

Unaccompanied and separated foreign minors in Italy: between vulnerabilities of the system and agency pathways

Menores extranjeros no acompañados y separados en Italia: vulnerabilidades del sistema y recorridos de agencia

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Abstract

In Italy, the presence of unaccompanied and separated migrant minors continues to be a target group for social care with specific characteristics and needs that are not always adequately addressed, especially when they reach the legal age of majority. Political restrictions make it difficult to achieve an adequate level of autonomy and significantly compromise social inclusion, increasing the risk of turning them into mere executors of an unwanted project in which they are excluded as actors in their own future. The results of an analysis of the state of the art and the fieldwork carried out through the SAAMA project in Agrigento (Sicily), during the years 2019-2022, are presented. The objective is, from an intersectional approach, to rethink the tools implemented in reception services to build new social management options through simultaneous and convergent attention between the meso perspective and the micro perspective.

Keywords: unaccompanied migrant minors, international migration, intersectionality, community work.

Resumen

En Italia, la presencia de menores migrantes no acompañados y separados sigue siendo un grupo destinatario de atención social con características y necesidades específicas a las que no siempre se consigue dar respuestas adecuadas, especialmente cuando alcanzan la mayoría de edad. Las restricciones políticas dificultan

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la consecución de un nivel adecuado de autonomía y comprometen notablemente la inclusión social, incrementando el riesgo de convertirse en meros ejecutores de un proyecto no deseado en el que se les excluye como actores de su propio futuro. Se presentan los resultados de un análisis del estado de la cuestión y del trabajo de campo realizado a través del proyecto SAAMA en Agrigento (Sicilia), durante los años 2019-2022. El objetivo es, desde un enfoque interseccional, repensar las herramientas implementadas en los servicios de acogida para construir nuevas opciones de gestión social mediante una atención simultánea y convergente entre la perspectiva meso y la perspectiva micro.

Palabras clave: menores migrantes no acompañados, migraciones internacionales, interseccionalidad, trabajo de comunidad.

Introduction

Unaccompanied and separated foreign children and adolescents (MAENAS)¹ in international migration have become numerically increasingly consistent. They represent 42% of the 82.4 million people forced to flee (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021), although there are significant difficulties in obtaining complete and consistent data among the different countries of the European Union (EU). This fact increases the need to structure social interventions from protection systems capable of ensuring the effective guardianship of their rights from arrival.

Considered as “migrant subjects” with their own characteristics and subject to specific interventions (Suárez Navaz & Jiménez Álvarez, 2011), they often find themselves within a reception system that does not always prove to be as hospitable as might be inferred from the principles of current regulations (Argento, 2023).

The difficulties in responding to such a complex social fact, between protection and containment of migrations, together with the obstacles related to the psycho-socio-cultural characteristics of these young people, have created a great deficit of homogeneity in social interventions at the European and Italian levels. Italy, the first country of arrival of MAENAS within the EU, is also a transit country, since many of them are forced to travel to other European countries for various reasons.²

¹ Due to word limitations, MAENAS (Spanish acronym for *menores y adolescentes extranjeros no acompañados y separados*) will be used to refer to unaccompanied and separated foreign minors and adolescents, although the use of this type of terminology, as well as that of MENA (unaccompanied foreign minor; Spanish acronym for *menor extranjero no acompañado*), may lead to the invisibility of the humanity and diversity of these minors, since the use of acronyms can lead to reification, a lack of consideration that under these acronyms there are people in very diverse situations, and implies labeling and stereotyping that strips away possible affectivity and emotional implications. It is often used as an administrative label, as an analytical category, or as a simplification of a complex social fact whose protagonists are people. In the scientific and political literature, they are referred to as MENA, this reductionist way of naming often tends to be associated with negative, demeaning and criminal notions. The term *unaccompanied minor* is only used in Italy and is not shared in the European and international context. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) advocates the term *separated children*: children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and who are separated from both parents or from an adult responsible for their protection. This definition was created to also include and protect accompanied minors whose caregivers are not appropriate to assume their responsibility (Tomasi, 2020).

