives on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them whether by law or custom, and for as long as they are not effectively taken into the care of such a person, or a minor who is left unaccompanied after they have entered the territory of the Member States”.

<sup>2</sup> IOM considers “unaccompanied children” to be children, as defined in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (CRC), who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to share IOM's experience in implementing the programme "*Addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Greece*" which ran for 21 months from February 2013 to October 2014 and was funded 90% by the Emergency Funds of the European Return Fund and 10% by the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden. Formulating common procedures to assist unaccompanied children wishing to return home and ensuring that all decisions and actions took into consideration the best interest of the child were among the key objectives of this programme. The programme's implementation included six different phases.

Phase one aimed at reaching out to minors and informing them about the programme's activities. As such, IOM Greece collaborated closely with two non-governmental organisations: ARSIS and PRAKSIS. IOM's staff and the organisations' personnel approached 1206 minors in different situations, namely in protective environment (reception centres for unaccompanied children), while living in abandoned buildings or placed in pre-removal and detention centres.

The primary concern was to meet the children's basic needs, therefore, apart from the provision of information with regards their rights in Greece, they were also given a hygiene kit, depending on whether they were identified and the conditions that they were living in. Furthermore, referrals were made either for accommodation or other types of service, such as medical aid. Through that process, IOM gained valuable information for the profiles of the unaccompanied children in Greece which were useful for designing tailored made protection mechanisms and services.

Out of 1206 approached children, 282 expressed the wish to return back to their country of origin. Family tracing procedures were initiated for 169 children, yet they either changed their minds or proved to be adults based on birth certificates before the end of the procedure. As a result, family assessment procedures were effectively undertaken by IOM Greece in collaboration with IOM missions for 113 children by using all the contact details and information minors were able to provide.

Out of the 113 children, 41 were from Egypt and their family assessments were conducted by the state authorities. Following the expressed wish of these children to leave Greece, they were eventually returned through Greece's State programme. For the remaining 72 minors, the family assessments conducted by IOM resulted in finding parents or other custodians pleased to welcome these children back, with all safeguards in place during this return phase.

The assessment phase was completed by the Prosecutor for Minors and, in its absence, the First Instance Prosecutor, acting as the provisional guardians of the involved children. The Prosecutors' duty was to determine whether return was in children's best interest based on the information gathered during family assessments and through interviewing the child on a case by case basis.

During the programme's implementation, only 59 out of the 72 unaccompanied children for which family assessments were conducted, received positive decision from the Prosecutor for Minors and returned. For the remaining 13 children, the Prosecutor's negative decision was motivated either by the fact that it was not in the children's best interest to return or by the children's change of mind or because children provided IOM with not accurate personal data. .

The last phase of the programme consisted in the provision and monitoring of reintegration assistance provided to children in kind depending on their skills, capacities and wishes, and by taking into consideration the families' opinion as well. In this context, IOM provided post-arrival reintegration assistance (PARA) to 38 out of the 41 unaccompanied children from Egypt on the same grounds as for the children who were returned through the Programme.

Numerous obstacles and challenges were encountered while trying to secure a safe and dignified return in all stages of the Programme, from first approaching and getting to know the minors, to trying to find appropriate accommodations for them, ensuring that information provided to them was appropriate for their age and maturity, and ensuring that their decision to return was fully informed and voluntary. Even after they had decided to return home, different challenges were faced in formulating a sustainable reintegration child rights' based plan which would enable the unaccompanied minor to successfully be reintegrated with his family and community. Equally significant challenges were encountered in gathering information and support documentation for the Prosecutor for Minors to use in deciding the best interest of the minor for each case.

The Programme was challenging and at the same time rewarding for all service providers and was an opportunity to gain valuable experience and created a common operating procedure that enabled the safe return of 59 unaccompanied minors to the family and to a secure environment appropriate for the upbringing and recovery of a minor.

# 1. Review of the Legal Framework and Greek Context

## 1.1 Legal framework

All activities undertaken by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are implemented in compliance with IOM Guidelines, Policies and Instruments, based on international law and drafted pursuant to international conventions and treaties, European legal instruments and Charters, and national legislation. During implementation of the project, emphasis was placed on ensuring compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is binding on 193 State Parties, including Greece. Specifically article 1, 2, 3, 7, 12 and 18 of the Convention were relied upon:<sup>3</sup>

### **Article 1**

*For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.*

### **Article 2**

*1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.*

*2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.*

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*  
<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (accessed 5.5.2015)

### **Article 3**

1. *In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.*

2. *States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.*

3. *States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.*

### **Article 7**

1. *The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.*

### **Article 9**

1. *States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child's place of residence.*

2. *In any proceedings pursuant to paragraph 1 of the present article, all interested parties shall be given an opportunity to participate in the proceedings and make their views known.*

3. *States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.*

## **Article 12**

*1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

## **Article 18**

*1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.*

*2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.*

In addition, Article 24 (Rights of the Child) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was relied upon as well:<sup>4</sup>

*1. Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.*

*2. In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.*

Where the age of the migrant child was uncertain and there were reasonable grounds to believe that the migrant was a minor, IOM treated the migrant as a minor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01)  
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf) (accessed 5.5.2015)

<sup>5</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 6, paragraph 31(i)

Use of the term unaccompanied minor throughout the report refers to “a child who is separated from both parents and other relatives and who is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so”.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this report, “return” is defined as the process of a third-country national going back to his country of origin.<sup>7</sup> As part of a sustainable voluntary return programme, the European Commission has recognised that reintegration activities should be part of a durable solution for minors voluntarily returning to their countries of origin, provided that it follows an individual assessment and is in their best interest.<sup>8</sup>

## **1.2 The Greek Context**

To gain a better understanding of the importance of the project, it is important to understand the context that exists for unaccompanied children residing in Greece.

Due to Greece’s geographic location and its green and extensive blue borders, migrants enter irregularly from different entry points. From the south-eastern points of the country, entry is usually by sea and from the north-eastern borders it is by land. Irregular migrants may be detected upon their arrival either by the Hellenic Police, responsible for border management, or by the Hellenic Coastguard, responsible for policing Greek territorial waters and search and rescue missions.

Considering the numerous points of entry, the first registration procedures are executed by the above mentioned two authorities. Irregular migrants are then transferred for screening procedures to an operational centre or mobile unit of the First Reception Service of the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform (FRS).<sup>9</sup>

The FRS was established in 2011 by Law 3907/2011 and is composed of a Central Service and several Regional Services. Their purpose is to establish and operate first reception centres for third country nationals arriving in an irregular manner in Greece.

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<sup>6</sup> Directive 2011/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 13, 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast). Article 2(1)

<sup>7</sup> Directive 2008/115/EU on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals. Article 3(3)

<sup>8</sup> European Commission *Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014)*, COM (2010) 213, final Brussels (6 May 2013)

<sup>9</sup> Formerly Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection

The first reception centre began operating in March 2013 at Filakio-Orestiada, in the Evros region, near the land border with Turkey. In addition, during the project timeframe, the first two established there were two first reception mobile units were operating primarily on two Greek islands, without the ability to cover all other blue entry points. As a result, upon irregular entry into Greece, all migrants, including unaccompanied minors, entering through other border points, were initially detained for screening. The exception was in Filakio, where migrants were hosted at the First Reception Centre for up to 25 days. During their stay in the Centre, if authorities had doubts about the age of migrants who declared themselves as minors, they were able to conduct age assessments described below.

Ministerial Decision 92490/29.10.2013 and more specifically Article 6 sets out the basic framework for conducting age assessments in Greece.<sup>10</sup> It states that the assessment shall be completed during first reception procedures. The decision requires an initial physical assessment by a paediatrician, followed by an assessment by a psychologist and a social worker. If age remains unclear, then the law foresees dental x-rays and an x-ray of the left wrist. Although the Ministerial Decision constitutes a good foundation for authorities to follow, it renders the application of the procedure described above compulsory only for the FRS and therefore not binding other national authorities or services. Accordingly, due to the bureaucratic nature of the procedure, and the limited equipment and human resources, police and coast guards rarely comply with the procedure for age assessment.

Irrespective of who identifies unaccompanied migrant children, whether the police or the coastguard, and whether they are taken to the first reception centre or to a detention centre for screening, once identified, authorities are under the obligation to inform the Prosecutor for Minors – or, in his/her absence, the First Instance Prosecutor, who acts as the provisional guardian. Simultaneously, authorities should send a request for accommodation to the National Centre for Social Solidarity (NCSS) and more specifically to the unit in charge of the national referral mechanism for accommodation of UAMs and asylum seekers in Greece, which is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity and the. While waiting for the NCSS to find an appropriate space for the

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<sup>10</sup> Ministerial Decision of the Ministry of Health. *Program of medical control, psychosocial diagnosis, support and referral of third country nationals entering without legal documents first reception facilities*. Official Gazette B' 2745/29-10-2013

child, the authority that initiated the referral undertakes the task of referring the child for medical tests – a prerequisite for the minor to be placed in a reception facility.

The above procedure is followed when an unaccompanied child is identified and registered. However, cases occur where children give false birthdates and claim that they are over the age of 18 because they do not wish to be referred to a reception centre for minors, or they are recorded as being accompanied by an adult of the same group for the same reason.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the wrong date of birth may accompany the child throughout his/her stay in Greece and automatically place him/her outside of any protection mechanism and environment, with all the respective outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, unaccompanied children may evade being arrested and recorded by the authorities upon their entry in Greece. Thus, they stay invisible, and become vulnerable to exploitation and being exposed to different risks. In some cases, the unaccompanied minors may seek assistance and be referred to NGOs working with migrant children. For these cases, priority is given to the placement of minors in a protective environment and ensure the provision of assistance and support.

### **1.2.1. Reception facilities for UAMs and existing protection mechanisms**

Reception for asylum-seekers and unaccompanied minors is regulated by the same national legislation, which ensures compliance with relevant EU instruments. Presidential Degree 220/2007 transposed the previous Directive 2003/9/EU, regulating the obligations for the reception of asylum-seekers in Greece. Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and Council of 26 June 2013, laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, have not yet been transposed into national law.

The reception facilities for unaccompanied minors in Greece are operated by Non-Governmental and sometimes by Governmental institutions, mainly with

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<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, *Protecting children on the move, Addressing protection needs through reception, counselling and referral, and enhancing cooperation in Greece, Italy and France*, July 2012, p17.

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR *Observations: Current Situation of Asylum in Greece* – December 2014, p13.

funding from the European Refugee Fund<sup>13</sup>. At the time of this report, the total capacity was of 320 places, although the needs were much higher and there was a waiting list of approximately 200 children. While waiting to be referred to an open accommodation centre, identified minors stayed either in the limited space in the First Reception Centre (FRC) or in detention facilities. It should be noted that both in the FRC and in detention centres, it is foreseen that unaccompanied children are placed in a different section than adults.