² According to 2022 entries, 70% of the children and youth arriving were unaccompanied or separated (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

There is a regulatory framework to welcome them, especially since Law 47/2017 of April 7, with protection measures for MAENAS.³ Nevertheless, this has not prevented numerous problems from persisting in the reception process because it is a system that, instead of supporting the autonomy of these MAENAS as protagonists of migration, minoritizes them (Agrela Romero, 2004) by not recognizing their specific characteristics as unaccompanied, which activates forms of real dependence that (re) produce a “system vulnerability” (Crepet, 2020).

Consequently, significant detrimental implications for their psychosocial well-being become particularly evident when they reach the age of majority, which turns them into so-called care leavers, that is, they are deprived of the forms of protection they received as minors. From being *welcome* and “unnoticed”, they become *uncomfortable* and expellable, target subjects of socio-political and cultural (pre)occupation due to the (supposed) charges of *otherness* and *dangerousness* associated with them (Gaspari & Agrela-Romero, 2022).

The strategies adopted by young migrants are manifold, ranging from passive acceptance of their new situation to total rejection of the system and Italy as a country. For most of them, this rupture translates into the decision to interrupt the path they undertook in the reception process, with all the negative consequences that this entails. All this is within the framework of a system that, despite its inefficiencies, has the tools and potential to benefit these young people.

This paper aims to reflect on the active role played by each actor involved in the Italian reception system (reception centers, volunteer tutors, education and training system, sports associations, volunteer associations, civil society or municipalities). Each participant can contribute to constructing a community defined as “emancipatory”, that is, a reception system capable of listening, recognizing different identities and giving a voice and power back to young migrants to make them autonomous and active protagonists of their migratory project. Hence, the key goal is to rethink the existing mechanisms to build new options for social management.

Based on the extensive experience of research and intervention involving MAENAS, this paper focuses on providing a summary of the issue and reflections on these young men in Italy through simultaneous and convergent attention between the meso perspective, characterized by the operationalization of the services (Bello, 2020; Salvatori & Terrón Caro, 2019), and the micro perspective, characterized by the life stories of the MAENAS.⁴ To this end, the regulations applied to these young people from their arrival on Italian shores until they come of age are presented in detail. The risk and protection factors they face on their way to autonomy and the search for belonging to the host community are analyzed.

³ Known as the Zampa Law because it takes its name from Senator Sandra Zampa (17G00062, Gazzeta Ufficiale. Serie Generale n.93 dated April 21, 2017). Effective as of May 6, 2017.

⁴ Fieldwork conducted through the SAAMA project (Italian acronym for Strategie di Accompagnamento all'Autonomia per Minori Accolti) in Agrigento (Sicily) 2019-2022.

Some characteristics to understand the presence of MAENAS in Italy

As a global social process, the migration of minors is leading several European countries to reinstate the issue of “unaccompanied minors” as a key topic for political agendas and action. It has also prompted many researchers to investigate the propensity of young people to migrate to understand the factors or reasons why they leave their countries of origin (Barn et al., 2020; Consoli, 2015; Jiménez & Vacchiano, 2011).

Since 2017,⁵ Italy has had the first European law that deals organically and specifically with the immigration of MAENAS. According to Article 2 of Law 47/2017, they are defined as:

[...] A minor who is not a citizen of Italy or of the European Union and who is for any reason in the territory of the State or who is otherwise subject to Italian jurisdiction without the assistance and representation of their parents or other adults legally responsible for them under the laws in force in the Italian legal system. (author’s translation)

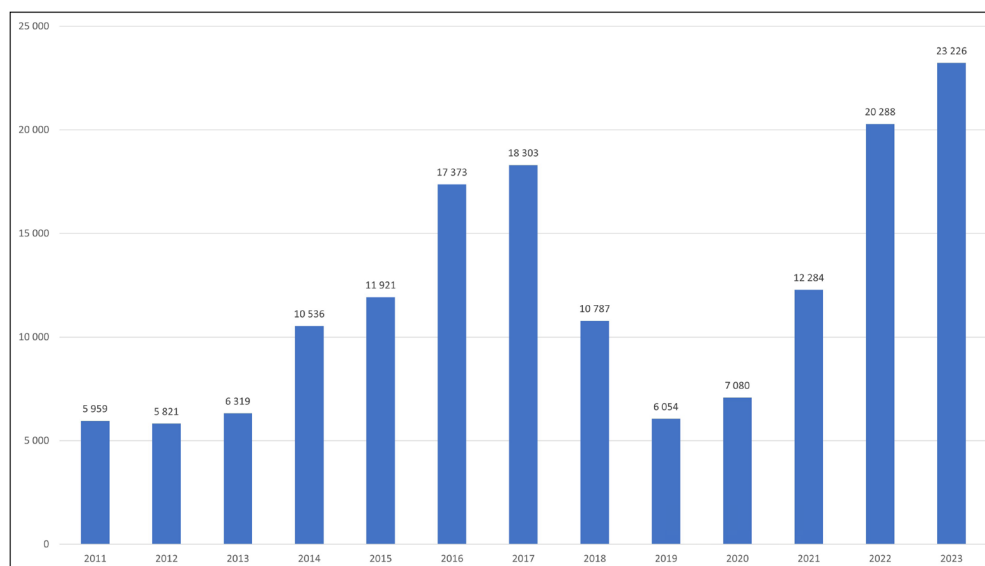
In recent years, due to national and international political events and following the pandemic emergency, there has been a variable trend showing how the peak of admissions 2016-2017 (absolute value 18 303) recorded a significant turnaround: in 2020, there were 7 080 MAENAS, -65.4% compared to 2017. Nonetheless, in 2021 there was a significant rise (absolute value 12 284), which increased in 2022 (absolute value 20 288) and in 2023 (absolute value 23 226) (see Figure 1).

As a consequence of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the data reflect the presence of Ukrainians, about 25% of the total number of MAENAS, which totaled 5 042 in 2022 and 4 131 in 2023. This analysis does not delve into the specific characteristics of this nationality, which differ from those of other minors.

After the Arab Spring (2011) and the Lampedusa massacre (2013), the movement of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe has consolidated its position as a priority issue in political discourse, which has intensified in recent years in the wake of anti-immigration ideologies and governments. Despite the structural nature of this migration, increasingly less cyclical, the reception system and international, national and local policies tend to crystallize an emergency-only scope, constantly confronting it in a problematic way (Attanasio, 2016). This coping mode, focused on policies with partisan interests, has discouraged the implementation of more functional reception strategies according to the needs of MAENAS without understanding the origin of the social problems they are going through.

⁵ That year, according to the Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies, a total of 18 303 unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy was reached.

Figure 1. Presence of unaccompanied foreign minors (children and young people) in Italy 2011-2023



Source: created by the authors based on data from the Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione (2024)

By nationality, they were from 63 countries in 2023. The majority came from the African continent, from 35 nationalities (69%, about 16 000 minors). Asia accounted for 8% of the total, with 1 950 minors from 13 countries. Those from Eastern Europe came from 11 countries (5 290 minors, 22.8% of the total). From the American continent, there were 24 minors from 24 countries. By nationality, at the end of 2023, minors from Egypt (4 667), Ukraine (4 131), Tunisia (2 438), Gambia (2 141), Guinea (1 925), Ivory Coast (1 261) and Albania (936) predominated, comprising 75.4% of the total. They were followed by minors from Pakistan (820), Malaysia (626), Burkina Fasso (468), Eritrea (453) and Afghanistan (404) (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2024, p. 13 et seq.).

Although in their absolute uniqueness, they present differences specific to their origins and the various migration routes, they mainly have in common the fact that during their journey they faced and experienced dangers, detention, violence, exploitation or abuse, especially in the widespread detention centers in Libya (Di Rosa et al., 2019).