At the reception facilities, children find a safe and protective environment, where they are informed about their rights and possibilities to apply for international protection.

Reception centres often report that unaccompanied minors in their care run away.<sup>14</sup> This was also verified during the implementation of this project. Although the shelters' personnel warns children about the risks they face by continuing their travel through irregular means, this is unfortunately not enough to alter their plans, as children are often pressured by their families to move on and reach other European countries.

At the reception centres, children may attempt to trace their family with the help of the staff. When possible and if it is in the child's best interest, family reunification in another EU Member State is initiated, pursuant to the provisions of the Dublin III Regulation.<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, AVRR procedures are followed.

### **1.2.2. Legal Guardianship**

As mentioned previously, the Prosecutor for Minors and in his/her absence the First Instance Prosecutor is by Greek law<sup>16</sup>, the provisional guardian of unaccompanied minors until a permanent guardian can be appointed. However, in Greece, there is no institution or body of guardians who can be appointed to represent the unaccompanied children in any legal action or proceeding that

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<sup>13</sup> During the Programme's implementation the funding was through the European Refugee Fund while currently (June 2015), funds for migration management will be from newly established AMIF Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR *Observations: Current Situation of Asylum in Greece* – December 2014, p20, 22 and 23.

<sup>15</sup> EU Regulation No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), OJ L 180, pp. 31-59.

<sup>16</sup> Greek Civil Code (Art. 1589 – 1665) and the Presidential Decree 220/2007. Art. 19

involves them. The reception centres only accept to host the children without undertaking any further responsibility. As a result no permanent guardian is appointed.

Reception centres are required to inform and receive consent of the provisional guardian on every single decision and action concerning children, including enrolment in schools, and social and recreational activities such as swimming and athletic activities.

It should be noted that the Ministry of Justice, Transparency and Human Rights has established a Working Group to review the guardianship system for unaccompanied minors. This group has engaged with national authorities, international organisations and civil society to identify existing gaps and is looking at guardianship schemes elsewhere in Europe in order to make recommendations for improvements in Greece. However, pending the outcomes of this study, the legal guardianship system for unaccompanied minors in Greece remains challenging.

Lastly, there is no other central authority to coordinate the different actors involved in the protection of unaccompanied minors. As a result, all matters related to the care and the protection of UAMs, from administrative issues to finding durable solutions for the migrant children, including return / the final decision on whether minors can be voluntarily returned home, is the responsibility of the Prosecutor for Minors. They are often asked to determine, based on the available information provided by institutions and international organizations, the children's best interest.

## 2. Programme Description and Implementation

Data on the numbers of UAMs in Greece is rather conflicting and not always consistent. Even though it is difficult to establish the exact numbers, it is widely accepted that considerable numbers of unaccompanied children from countries outside Europe have been arriving in the EU Member States (EU MS) in the last few years.

The 21-month programme “*Addressing the Needs of Unaccompanied Minors in Greece*” was initiated in response to the high numbers of unaccompanied minors in Greece and the dangers they face. It provided the option for children who were no longer legally entitled to remain in Greece to seek the option of returning to their respective country of origin and supported with reintegration activities. The Programme had the following objectives:

- Mapping the existing situation of unaccompanied minors in Greece;
- Further understanding the reasons, motivations and incentives for leaving their respective countries of origin;
- Developing a common procedure for assessing and determining the best interest of the child by providing the Public Prosecutor, as provisional legal guardian, with accurate and complete information through standardized forms on family tracing and family assessment reports, including a description of the child’s situation, views and opinions. Providing the option of voluntarily returning to their respective country of origin with appropriate reintegration

In order to meet the objectives, IOM Greece worked closely with various organizations in the public sector as well as in the private and volunteer sectors. More specifically, IOM Greece, including its regional staff in Orestiada, Alexandroupoli, Thessaloniki, Crete, Lesvos Patras and Samos, also collaborated with the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen’s Protection, NGOs that provide direct support to unaccompanied minors at the borders of Greece (ARSIS and PRAKSIS), migrants’ communities, the Prosecutor for Minors, social workers and medical staff in children’s Hospitals, who provided health services to UAMs.

In addition, IOM Missions in the countries of origin were responsible for conducting family tracing and family assessments for the children interested in returning to their countries of origin. They provided follow up information on all returning cases in order to monitor the necessary procedures for reintegration activities and the wellbeing of the child.

## 2.1 Outreach

One of the priorities at the start of the Programme was to reach out to unaccompanied minors throughout Greece, informing them on the main aspects of the programme and interacting with them so as to gain a better understanding of the factors that led to their journey to Europe.

Aside from providing UAMs with information on the option of AVRR, IOM Greece also wanted to ensure that they understood their rights and all options available for their protection while in Greece. To accomplish this IOM sub-contracted two non-government organizations: ARSIS and PRAKSIS who are active in the provision of shelter, counselling, psychosocial and health support to unaccompanied minors.

ARSIS and PRAKSIS conducted extensive work in different cities of Greece including Athens Thessaloniki, Patras, Alexandroupolis, Kastoria, Ioannina, Igoumenitsa, and Volos and visited old train stations, parks, neighbourhoods where migrants were residing, abandoned factories and areas close to the exit ports.

During outreach activities, it became evident that many unaccompanied children were destitute and had limited or no access to clothes, hygiene items and psychosocial support. To cover the basic needs of these minors, a health kit was produced and distributed during street work. It contained clothes, towels, soap, toothpaste and other basic essentials. Also, the option for the children to be referred to special reception facilities for minors was always made available.

### **REMARK**

*Locating unaccompanied minors is often difficult because many enter without being detected. They can only be approached through targeted outreach activities. Even when found, minors sometimes give a different birth date so as to remain undetected, as often instructed by smugglers.*

Children were also given a pamphlet containing information on the Programme and the availability of AVRR. The pamphlet was available in the following 10 languages: Greek, English, French, Russian, Pashto, Farsi, Urdu, Arabic, Georgian and Bengali.



Explaining the information pamphlet during outreach activities

### ***2.1.1. Analytical Data of outreached unaccompanied children***

1206 unaccompanied children were identified during the outreach activities. One thousand two hundred and three minors (1203) were male and three (3) were female. The majority of unaccompanied children were between the ages of 13 and 17. The main countries of origin of the unaccompanied minors were Afghanistan (609), Egypt (216), Pakistan (176) and Bangladesh (54).

The gender and age break-down of the identified minors was predictable considering that most UAMs come from countries having socially distinct norms for boys and girls. In many countries, the burden of providing financially for the family lies with the male beneficiary and this is supported by the answers of many of the boys approached, who were expected to reach their destination country, find work and send money to their families. In addition, because of their vulnerability, girls are kept closer to parents and it would not be socially acceptable for them to travel alone. However, while some of the children were as young as 13, the majority were

between 15 and 17 years old: at this age, boys are considered old enough to leave the family to find work.

It should be highlighted that, because the unaccompanied children identified through street work were primarily 15-17 years old, they were better able to understand their options, express their opinions and make decisions on what option best suited their needs and aspirations.

**Table 1: Breakdown by nationality of migrant children identified through street work**

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Outreached Unaccompanied Minors</b>
Afghanistan	609
Angola	1
Albania	11
Algeria	21
Bangladesh	54
Burkina Faso	1
Congo	10
Egypt	216
Eritrea	2
Gambia	3
Georgia	1
Guinea	4
Iran	17
Iraq	17
Ivory Coast	5
Libya	1
Mali	1
Morocco	7
Nigeria	4
Pakistan	176
Rwanda	1
Senegal	8

Sierra Leone	2
Somalia	17
Sudan	4
Syria	10
Tunisia	2
Turkey	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1206</b>

*“I have decided to return to Afghanistan. I cannot survive here. I am a minor, now I only want to return to my home country” –JU 16 years old from Afghanistan.*

Out of the 1206 unaccompanied children approached through the programme, over five hundred (508) stated from the outset that they would not consider returning to their CoO because it was their intention to reach a northern European country. They were also adamant on continuing to try to reach their final destination no matter what services were made available to them in Greece, as they considered that they would ensure a better future in other European countries. Even in cases where the unaccompanied children had the option of being reunited with their family members in another European country through the Dublin III Regulation, they preferred to travel irregularly to their intended final destination country as they believed it was the fastest option available and because of their mistrust of authorities.

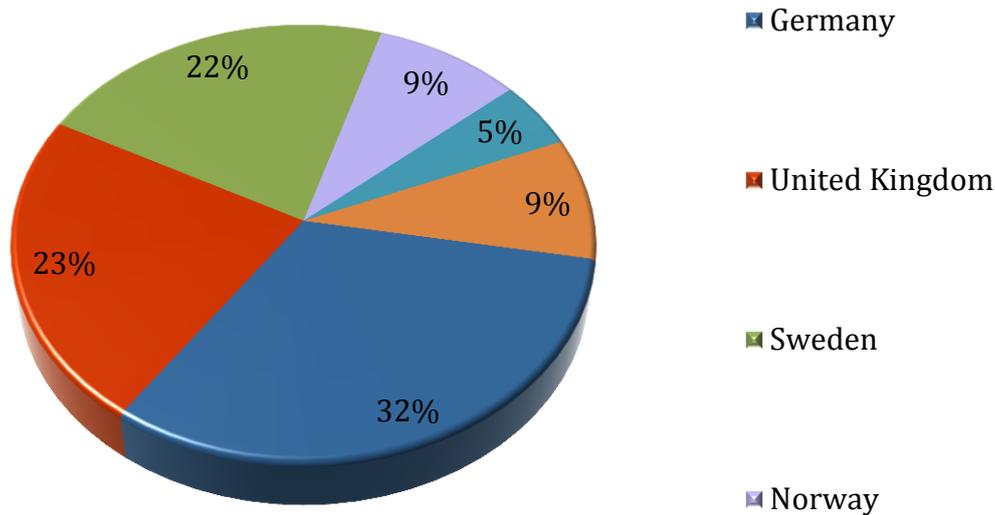
**REMARK**  
*For unaccompanied children with legal options for family reunification, procedures need to be streamlined so that they can be reunited more quickly and avoid the dangers associated with irregular travel within the EU.*

*“I am feeling exhausted, I haven’t had food for days, I live in the street but I hope I will succeed to pass to the rest of Europe.”- RA 16 years old from Afghanistan.*

Out of the 508, approximately 32% stated their final destination would be Germany, 23% the United Kingdom, approximately 22% Sweden, 9% Norway, 5% France and 9% other European countries, such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Canada.

*"I am sure a better future is waiting for me in Sweden"- HH 16 years old from Afghanistan.*

**Graph 1: Preferred countries of destination of the unaccompanied children approached during outreach activities**



The majority of unaccompanied children who said that they intended to continue their journey towards Northern Europe were adolescent boys, between the ages of 15 and 17 and primarily from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

*"I want to go somewhere safe. I don't have any money. Maybe I can borrow a little money in order to move on to other European countries."-KMN 16 year old from Pakistan.*

*"I will wait until I am released and I will exhaust to reach my brother in Germany"-SB 16 year old from Afghanistan.*

**REMARK:**  
*The top countries of destination were selected due to children's ability to speak the language, the presence of family and/or friends in the destination country, who could assist them once they arrived; and already existing migrant communities who could help them settle in the*

*“My brother reassured me that there are job opportunities in England”-HM 17 year old from Afghanistan.*

*“I know the language and I have relatives outside Paris that I can stay with”-KM 16 year old from Algeria.*



Outreach activities

Upon the request from Embassies, IOM Greece visited pre-removal centres in different regions of Greece. Amongst adult migrants in the pre-removal centres, a significant number of migrant children were detained because they had declared themselves adults as instructed by smugglers in order to avoid being referred to accommodation for minors.

Out of the 1206 minors approached during the Programme’s implementation, 953 were identified during outreach activities conducted by ARSIS and PRAKSIS, and 253 during visits to pre-removal centres realised by IOM Greece staff. During the visits to the detention centres, IOM extensively spoke to children to better understand their concerns and expectations and to inform them about the option of reception centres and the availability of the Programme. The majority were willing to wait until they were released to an accommodation or open centre so they could

**REMARK:**

*In trying to identify unaccompanied children, it became apparent that close cooperation between all stakeholders was essential, and that diverse activities were required in order to gain access to all places where children may be located.*

**REMARK**

*Many minors disclosed that the main reasons they left their home country was to escape from wars and conflicts, natural disasters, harsh or difficult socio-economic living conditions, discrimination or persecution. They selected various European countries in the hopes of finding a better life and have access to education, employment, welfare, and health care; and they were willing to endure the dangerous journey to get there.*

continue their journey to other countries in Europe.

*"I arrived in Greece couple months ago. I am detained for more than one month. I came to Greece because I want to leave and pass to the rest of Europe"-AR 17 years old from Afghanistan".*

*"I won't return now, I will wait to leave the detention centre and try to go to another European country"-SS 17 years old from Pakistan.*

*"The ideal picture I had of Greece is far away for the reality, so I prefer to return to Pakistan and open a small business"-SS 17 years old from Pakistan.*

*"My parents send me to Europe for a better future; I do not want to disappoint them"-BW 17 year old from Iraq.*

#### **REMARK**

*Efforts in the host countries should be coordinated to address issues of early identification, approach methods, standardized procedures to enable sustainable return and reintegration where possible and alternative options of assistance if the child does not want or cannot be returned home, always based on the principle of the best interest of the child.*

## **2.2 Intakes**

As mentioned earlier, one of the main objectives of the Programme was the development of standard operating procedures for assisted voluntary return and reintegration of unaccompanied migrant children that are now available to the Greek State in order to enhance its efforts to protect unaccompanied children within the Greek territory. Those standards were developed in line with international standards and obligations, as well as in compliance with IOM's internal policies and practices. Protection, from a psychosocial perspective, included making the children approached by IOM feel comfortable and safe as many of them had showed signs of neglect.

While neglect may be harder to define or to detect than other forms of child maltreatment, child welfare experts have created common categories of neglect,

including physical neglect; medical neglect; inadequate supervision; environmental, emotional, and educational neglect and minors addicted or exposed to drugs.

All types of neglect and, in particular emotional neglect, can have serious psychosocial and emotional consequences for children. *Some of the short-term emotional impacts of neglect, such as fear, isolation, and an inability to trust, can lead to lifelong emotional and psychological problems, such as low self-esteem.*<sup>17</sup> Given the circumstances in which unaccompanied children were identified, there were clear signs of neglect and IOM Greece often witnessed symptoms such as fear and inability to trust the adults with whom they had contact.

Based on these observations during the intake, IOM staff spent time with the children to help understand their needs and establish open and honest communication. Primary consideration for all children registered or not in the Programme for voluntary return, was to assess and assist the basic needs of the child such as shelter, clothes and food. As part of this process, migrant children were also provided with the opportunity to speak to a lawyer from UNHCR, who was present in the IOM office in Athens within the framework of the national AVRR programme. Afterwards, if the children insisted on returning to his family, the social worker of the Programme together with a cultural mediator, explained in a child-sensitive manner and in full detail, the procedure that would be followed over the next few weeks until the minor could be safely returned to his/her respective country of origin. The term “voluntary” was also explained to the child. The social worker took into account the age and maturity of the child and ensured that he fully understood the questions and process described.

**REMARK**

*In order to decide on children's best interest someone must undertake a clear and comprehensive assessment with regards to their identity, including information on nationality, upbringing, ethnic, cultural and linguistic background, particular vulnerabilities and protection needs.*

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<sup>17</sup> DePanfilis D & Dubowitz. H, Family Connections: A Program for Preventing Child Neglect, *Child Maltreatment*. 2005. vol. 10. p110  
<http://cmx.sagepub.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/content/10/2/108.full.pdf+html> (accessed on 5.5.2015)

*"Thank you for explaining this to me! ...I had no idea that I have the right to change my mind even on the day of departure. But, honestly I cannot bear living far away of my family any more..." - M.Q, 15 years old from Pakistan.*

*"When I came to Greece and I realized the situation I started crying. I was crying all the time. I only wanted to cry. Somebody told me that without passport I cannot leave, that's why I stayed 9 months here. If I knew that I could return only with the Out-pass application, I would have left earlier. My heart does not want to stay here any longer."*  
- K.S , 16 years old from Pakistan.

Additionally, before signing the declaration form for voluntary return, which is a pre-requisite for return, the children had the opportunity to call their parents from the IOM office, talk to them, and make sure that they supported their decision and were willing to receive them when they returned home. Due to lack of income, the majority of the minors had not the opportunity to communicate with their parents in a long while. The fact they were given this opportunity had positive effects on their psychological well-being and increased their confidence in IOM staff and work.

**REMARK**  
*At all times, children should be informed of arrangements with respect to guardianship and legal representation, and their opinions, depending on their age and maturity, should be taken into consideration.*

After signing the declaration form, the social worker conducted a full detailed social history interview with the unaccompanied child in a private and quiet room, with the assistance of a cultural mediator. The purpose of obtaining an accurate social history was an attempt to address the needs and problems faced by the migrant child, to assess their home and family conditions and understand the current situation of the child. Additionally, through the social history interview, the social worker was able to determine and address needs or "gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions or "wishes". The discrepancy between the current conditions and desired conditions had to be assessed first in order to appropriately identify the needs of the child. During the implementation of Programme, and during the social history interviews, several issues were identified and acted upon. For instance, prompt action was taken in cases where children were destitute and had to be referred to reception centres for minors.

*"I feel very happy here in the shelter...I feel safer and I have met new friends! But I still miss my parents...When will I return?" - S.I, 14 years old, Pakistan.*

The constant request for clean clothes urged IOM Greece to collect appropriate clothing through private donations. Consequently, all children who approached IOM, irrespective of whether their decision to return or not to their respective country of origin, were provided with clean clothes and shoes.

*"Thank you...I was ashamed to return back to my family with my old clothes. I will wear these at the day of my flight departure" - M.A, 17 years old, Pakistan.*

Lastly, health and psychological support was another identified important need. For instance, M.Q, 17 years old, disclosed physical and psychological attacks in the past from members of an extreme right wing party in Greece. He also complained about suffering from insomnia, a possible symptom of post-traumatic stress. Therefore, an appointment was immediately arranged for him at the non-governmental organization *Doctors of the World* for counselling and possible treatment a psychologist and doctor.

282 out of the 1206 approached and informed unaccompanied minors expressed the wish to return and were registered in the Programme for further actions.



During intake with social worker and cultural mediator of the project

**Table 2: Breakdown by countries of origin of the unaccompanied migrant children registered by IOM Greece in order to benefit from the Programme’s activities**

<b>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</b>	<b>UAM's REGISTRATIONS</b>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	19
<b>Albania</b>	9
<b>Bangladesh</b>	15
<b>Egypt</b>	146
<b>Georgia</b>	1
<b>Iran</b>	5
<b>Iraq</b>	12
<b>Pakistan</b>	72
<b>Senegal</b>	1
<b>Tunisia</b>	1
<b>Turkey</b>	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>282</b>

The assistance offered by IOM Greece was firstly based on the child desire to return home and by taking into consideration his/her best interest. . As per the “*IOM Guidelines on the Protection of Unaccompanied Migrant Children*” and before IOM Greece provided assisted voluntary services to unaccompanied migrant children, a confirmation that the following conditions were met was sought:

- a) Confirmation of the identity of the legal guardians in the CoO and in Greece,
- b) Confirmation that a thorough family assessment by IOM and/or in partnership with NGOs in the countries of origin had been completed,
- c) Confirmation that the Prosecutor for Minors had reviewed all available material, and had the opportunity to speak to the child and consider their opinion, and had decided that it was in the best interest of the child to return home.

## 2.3 Family tracing

IOM was responsible for family tracing activities in the countries of origin. The working-definition of family-tracing under this project was the process of locating the family, based on the information provided by the UAM, and was followed by a thorough assessment of the family.

The results of the family tracing activities were provided to the Prosecutor for Minors as quickly as possible to avoid unnecessary delays as this caused excessive stress to the child wishing to return home.

Certain challenges occurred when trying to initiate and complete family tracing procedures during the Programme. Below are the most common obstacles encountered.

### Reluctance to Disclose Information:

One of the essential elements for family tracing was obtaining a valid telephone number.

During registration, the unaccompanied child was asked to provide the telephone number of his family. It should be emphasized that this was not a necessarily simple task. The vast majority of the children had endured tremendous hardships while being on the move. Trusting adults was lost and, despite their wish to return home they were reluctant to disclose their families' whereabouts. It was IOM's task to make the child feel comfortable and safe enough to provide information which could be used to trace their families.

#### **REMARK**

*Only in an environment that respects children's views and supports their decisions, children are able to start considering their different options. Throughout the Programme, it was repeatedly explained to them that all activities were based on their wishes and that they could change their mind at any point. By feeling empowered, minors were able to work with the counsellors and set realistic and achievable goals for themselves.*

It was also common that children could not provide a working telephone number because they simply could not remember it. As stated above, during the migration process, children endured hardships, have often been abused, others have almost drowned in the sea, and they have lost all their personal possessions and mobiles phones – naturally, these circumstances often impeded them from remembering the correct phone number.

### Security Issues

**The safety of the child and his family must be paramount.** “Family tracing is an essential component of any search for a durable solution and should be prioritized except where the act of tracing, or the way in which tracing is conducted, would be contrary to the best interests of the child or jeopardize fundamental rights of those being traced ”(General Comment n°6, op. cit., para. 80 as cited in International Migration Law Information Note, 2011)<sup>18</sup>.