Their stories describe different profiles of minors depending on the reasons for their migration choices. Giovannetti (2014) made a classification that, while not intended to be exhaustive given the plurality of their life projects and migration processes, offers a useful framework for understanding this current social phenomenon:

1. Asylum seekers, or those provided with temporary protection measures on humanitarian grounds, fleeing situations of war, conflict or persecution, mainly from countries such as Syria, Gambia and Somalia. A significant case is that of children fleeing Libya since 2011, or those from sub-Saharan countries with a high level of political instability and religious conflict due

to the escalation of long-standing local tensions, such as Nigeria and the spread of Islamic radicalism and related terrorism, for example, Al Shabaab in Somalia.

2. Those who migrate in search of new job prospects, as heads of households with possible claims for reunification, such as young people from Tunisia.
3. Those who are attracted to the Western lifestyle, strongly influenced by the virtual communication of social networks.
4. Those driven by social disintegration in the places of origin or belonging to contexts in which the peer group has been progressively reduced due to emigration; thus, migration is a “natural” life strategy.
5. Those exploited by international criminal groups and mafias as slave labor.
6. Those who arrive to join their parents or other family members but who do not meet the requirements to be able to initiate regular family reunification procedures.
7. Those who move through illegal organizations because of their need to find work are at risk of being recruited into illegal systems.

Law 47/2017 recognizes them as holders of rights regarding the protection of minors on an equal footing with those of Italian nationality. Additionally, Decree 142/2015 establishes that in applying foster care measures, the minor’s best interest takes precedence to ensure living conditions appropriate to their age concerning their protection, welfare and social development. Article 13 of this regulation, paragraph 2, introduces the new concept of “administrative continuation”, outlining the possibility for the Juvenile Court to order with a reasoned decree the entrustment to the social services of a new adult until the age of 21 in those cases where the minor has started a process of social integration and needs prolonged support to achieve autonomy. The purpose of the above is to ensure social protection for new adults without housing or work who have to drastically interrupt their studies or vocational training due to a lack of resources. Nevertheless, this reception measure is controversial because of its economic costs and the municipalities do not always provide, or are not always able to provide, resources to implement it.

Subsequently, Laws 132/2018⁶ and 176/2023⁷ maintained the principles enshrined in Law 47/2017 but restricted the provisions regarding the reception of minors on the requirements identified for a residence permit at the age of majority. Law 176/2023 extended the stay limit in first reception centers from 30 to 45 days for minors under 16 years of age and from 90 to 150 days for those over 16. In case of temporary unavailability of reception centers, the Prefect, in the case of those over 16, may

⁶ Law 132 (December 1, 2018). It converts into law, with amendments, Decree-Law 113 of October 4, 2018, establishing urgent provisions on international protection and immigration, public safety and measures for the functionality of the Ministry of the Interior and the organization and functioning of the National Agency for the Administration and Destination of Assets Seized and Confiscated from Organized Crime. It delegates powers to the Government on the reorganization of the functions and careers of the personnel of the Police and the Armed Forces (18G00161, Gazzetta Ufficiale, Serie Generale n281, December 3, 2018. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2018/12/03/18G00161/SG>)

⁷ Law 176 of December 1, 2023. It converts into law, with amendments, Decree-Law 133 of October 5, 2023, which contains urgent provisions on immigration and international protection, security policies and the functions of the Ministry of the Interior.

order their placement in adult centers. These changes have significantly impacted the legal status of MAENAS, jeopardizing their path toward stabilization and regularized status in Italy. Being outside state protection increases their vulnerabilities and social exclusion processes.

Systemic, institutional and social injustices

The Italian situation of MAENAS is paradoxical: *a)* they are protected by reception measures based on the priority of the best interests of the child, which guarantee living conditions appropriate to their age. However, *b)* at the substantial level, there are still many gaps in guaranteeing their rights, forcing them to face numerous challenges and critical problems, which increase especially in the transition to the age of majority.