Security issues in the country of origin of the child were in some cases, an insurmountable obstacle, and family tracing became even more difficult when conflicts occurred at the hometown of the family.

*S.M was 17 years old, from Pakistan and he was living in a shelter operated by ARSIS in Thessaloniki. The social worker of the shelter contacted IOM, and explained that the child wanted to return to his country of origin. After completing registration, it was impossible for the IOM mission in Pakistan to locate the family. After countless efforts, it was eventually revealed that, due to security threats, the family had moved from their residence and did not want disclose their new location.*

### Moving of the parents

In other cases, the remaining family in the country of origin had migrated without informing the minor. This was the case for M.A. who was 16 years old and from Afghanistan. He approached IOM in order to request help to return to his parents in Kabul. After several days of trying to locate his family, it was confirmed

that his parents had migrated to Iran without having informed their son of their new whereabouts.

#### **REMARK**

*When families were living in a country other than the country of origin of the child, the return procedures could not be applied, since return can only take place in the country of origin of the child.*

<sup>18</sup> International Organization for Migration. International Migration Law Information Note. *The Protection Of Unaccompanied Migrant Children*. 2011  
<https://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/What-We-Do/docs/InfoNote-Unaccompanied-Migrant-Children-Jan2011.pdf> (accessed 15.5.2015)

### Change of mind

In each case, it was repeatedly explained to unaccompanied children that returning home was their decision and they had the right to change their mind at any stage of the procedure. As a result, several family tracings were not initiated as minors changed their mind very quickly after registration for different reasons.

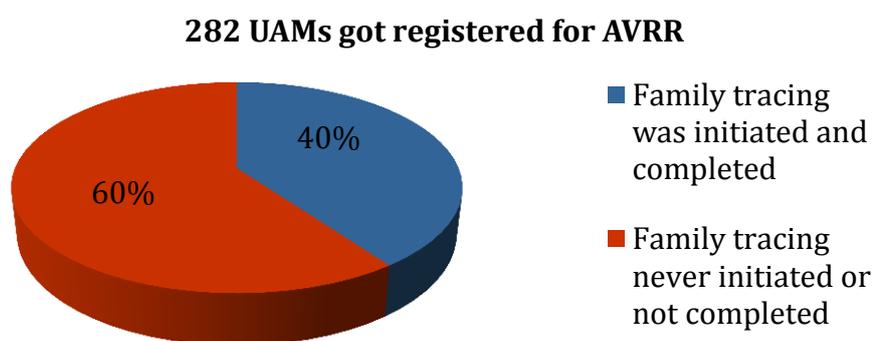
*M.A. was 16 years old and from Pakistan after his initial request to return to his country of origin, he later informed IOM that he changed his mind and decided to stay in Greece because he found a new well-paying job. He refused to disclose the type of work.*

*M.I. was 14 years old from Pakistan, following the needs assessment that was conducted by the social worker, he was referred to a shelter for unaccompanied minors in Athens. The child settled in the safe environment and after a few days he changed his mind and wanted to explore ways of staying in Greece.*

Lastly, in a case involving a child from Iraq and in another involving a minor from Senegal who both initially requested to return to their respective countries of origin, lost contact with IOM office after registration and for which family tracing was never.

These cases demonstrate the challenges in attempting to establish contact with families and the importance of the procedure in providing assistance to UAMs at an early stage. Out of the 282 minors who registered for AVVR assistance, 113 family tracings were successfully conducted while the rest 169 were either initiated but not completed or were stopped at the request of the child.

**Graph 2: Family tracings during the Programme's implementation**



## 2.4 Family assessment

The information collected during the family-tracing process by IOM Greece and partner NGOs in coordination with the IOM missions in the respective countries of origin was shared with the Greek authorities, namely the Prosecutor for Minors in compliance with IOM's Data Protection Principles and the Greek Law.

Family assessment reports were used by the Prosecutor for Minors to assess the child's best interest. These reports included information on the safety of the region and country, as well as the safety of the community where the family resided. Access to basic services such as health care and education were also comprised in the family assessment. The report contained information on the make-up of the family, family dynamics between family members and extended family, the social and economic ability of the family to support the child and their willingness to care for the unaccompanied child if he returned.

After reviewing the family assessment reports, IOM Greece submitted each report, along with the views of the minor and the social history form to the Prosecutors for Minors, who as mentioned earlier is the provisional legal guardian. The Prosecutor also had the opportunity, if requested, to speak to the minor to ascertain his views and opinion. Apart from the information provided by IOM Greece, the Prosecutor could also have information from other sources such as from the accommodation centre staff where a minor was staying or, if the minor had been detained, from the psychologists and/or social worker working in the detention centre. In addition, the Prosecutor had the opportunity, if deemed necessary, to request further information. Based on all the information gathered, the Prosecutor then decided whether it was in the best interest of the child to return to his/her country of origin.

Thus, during the programme, out of the 113 successful family tracings, IOM continued with 72 family assessments. The remaining 41 cases refer to a group of unaccompanied children from Egypt who finally returned to their country through Greek state's procedures and not via IOM's Programme.

In 13 cases out of the 72 family assessments conducted by IOM Greece, the minors could not be assisted to return to their respective countries of origin for different reasons – wrong data on the date of birth of the presumed child, unwillingness to receive the child from the part of the family members in the country

of origin, security concerns in the country of origin and change of mind of the child. These considerations led the Prosecutor for Minors to decide that it was not in the best interest of the unaccompanied child to return home.

**Table 3: Family assessment and AVRR by country of origin**

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Family Assessments conducted</b>	<b>Assisted Voluntary Returns Implemented</b>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Albania</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Egypt</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Iran</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Iraq</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Turkey</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>59</b>

*Inaccurate Data*

Unaccompanied migrant children who approached IOM usually did not have any identification documents from their country of origin to verify their date of birth. The only documentation they submitted, if any, was the police registration paper from the borders which provided a date of birth that was often disputed. As a result, it was unclear whether the unaccompanied minor was indeed under the age of 18 or an adult. In addition, when requested to state their date of birth, many children did not remember, or did not know what to answer. In cases where uncertainty regarding the migrant’s age subsisted, IOM followed all safeguards in place for minors until their identification or birth certificate proved otherwise. As a result, many potential beneficiaries were proven to be adults after receiving the birth certificate from the family along with the family assessment. As they could not be

assisted by this Programme, the migrants were subsequently referred to the National programme and were provided with return assistance through it.

*"I.N. was from Pakistan. He was detained in the Amygdaleza pre-removal detention centre, in the section for UAMs. According to Greek authorities, the macroscopic characteristics of the migrant, such as physical appearance indicated that he was less than 18 years old. Dental x-rays and x-rays of the left wrist, which are part of the age assessment procedure, were not conducted. The cognitive, behavioural and psychological development of the person as examined by the social worker indicated that I.N. was over 18 years. I.N. insisted that he was 17 years old and urged IOM to complete the procedures as soon as possible in order to help him to return to his family. Given the uncertainty, I.N. was treated as a minor. All procedures were completed. When IOM received the family assessment after 1 month from the IOM mission in Pakistan, I.N.'s birth certificate surprisingly revealed that he was 21 years old. He was then subsequently referred to the national AVRR program for assistance."*

#### Unwillingness to receive the child

It is often assumed that all parents have the same desire to receive their child back in their home. Unfortunately, for different reasons, this was not always the case when working with the families of unaccompanied children.

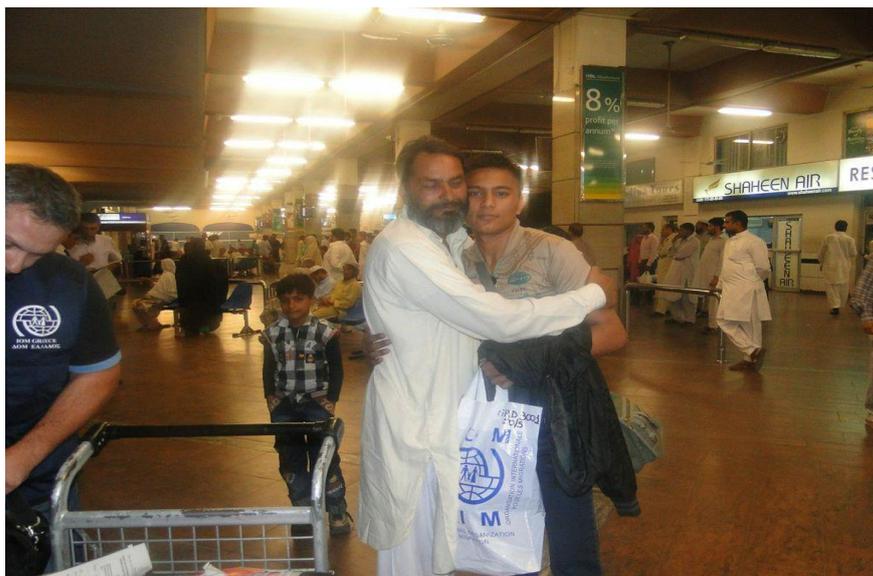
*K.G. 16.5 years old from Pakistan who, according to what he said during the social history interview, was urged by his relatives to migrate to the United Kingdom. The main motivation for initiating the migration process*

*to the EU was the financial insecurity of the family. K.G had nine (9) younger brothers and sisters and was told that he was responsible for their care. The smugglers asked for 4.000 Euros from K.Gs' parents and relatives. To raise this amount of money, they sold all their land and cows and half of their house. During the migration process, he*

#### **REMARK**

*Large sums of money had been paid to smugglers by the families or the minors to get to Europe. Therefore, they considered the available 1.000 Euros for reintegration assistance a small amount compared to what they had spent for their children to reach Greece. They preferred to exhaust all possibilities of leaving Greece to other European countries before considering the option of returning to their countries of origin.*

*endured a particularly traumatic experience. He was physically assaulted by the smugglers and as a result he had to stay for 4 months in a public hospital in Istanbul, Turkey, where he was guarded by the smugglers. When released, he was sent to Greece and for 4 months he continuously tried to travel to the United Kingdom. The Hellenic police placed him in the adult section of a pre-removal detention centre because he had claimed to be an adult. The child, traumatised by his migration experience, wanted to return to his family the soonest possible. K.G.'s parents were contacted following the IOM family tracing and assessment activities. The parents adamantly refused to receive their child back, stating that he should stay in Europe and work, despite the information they received that K.G was detained and would not be able to stay in Europe to work. The most difficult part of this case was informing the child, in a child-sensitive manner that he could not return to his country of origin until he was 18 years old because his parents were unwilling to receive him. The child was eventually referred to a shelter for unaccompanied minors in Greece.*



17 year old S.K. from Pakistan meeting his father at the airport upon arrival

*A.B. was 16 years old from Nigeria and he was detained at a pre-removal detention centre in Athens. The child requested to return to his country of origin. The telephone number he gave IOM was his uncle who was the legal guardian of the minor since his father had passed away. However, after several sessions with the child, he finally revealed to the social worker that the relationship that he had with his uncle-legal guardian was bad and that he was really scared for his life if he returned to Nigeria. After this, his case was referred to the Prosecutor for Minors in order to find appropriate accommodation for him in an open shelter in Greece.*

### Security concerns in the country of origin

As mentioned in section 2.3, security issues represented a major obstacle during family tracing and were also a challenge encountered while trying to conduct family assessments.

During some family assessments, children could not be returned to their families because it was not in their best interest due to different types of security concerns.

*A.M. 16 years old, an Iraqi national, was detained in the pre-removal detention centre of Amygdaleza, waiting to be referred to an open facility. He requested IOMs' help to return to his country of origin. After completing registration and family tracing, the procedure of family assessment was initiated. According to the information disclosed by his parents during the family assessment, the family resided in the Sinjar District along with all the other 9 members of the family in a small and old house made of clay. Their financial situation was dire as the father was the only member in the family who worked. The critical issue, though, was that there were continuous security conflicts in the area. "No one can assure my life or that of my family, not even for tomorrow" said the father. The situation in the Sinjar District forced the family to refuse acceptance of A.M.'s return since they were struggling themselves to survive. Following receipt of this information, which was provided to the Prosecutor for Minors, it was decided that it was not the best interest of A.M. to return to his family. He was referred to a State run shelter in Attica.*

*S.I. a 16-year-old boy from Pakistan approached IOM office with the request to return to his country of origin. After completing registration, the social worker proceeded with the social history interview. During interview, the minor disclosed that he had a harrowing experience with his neighbours in the area where his family lived, Saida Sharif, Mandi Bahauddin, due to ongoing family feuds. When the family assessment was completed, it corroborated that the family was very reluctant to receive their child because of these ongoing disputes with their neighbours. For many years, quarrels and fights occurred, often leading to life threatening injuries. This violence was enough to make attendance at school dangerous, as well as rendering the whole neighbourhood unsafe. The family refused to receive their child back to their hometown as they said "they do not want to lose their only son". With inclusion of this information to the*

*Prosecutor for Minors, it was decided that it was not in S.I.'s best interest to return to his country of origin. Although he was reluctant to stay in Greece, he agreed eventually to be referred to an accommodation centre for minors in Attica.*

*M.Q. 17 years old and from Afghanistan stayed in Athens for several months while trying to migrate irregularly to the United Kingdom. After several unsuccessful attempts he approached IOM requesting to return to his family in Ghazni. After being registered for return, a family tracing was conducted by IOM Afghanistan in order to locate the family. Unfortunately, IOM Afghanistan was unable to carry out the family assessment because the unrest in the area where the family resided made the situation dangerous for both IOM staff and the child.*

### Change of mind

The voluntariness of the programme was clearly explained to all unaccompanied children, including the option of changing their minds at any stage of the procedure. At the completion of three family assessments, several children chose not to their respective countries of origin after changing their minds for personal reasons.

*H.M. was 17 years old and from Bangladesh. He approached IOM and requested assistance to return to his country of origin. After completing registration, family tracing and the family assessment, the minor informed IOM that he changed his mind and didn't want to leave because he had found a new "well-paying" job in Greece.*

A.Z. was 17 years old and from Pakistan. He was living in a shelter for unaccompanied migrant children operated by ARSIS and requested to return to his country of origin. After completing the IOM registration procedures, A.Z. reconsidered his decision and did not want to leave for the time being. He preferred to stay in Greece as long as possible, hoping to have the opportunity to travel to his destination country, the United Kingdom.

B.W., a 17 year old from Iraq, was in the detention centre of Orestiada in North Eastern part of Greece. He approached IOM in Orestiada and requested to return to his country of origin. He was transferred to Athens the soonest possible. After

completing IOMs registration procedures, the family tracing and assessment, IOM visited W.B at the Alien Division of Attica where he was transferred from the detention centre of Orestiada, in order to proceed with his social history interview. B.W., from the first minute of the conversation, declared that he did not want to return to Iraq. The only reason that he initially agreed to participate in the program, was because he wanted to be transferred in Athens, hoping to be released sooner. His options with the programme were explained to him and a pamphlet about AVRR was provided. Authorities continued trying to find a place in an accommodation centre for him.

#### *Returned without the assistance of IOM*

Finally, there were cases of children who decided to return alone to their respective country of origin even though the family assessment was already conducted and finalised because they did not want to wait until the Prosecutor finished examining their case.

A.H was a 17 year old boy from Pakistan. He was detained at the pre-removal detention centre of Amygdaleza. The child requested to return to his family within two days. It was clearly explained to him that the completion of the procedure takes longer than two days. After a couple of days, the child stated that he had decided to return with the assistance of the police rather than wait for the IOM procedures to be completed. Therefore, he returned to Pakistan without the assistance of IOM.

#### *Not in child's best interest*

In three cases, after reviewing the information collected in the family assessments, the supporting documents and the opinions provided by colleagues in IOM Iraq, IOM Pakistan and IOM Albania respectively, the Prosecutor concluded that it would not be in the best interests of the minors to return to their families.

The family of N.B. from Albania was living, essentially, in a one-room shanty where the presence of mould from humidity made the room unsafe for habitation. The family had serious socio-economic problems and with no income. The relationship between the parents was unstable and there were continuous conflicts between them. The children often witnessed domestic violence towards their mother, and

were themselves also victims of serious physical and psychological abuse. While the mother maintained regular contact with the children, given the situation at home, it was clear that she could not fulfil her responsibility towards her children or protect them from abuse. Despite the parents' declaration that they wanted their child to return, based on the family assessment, the Prosecutor decided that it would not be in the child's best interest to return to Albania. The child remained in an accommodation centre designed to meet the needs of vulnerable populations and especially unaccompanied children.

## 2.5 Reintegration Assistance

The availability of reintegration activities in the country of origin is considered a valuable sustainable solution for managing irregular migration. Reintegration assistance becomes even more important when migrant children are concerned as it provides ways for families to care for their children and protects the child's right to be cared for by his/her family.<sup>19</sup>

**REMARK**  
*Reintegration that is based on minors' interests and skills and family background can have profound effect on children's sustainable return and wellbeing.*

The opportunity for reintegration assistance was offered to all unaccompanied children registered for voluntary return. It should be noted that the provision of reintegration involved holistic support and included, at minimum, the following:

1. Complete interviews with reintegration counsellors during which a socio-economic profile of the unaccompanied children was recorded to identify their needs as well as to assess the circumstances and prospects in their country of origin, and to support the children's decision to return. Reintegration counselling focused on improving the human condition and improving the human quality of life for the children and their family, provided there were no concerns regarding their safety.
2. Following the interview, the reintegration counsellor and the child produced a personalized reintegration plan that would be implemented once returned to his/her country of origin. Before the plan was finalised, it was sent to the IOM

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<sup>19</sup> Article 18 UNCRC

mission in the country of origin to be shared with the legal guardian(s) of the minor. The reintegration plan was finalised after receiving their input.

3. Once the child returned home, the reintegration plan was reviewed with him/her, with the assistance of the IOM mission in the country of origin and his/her legal guardian. If considered necessary, changes could be made to the original plan. The IOM mission in the country of origin was then responsible for monitoring and providing support in the implementation of the reintegration activities, and making adjustments when necessary. Once reintegration was completed, the IOM missions in the origin countries evaluated and reported the outcome of the activities.

As the Programme involved the return and reintegration of unaccompanied children, assistance was tailored to their specific needs. It should also be highlighted that the primary consideration in drafting the reintegration plan for each minor was whether the proposed activities would be in the minor's best interest<sup>20</sup>.



*“IOM helped me at every step of developing my idea. The shop was indeed a good idea since there was a need for one shop in my area. I believe I will be able to increase my profits in the future through selling cosmetic products as well!” 17.5 year old H.B. from Pakistan*

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<sup>20</sup> International Organization for Migration. Geneva. *Reintegration: Effective approaches*. 2015. <https://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/What-We-Do/docs/Reintegration-Position-Paper-final.pdf> (accessed on 4 November 2014).

During the reintegration counselling sessions with the unaccompanied children, it became evident that most of them had decided to migrate to Europe as a means to improve their living conditions and maximize their educational and employment opportunities. As a result, the main activities selected by minors as part of the reintegration assistance involved the following ones:

- i. Education: payment of school fees or taxes, the purchase of educational materials books, or computers or other school related items.
- ii. Vocational training: payment of enrolment fees, books, materials, and transportation allowances.
- iii. Start-up of business activities: Payment for rent of premises, business registration fees, commerce licenses, and purchase of equipment and goods.
- iv. Employment: support paid as an employment grant for those who manage to find work independently.

Other reintegration support that was available in exceptional cases included:

- Medical support and psycho-social assistance: payment for medical treatment and prescriptions, as well as psychological counselling to address any pre or post arrival trauma the minor had experienced.
- Community assistance: community assistance can be considered as part of the individual reintegration plan, if it positively impacts the reintegration conditions of the child.<sup>21</sup>

As for the parameters the project, the total cost for each reintegration plan could not exceed the amount of 1.000 EUR and was available only in kind. To comply with these pre-requisites, the IOM missions in the respective countries of origin were responsible for the payment of goods and services directly to the vendors, according to the approved reintegration plan.

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<sup>21</sup>International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2010*  
<https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/regulating/AVRR-Annual-Report-2010.pdf> (accessed on 15 April 2014).



17 year old  
G.U.M.G is from a  
village in  
Bangladesh where  
rice is one of the  
main food staple.  
He used his  
reintegration to  
start a rice store in  
the village

As part of the reintegration process, actions were also carried out to prepare the families and their communities to receive children in a positive and supportive manner. These particular activities included close contact between IOM staff and the child's family throughout the return and reintegration processes back to his/her country of origin. The contact between the family and the minor, prior to his/her return, was facilitated by IOM and the child's parents, relatives or other care takers who were fully informed of the process at all stages. Counselling sessions were conducted aiming at the evaluation of the socioeconomic situation of the family and the community. The family was prompted to identify and explore possible reintegration activities which could strengthen the socio-economic situation of the family and avert the possible re-immigration of the child.

The process, begun prior to the child's arrival during family tracing and family assessment activities, continued while drafting the reintegration plans and was concluded with follow-up monitoring once the child returned to his/her family. To this end, assessing the individual needs of the child and exploring ways to meet his/her needs was key to successful reintegration.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gambaro, A., Kobayashi, Y., Levy, R., Rasheed, L. and Winkler, E. *Unaccompanied children: What happens once they are back home?* 2008 [http://www.iss-si.org/2009/assets/files/others/Unaccompanied\\_children-ISS-Final\\_report-23June\\_2008.pdf](http://www.iss-si.org/2009/assets/files/others/Unaccompanied_children-ISS-Final_report-23June_2008.pdf)

(accessed 4 November 2014).

*M.A. was a 16 year old boy from Pakistan. He came from a farming family. His father was seriously ill and the main concern for him was to return to his country in order to help supporting the family. For this reason, he wanted assistance to take charge his father's farmlands. The programme provided him with the opportunity to enhance his knowledge on different types of farming. During reintegration counselling, he decided that he wanted to diversify the farm's productions by purchasing a buffalo that would enable him to set up a dairy farm business.*

Sustainable reintegration not only implies economic reintegration, but also social and cultural reintegration in the family and community, resulting in the child's feeling of safety and security. IOM works closely with the family and the community to build a safe network for returned unaccompanied children. This network includes social and psychological support services provided to these children, who often experience stress when adjusting to a new environment.



*"...I left my country in order to find a better place to live and run my life. Unfortunately, I couldn't find my destiny and faced many problems. It hurt me a lot, so I needed to come back home. IOM was the only way to return to my country and manage to restore my life. I feel like a completely different person!"* 16.5 year old J.U. returned to Iraq to set up a dairy farm in his home village.

Effective sustainable return and reintegration in the case of unaccompanied migrant children must take into account two different aspects of the process: the necessity to promote their self-sufficiency and to contribute to their local communities. Achieving sustainable return and reintegration within this project lay

in the constructive cooperation between all parties involved in the reintegration programme. Therefore, IOM and all partners in the countries of origin worked closely to offer the unaccompanied children socio-economic support, as well as ways to promote their self-sufficiency and contributions to their local communities.

M.Q. was 17.5 years old from Pakistan. During the counselling reintegration session, his emotional stress, because of difficulties related to the conditions of his stay in Greece, was apparent. However, by spending time and providing him with positive support and understanding, he was able to feel safe and to trust the reintegration counsellor. M.Q. was encouraged to reflect on his needs and goals and formulate (positive) expectations about his well-being, adjustment and possible reintegration in his home country. Before leaving Pakistan, he used to work with his father selling fabrics in the local open air market. Based on this experience, he came up with the idea of starting his own fabric store and working with the support of his father. When asked about his work experience and skills, he said: *“I know how to recognize good quality fabrics as well as how to select the proper suppliers. I will buy fabrics from many different suppliers inside and outside my village in Pakistan.”*



16.5 year old H.A.R. wanted to open a bookstore in Afghanistan. With the assistance of IOM, he rented space and bought the books that he is now selling.

It was important for the child to share his/her thoughts, feelings and opinions during the counselling sessions with the reintegration counsellor. In addition to encouraging the child to actively participate in the reintegration plan, providing

clear and objective information to the child in order to ensure that both return and reintegration are made on a voluntary and fully informed basis, and thus ensure the successful realisation of the reintegration plans, was equally significant.<sup>23</sup> To this end, the reintegration counsellor was also responsible to provide explanations to the unaccompanied child on the current situation in the country of origin, what to expect upon his return home in terms of assistance provision, and to highlight his/her duties and responsibilities. Thus, reintegration adopted a participatory approach by engaging with the minor throughout the entire reintegration processes.

H.K. was 17.5 years old from Pakistan. Three different reintegration activities were explored during three reintegration counselling sessions. Although H.K. was determined to return home, he found it difficult to decide whether to buy agricultural equipment for the family farm or to undertake a completely different activity. He was encouraged to consult with his parents so that the plan he finally selected would benefit him and his whole family. After speaking to his parents, he decided to use the reintegration grant to purchase a water pump. However, once he returned to Pakistan, he did not contact the IOM mission as he had been instructed. When IOM contacted him, he explained that he had again changed his mind and that he wanted to start his own dairy farm. Again, his responsibilities and duties were explained to him in detail and with the support of IOM and his family, he started his own dairy farm.

Adolescents often experience a so-called “identity diffusion”, making it more difficult to clearly define their goals in life. In order to develop and establish an identity, they often need to make a series of choices and commitments. In this context, reintegration assistance sets specific attainable goals based on purely rational grounds: it is a way of building a new life in the home country. To best achieve this, all actors involved in the process should create a network and to

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<sup>23</sup> International Organization for Migration. *Reintegration: Guidelines on Reintegration Pre-departure Counseling*. 2012 <http://avrr.belgium.iom.int/en/resources/manuals/406-guidelines-on-reintegration-pre-departure-counseling.htm> (accessed 5.5.2015)

promote the exchange of information between countries of origin and host countries.<sup>24</sup>

U.C.A. was a 16.5 years old boy from Turkey. Reintegration counselling took place in an accommodation centre where the child was staying. The counselling session took the form of an individual brainstorming session since he expressed many different ideas about his future reintegration activity. He was uncertain about his goals and life plans after returning to Turkey. He stated: *"It is impossible for me to choose between enrolling in a public high school, attending a language course in Turkey or working in a youth centre."* Upon return to his country of origin, he was offered reintegration assistance but he was still hesitated between attending a formal educational institution which required daily attendance and following informal education through an open high school. The IOM offices in both countries worked closely with the child in order to help him to make a final decision and manage his expectation. The IOM staff in Turkey collected all necessary information regarding the right of the child to enrol in either of the two education programmes. The minor finally chose to attend an open high school and, at his request, he was also provided with a computer to write his school essays.

It should be highlighted that effective reintegration counselling also prepares beneficiaries to deal with different types of challenges in their countries of origin.

R.H.Q. was 16.5 years old and from Iraq. The child was held in the detention centre in Athens until a place was made available for him to be referred to an accommodation centre. He wanted to return to Iraq and requested IOM's assistance. Despite having any related work experience, R.H.Q. insisted on starting an internet café as he was familiar with computer software. His initial reintegration plan was based on his wishes. After returning to Iraq, he recognized the difficulties he would face in implementing his plan. As a result, with the assistance of the IOM mission, a

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<sup>24</sup> Gambaro, A., Kobayashi, Y., Levy, R., Rasheed, L. and Winkler, E. *Unaccompanied children: What happens once they are back home?* 2008 [http://www.iss-si.org/2009/assets/files/others/Unaccompanied\\_children-ISS-Final\\_report-23June\\_2008.pdf](http://www.iss-si.org/2009/assets/files/others/Unaccompanied_children-ISS-Final_report-23June_2008.pdf)

(accessed 4 November 2014).

new, more realistic, plan was drafted and R.H.Q. enrolled in an intensive English language course. He was a high school student and wanted extend his knowledge in English in order to be well prepared for the next steps of his studies. IOM covered the costs of the course and transportation fees.

A.U.R. was 17.5 years old and from Pakistan. The adolescent had acquired valuable work experience through working for some years in a car repair shop in Pakistan. During the reintegration counselling session he stated: *"I know just what I want to do after I return. I am an experienced auto car mechanic and my dream is to start my own spare parts workshop."* The programme provided him with the opportunity to make his dream come true and start an auto workshop. At the monitoring and evaluation stage, the minor said that this business was the best way for him to be reintegrated and that he had good hope for his future in his home country.

As mentioned above, IOM missions in the countries of origin are responsible for monitoring the reintegration process to ensure that adequate assistance was provided for the effective and sustainable transition and reintegration of the returned children.

## **2.6 Monitoring the Reintegration Assistance**

Monitoring the reintegration assistance is an objective and represents a quantifiable method to assess the effectiveness of the reintegration plans of children and their integration within their families, local communities and countries of origin. The monitoring activities aim to observe *whether the key objectives and results of the desired activity have been achieved through measurable means*. During this monitoring stage of the programme, the following factors were assessed:

- The degree of success of the reintegration plans for the assisted unaccompanied children;
- The obstacles encountered during implementation of the reintegration plans;
- The lessons learned throughout the implementation of the Programme in order to build on these experiences future reintegration assistance schemes.

Reintegration of unaccompanied children requires addressing their inherent vulnerabilities. To achieve this, IOM Greece focused on continuous follow-up and monitoring of the reintegration process, to ensure that adequate assistance was provided for the effective and sustainable transition of the children, as well as to evaluate the results of the reintegration activities and their impact on unaccompanied children.



*“Thanks to IOM, I own a business which is now running quite well!”*, 16 year old H.A. from Pakistan

Apart from the frequent communication maintained by IOM with the minors and their families during the implementation of their reintegration plans, onsite monitoring visits were conducted to assess the success of the reintegration plans. During the monitoring visit, IOM staff interviewed the minors once again in order to assess a number of factors such as the appropriateness of the reintegration assistance provided, the results of the reintegration plan, including whether the beneficiary was satisfied with the results and, if he/she would consider leaving his/her country of origin again.



17 year old A.A. is from Pakistan and opted to start a computer accessories store in his hometown. With the assistance of IOM, he purchased the necessary tools and equipment for his new income-generating activity

During the Programme, IOM assisted 59 unaccompanied children to return to their countries of origin. Out of the 59 children, only 48 completed their reintegration plans and IOM conducted onsite monitoring visits for 45 of them. Onsite monitoring visits were not possible/could not be conducted/ undertaken in 3 cases as the concerned children changed their contact details or could not be reached by IOM during the three month implementation period. These three cases involved two children from Iran and one from Afghanistan.

Furthermore, IOM provided a one-time reinstallation grant of 500 euros instead of reintegration assistance to 9 children out of 59 because they registered close to the end of the programme and only limited time to implement reintegration activities was left.



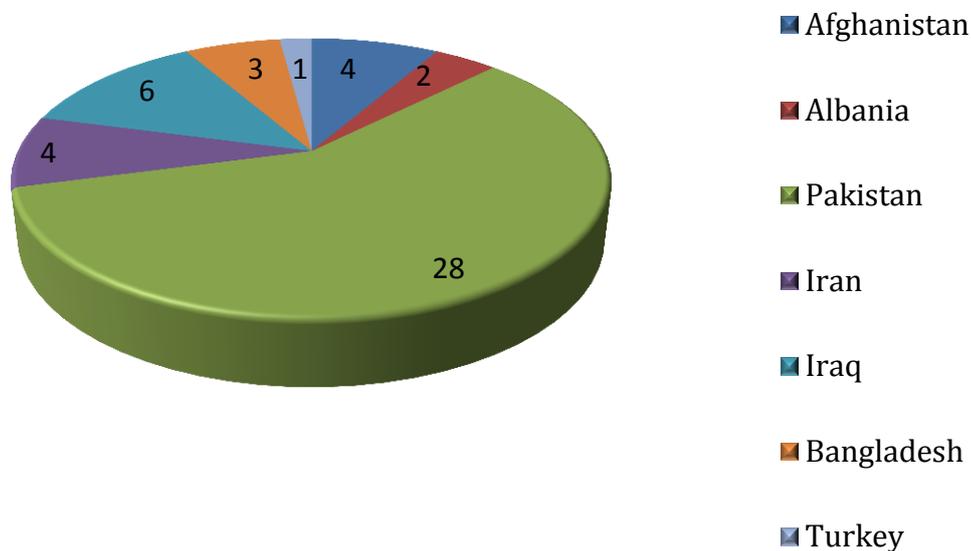
17.5 year old P.H. returned to Iraq to start an auto repair shop with his reintegration assistance. The shop will enable him and his family to earn a living.

In two cases involving one child from Iraq and another from Pakistan, reintegration activities were never initiated because the minors changed their minds and were no longer interested in completing their reintegration plans. More specifically, when the first child returned to Iraq, he was no longer interested in implementing his reintegration plan because he had started working at a store selling dishware.. Similarly, although a close relationship had been built with the child from Pakistan, upon his home he found that that the required procedure, which comprised the collection of several verifying documents, was too tedious in comparison with the benefits he would gain from it. Prior to his departure from Pakistan, his parents were separated and he was living with his mother and siblings,

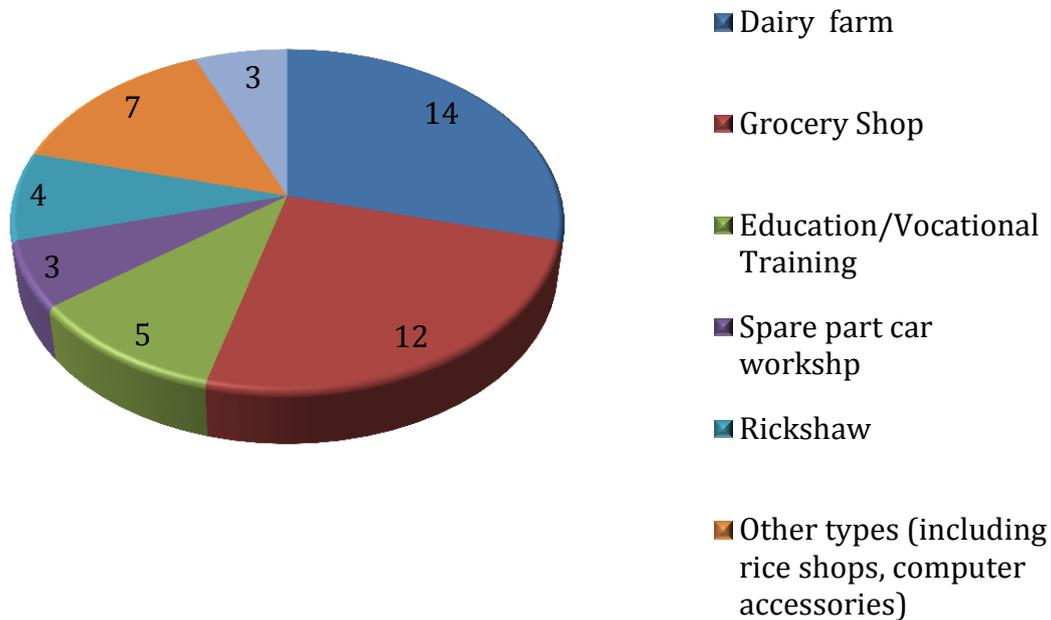
who were unable to cover the household expenses. This situation has prompted him to migrate to Greece in order to improve the family's financial situation. However, upon return to Pakistan, the relationship with his father was re-established, and lost interest in the reintegration assistance programme. Indeed, according to him, his father owned a factory in Pakistan, thus freeing him from want and financial difficulties.

28 out of the 48 unaccompanied migrant children who completed their reintegration plan were from Pakistan and chose to set up small businesses such as the purchase of rickshaws, dairy farms and grocery shops. Within the framework of the project, 14 dairy farms were started, 12 grocery shops were opened, 5 minors received education/vocational training, 4 rickshaw businesses were started, 3 workshops with spare car parts were opened, and 10 various other types of shops were established.

**Graph 3: Reintegration assistance by country of origin**



**Graph4: Type of reintegration assistance implemented during the programme**



During follow-up and monitoring visits, many successful reintegration stories were recorded. With the written consent of the returned child and his/her legal guardian(s), some of these stories are shared in the following section. The common thread in all these stories was that the reintegration assistance provided the children with the opportunity to integrate in the local society and to feel that they were contributing and improving their lives and those of their families. Equally significant to highlight was the fact that all children showed increased confidence about their future in their home country and that some were even making plans to expand their businesses. They expressed new hopes for their future.



15 year old M.G wanted to work with his family and open a fabric business in Albania.

### *3. Post-arrival Reintegration Assistance: Egyptian unaccompanied minors returning from Greece*

Post-arrival reintegration assistance (PARA) provides reintegration assistance following return of a migrant to his/her country of origin through another option and not via the IOM Programme. PARA uses the same criteria and procedures as all reintegration activities implemented by IOM. This service was provided during this project to a particular group of UAMs who returned from Greece to Egypt.

In April 2014, more than 100 unaccompanied children from Egypt, along with Syrian refugees, were rescued by Greek authorities and taken to the island of Crete. Lack of appropriate space resulted in the rescued children being transferred to accommodation centres in different areas in Greece such as STEGI PLUS (+) in Patras and the Greek Red Cross “Paidopoli Agias Sofias” in Agria Volos. Smaller groups of children were transferred to ARSIS shelter for unaccompanied minors in Makrinitza Volos and Thessaloniki, and others to Apostoli, to Mellon shelters and in the Society for the Care of Minors (SMA) in Athens.

Once recovered from their journey and received information about their rights, many children from Egypt expressed their desire to return home. Based on their requests, staff from the accommodation centres asked IOM to visit the shelters in Athens, Patras, Volos and Thessaloniki and provide information to the minors about the availability of the IOM’s assistance in the framework of the project, the procedures that had to be followed and to provide them with clarifications regarding the implementation of their return and the reintegration assistance in Egypt.

IOM staff conducted extensive counselling with these children, including by conducting needs assessments. Unaccompanied migrant children who wanted to return to their country of origin were registered with the project and an initial review of possible reintegration activities was explored. Following these visits to the shelters, IOM Greece worked closely with IOM Egypt in order to trace the children’s family members, conduct family assessments and collect relevant information that

would enable the Prosecutor for Minors in Greece to decide whether return is for children's best interest.



A.R.E.B.'s family worked in the sewing business. With the assistance of IOM, he and his family were able to expand their family business to support the whole family.

In Egypt, only the National Centre for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), a government body, is authorized to conduct family assessments under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). In coordination with IOM Egypt, IOM Greece requested that NCCM conduct family assessments with onsite visits to the families of the migrant children who wanted to return home. To support the NCCM, IOM Egypt provided capacity building to ensure that the family assessment would contain all the information required by IOM guidelines. This resulted in significant delays in conducting family assessments.

While the activities for the children from the first shipwreck were carried out, there was a second shipwreck in May, 2014 and 79 unaccompanied children from Egypt were rescued in the waters between Greece and Malta. There was no available space in the accommodation centres and, as a result, the 79 children rescued from the second shipwreck were placed in detention centres, until space in the accommodation centres became available.

Upon the request of authorities, IOM Greece visited the children from the second shipwreck that had been transferred in the Attica Aliens Police Directorate and to the Amygdaleza detention centre in order to provide them with information about the availability of AVRR assistance. Given the circumstances, the voluntariness of the programme was explained in detail to the children, as well as their right to change their mind at any moment during the procedure.

The unaccompanied migrant children from both shipwrecks wanted desperately to return to their families and, because of the duration of the family assessment procedure, the children felt stranded in Greece and began to show signs of anxiety and frustration that resulted in tension between them and other minors in the shelters. The social workers and psychologists in the shelters tried to find ways to manage children's anxiety and, for that reason, they engaged them in various recreational activities. The children staying at the Attica Aliens Police Directorate displayed similar signs of stress. With no other outlet, they began a hunger strike to protest being in Greece.



15 year old I.A.E.A used the IOM reintegration grant to purchase the products necessary to start a family grocery store.

IOM staff, including cultural mediators, had extensive counselling with all the migrant children in the pre-removal centres in order to support them psychologically and also to provide them with a clear view of the different stages of the programme. After active listening and by accepting and replying to all their questions, they finally felt more secure and comfortable with the procedure and eventually children decided to discontinue the hunger strike.

It is worth noting that many of the children were anxious and fearful because they thought they were going to die during the shipwreck. Most had travelled, hoping to reach Italy, to try to find work or continue their education. After the trauma experienced from the shipwreck, they wanted only to return home to their families.

K.A.H.S. was 17.5 years old and one of the children from Egypt who had been rescued at sea. At the beginning of the counselling session he was physically shaking and after a few minutes he burst into tears. *“I am so much afraid! I had a terrible time during the travel to Greece. I was sure I was going to die. Please help me return to my country. My friends decided to leave Egypt and I didn’t want to be left behind. I was just playing but now I realize it wasn’t a game”.*

The above testimony is one of many that IOM came across during the visits to the different centres where minors from the shipwrecks were staying. In K.A.H.S.’s case, he was reassured that IOM’s priority was to help him return home safely. During the counselling session, he was also provided with information regarding the availability of reintegration assistance. When informed about the reintegration options available, he started smiling.

*“Perhaps all this was not for nothing. I could have a chance to start a mechanic car repair workshop. After all, it is my greatest dream.”*

As a follow-up, the child’s dream was fulfilled since he was assisted in opening a car repair shop through post-arrival reintegration assistance, that was provided after his return to Egypt.

In total, 78 children asked for assistance to return to their country of origin through IOM. All were boys between the ages of 13 and 17. A detailed database was prepared and sent to IOM Egypt to be shared with NCCM in full respect of IOM data protection principles. Following the capacity building carried out by IOM Egypt and receipt of the database, NCCM began family tracing and family assessments for a first group of 42 Egyptian minors. However, the family assessments were not shared either the IOM Egypt or IOM Greece. The information, therefore, could not be provided to the Prosecutor for Minors for a decision on the best interests of each child. As a result, this group of minors could not be assisted through the voluntary return programme. Nonetheless, after almost three months of continuous efforts from both IOM Greece and IOM Egypt, 101 unaccompanied minors were eventually returned through the coordination between the Greek and Egyptian authorities.

While IOM could not assist with returning these minors home, reintegration assistance remained a priority in order to offer them a durable alternative to

irregular migration. Following consultation with the European Commission, which was one of the funding organisations of the project, with the IOM Regional Offices and with the Government of Egypt, it was decided that it would benefit to offer post-arrival reintegration assistance (PARA), at minimum, to children who had registered with the programme during their stay in Greece.

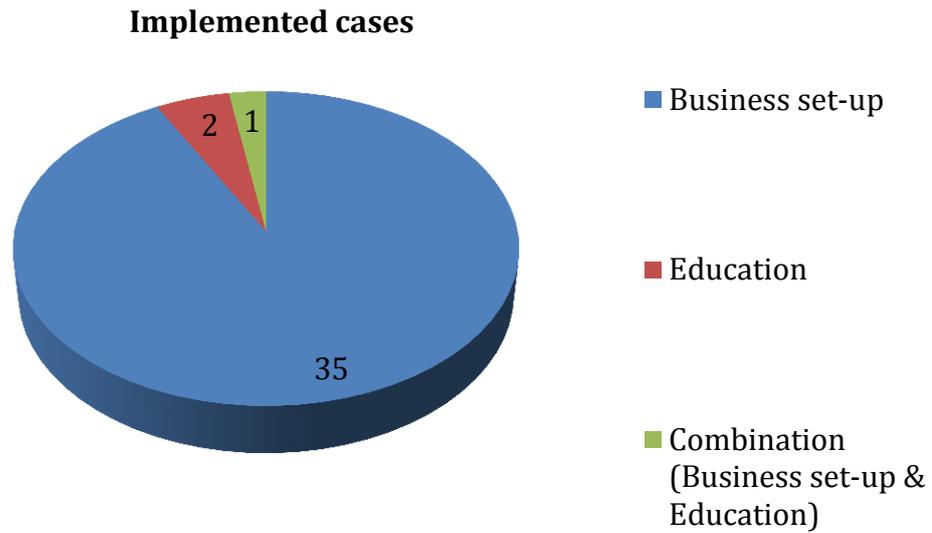


17.5 year old  
K.A.H.S opened an  
auto workshop  
business. The  
business provided  
him with the  
opportunity to  
work with his  
father.

IOM Egypt was able to trace 58 families of the returned minors and informed them about the possibility of PARA. Forty one (41) out of the 58 minors and their families submitted supporting documents to IOM Egypt in order to be eligible for the project. In total, 38 minors complied with the requirements of the programme, including the provision of supporting documentation, and successfully completed their reintegration plans.

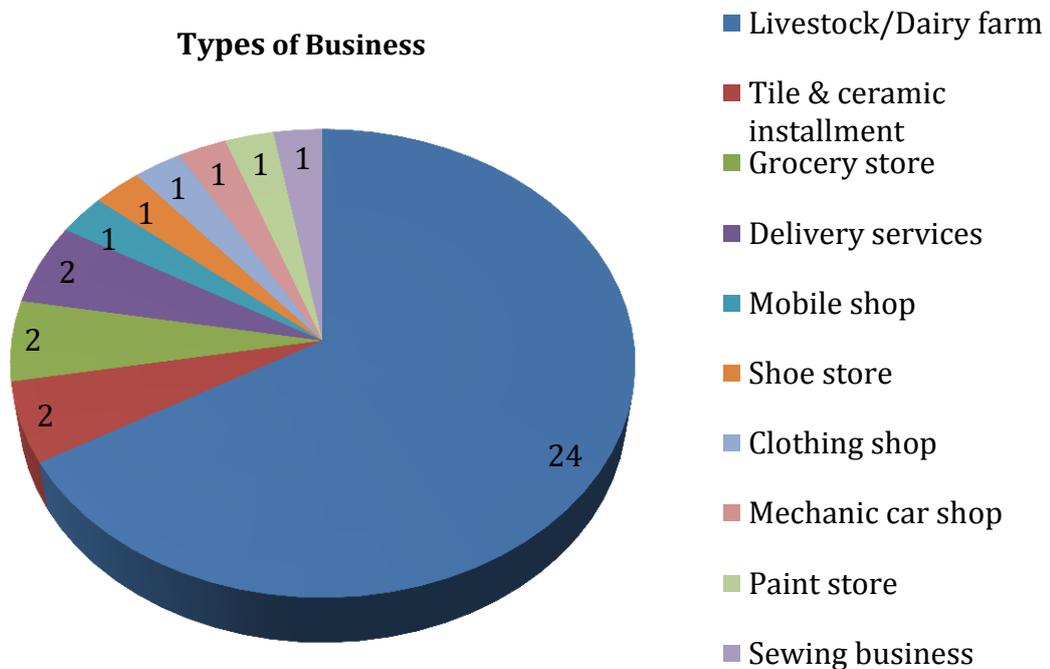
In the cases where PARA activities were undertaken, IOM Egypt contacted the UAMs and their family and collected information about the social and economic situation of the family and the children, in order to help formulate the most adequate reintegration plan according to their needs and background. IOM Egypt then began working with the children and their families to implement each reintegration plan, and conducted the necessary monitoring and evaluation. Most of the returnees decided to start up a micro-business after their return to Egypt. More specifically, 35 unaccompanied children wanted to start a business, 2 chose to continue their education and one child was able to combine both setting up a business and pursuing his education.

**Graph 5: Type of reintegration assistance provided with the PARA framework**



Furthermore, among the types of micro businesses that were started with post-arrival reintegration assistance in Egypt was dairy farming, which included the purchase of livestock, as the most commonly chosen reintegration plan. One reason for the popularity of dairy farming was that most of the UAMs lived in rural areas and their parents were already engaged in farming.

**Graph 6: Types of businesses supported by PARA**



## 4. Lessons learnt and Recommendations

Based on the experience gained, the following recommendations can be applied in other settings and projects regarding the approach towards unaccompanied migrant children and the identification of durable solutions in the best interest of the child.

### *Operational level*

- All procedures and decisions should be applied and taken in due time considering that children appreciate time differently from adults. They focus on their needs “now” and “here”, as a result of which they might show unwillingness to participate in a lengthy procedure. Return to the family or reunification with a relative should therefore be implemented with caution and speed. Coordinated efforts based on common procedures for all organizations involved could decrease the time required for the necessary activities without jeopardizing the final result.
- During all phases and for a majority of cases, regardless of whether the child eventually returned to the family or not, enabling and assisting the communication of the child with his/her family was essential, especially in the cases where the contact had been lost due to hardships during migration procedure. This contact with the family was beneficial for the child since it linked him/her with important people in his/her life. In cases where the family fully supported the procedure of the return and the reintegration was also helpful, since the child was able to share feelings, thoughts and ideas.
- It is extremely critical to have experienced, motivated and knowledgeable professionals to address the needs of children in the context of return and reintegration programmes. Professionals working with children should be able to alleviate the pressures and anxieties experienced by the child, to create an environment of trust and safety, give the time and space to children communicate personal information and traumatic experiences. The process of building trust and communication requires that stable contact is maintained with the child and that

immediate needs and underlying issues, such as shelter, basic material needs and psycho-social support, is provided.

The presence and participation of a cultural and experienced mediator was valuable during all procedures. For instance, the cultural mediator could explain the situation in a language understood by the child. Moreover the mediator, along with the social worker and the reintegration counsellor, could understand the cultural differences experienced by the migrant child, and help both sides comprehend and deal with them, making the child feel more comfortable with a person from his/her own culture. By providing information to both sides, the cultural mediator makes the hesitations, language obstacles, differences of values, fears and expectations clearer and more comprehensible.

The social history form included information on the family in the country of origin, the family's background and on close relatives and friends, on the life conditions before separation and departure from home and, after that, on the current situation of the child: on the health, culture, education and maturity, on the frame of mind, on the availability of current support systems, on desires and plans for the future. Based on these elements, the staff would formulate recommendations on the appropriate solution and support for the unaccompanied migrant child at this stage.

The social history form, the recommendation and the family assessment were examined and appreciated to determine the best interest based on well-established and acknowledged procedures as described above. Moreover and most importantly, by following this procedure, the Prosecutor was assisted in reaching a final decision on the child's best interest based on reliable information gathered by qualified staff in direct contact with the child and his close environment.

#### *Working with unaccompanied migrant children*

Working with unaccompanied migrant children is a challenging endeavour. In cases of children showing signs of depression and/or detachment, stable contact and the prospect of a positive outcome of the return and reintegration procedure, gradually made them get more involved and triggered their interest, in particular when they started planning their return through the reintegration assistance. Their motivation and emotional involvement progressively increased when they realised that their plans would become tangible / become a reality/materialize.

In these situations/circumstances, staff should remain stable and disregard personal views; the views of the child are of paramount importance at all stages; the involved staff should focus its efforts to listening and understanding the child. However, staff members, and especially those involved in decision making, should be able to consider other factors affecting the situation and the attitude of the child. For instance, the minor might not be fully aware of the dangers that he/she might be faced with as a child travelling irregularly, as he/she is driven to travel further in other European countries by feelings of fulfilling the expectations of the family members back in the home country, the expectations of the community which participated in funding his/her journey, the misinformation received from smugglers or other compatriots.

Social workers and psychologists working with unaccompanied children should enable child participation and empowerment by providing accurate information and by allowing the child to express his/her views and explore core beliefs and ideas. The child's maturity and experiences need to be taken into consideration so as to assist him/her in reaching a sustainable decision on his/her future. In certain/some cases, a child's negative approach was overcome by acknowledging the right of the child to choose and giving time to accept the offered help/assistance. Unaccompanied children are often not familiar with the concept of being supported by foreigners/outside and are not accustomed to accepting it.

#### *During the reintegration phase*

Reintegration counsellors made best use of visual material to make the minors better understand the value of reintegration. The use of photos from already implemented plans helped children gain trust in the service, enabled them to identify the opportunities made available, and contributed to guide children in projecting and planning their return based on based on personal inspirations, skills and available resources in their countries of origin.

While drafting reintegration plans with the children, the counsellors often faced with plans where the child had little experience and knowledge about the activity he/she wished to implement back home. However, the counsellors always took care of showing the children respect and listened to their proposals. There were cases where the child was supported regardless of his/her experience, yet it was compensated by the positive attitude and enthusiasm, the ability to form a plan and

the willingness to implement action on the part of the child. Ultimately, those cases proved to be successful.

A factor of success of the reintegration plans was to explain clearly and, according to children's experiences and cultural background, the necessity to gather the documents and financial invoices both in the host country and in the country of origin. Explaining and guiding minors on the move and not accustomed to following procedures was both a challenge and a determining factor for the successful implementation of the return and reintegration plans.

Designing and implementing a return and reintegration programme proved to be much more challenging than initially expected but rewarding at the end. Out of 282 unaccompanied children who originally expressed interest to participate in the programme, only 59 children returned and fully benefited from the Programme's actions, while 41 UAMs from Egypt received only PARA support. However it should be highlighted that unaccompanied migrant children are a diverse group and, in this regard, it was crucial to combine personalized approach and individual solutions to each case. Return to the country of origin and support to reintegrate in the local community was a durable solution that should always be available and well governed to enable the returned children benefitting from it to enjoy care, support and a safe environment amongst family and friends. In situations where the unaccompanied child did not receive assistance due to factors described in this report, it was important to provide alternative supporting networks and the possibility of sustainable return and/or reintegration at a later stage in case certain (pre)conditions are met or altered.

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