Due to its diversity, the intersectional perspective (Gaspari & Agrela-Romero, 2022) helps to elaborate a new reading of this multidimensional social phenomenon for a better understanding of how the systemic, institutional and social injustices to which minors are subjected operate by considering and unraveling the multiple aspects that intersect in their experiences of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Mattsson, 2014). First, it is necessary to understand how the categories used to describe social reality are not homogeneous; they are full of nuances that may change their characterization over time.

The inequalities and oppressions that place minors at a disadvantage operate simultaneously. They are forms of discrimination intertwined with a multiplicity of discriminations based on different categories (such as being a foreigner, a minor, of a certain nationality, of a certain social class, with different phenotypical traits, with a different social-cultural-religious capital, or of a certain ethnicity). These forms interact with each other and must be analyzed and understood simultaneously to avoid perpetuating forms of discrimination and distorting possible effective solutions by being too simplistic (Creighton, 2013).

Specifically, in the very definition of MAENAS, three fundamental aspects can be identified: being minors, being foreigners and having arrived alone in a new context without any adult reference (Bargach & Jiménez-Álvarez, 2020). Although these aspects do not always constitute exclusion factors individually, they can become so in their interaction, especially when the transition to adulthood occurs. It is during the transition to the age of majority when the condition and meaning of a minor changes radically; they become “ex-minors” and are no longer considered “unaccompanied” or deserving of accompaniment.

Once outside the protection system, they often find themselves without support or resources. This helplessness is even more evident in societies such as Italy’s, where welfare systems correspond to a “family-oriented” model, where the family is the central life support so that when the family is in the place of origin, homelessness is unquestionable. Precarious situations require accompaniment and social support, without which work or previous investments risk being useless.

In this transition phase, foreignness, coming of age and loneliness reinforce their perception as key to a social problem. The condition of foreigners prevails as a dominant category and source of various forms of exclusion. The possibility of having one type of residence permit recognized instead of another, or the waiting time to

be summoned to the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection⁸ to obtain the application result, often lasts several months or even years.

All this makes them become part of a register of exclusion and discrimination that reduces the life projects of young migrants to a few stereotypes, which activates a process of “invisibilization” and reduces their diverse and complex life stories to silence (Pescarmona et al., 2022). Consequently, their stories and voices run the risk of remaining unheard or of merely being considered to reproduce arguments as needy and vulnerable subjects or even as potentially dangerous subjects to be returned to their countries of origin.

The application of intersectional analysis makes it possible to develop more inclusive policies that address the needs of specific groups, as in this case, so that they are adequately represented in the policies and measures that affect them as migrants and also society as their host. It makes it possible to create spaces where young migrants are subjects of rights, also those related to speech, and that the context of arrival gives them back the possibility to redefine their own evolving identity, to adopt different positions, to question what is taken for granted and to seek new negotiations even concerning generalized representations.

It is also possible to encourage processes of reappropriation of their identity as young immigrants with their own competencies, skills and abilities to take dignified ownership of the words to define themselves and their prospects. For the receiving society, and especially those involved in the reception, this is very useful to rethink one’s own identity as something connected to multiple belongings toward an “other us”. This requires the development of solidarity and awareness of the common experience of inequalities that unites the human race despite mutual differences (Mohanty, 2003/2012).

For those involved in the management of MAENAS migrations—such as public and private social operators—repositioning their course of action according to the features of intersectionality means promoting a process of empowerment (Biagioli, 2014) capable of giving a voice back to the MAENAS, that is, of acknowledging their points of view and their experiences to help social services distance themselves from the paternalistic roles established by the dominant Italian culture. In this way, it will be possible to contribute to the realization of a process of social justice and liberation from the different forms of inequality, and this will allow MAENAS to move from being silent subjects, often considered incapable of performing certain roles, to being resilient citizens and politically aware of their obligations.

Critical issues in the autonomy processes of those who have to leave the shelters

When these minors leave the shelters, they are usually between the ages of 16 (27.3%) and 17 (46%) (Direzione Generale dell’Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2024). They do not always have enough time to embark on a process of integration

⁸ These are administrative bodies in the prefectures where the requirements for the recognition of international protection or special protection of the applicant are checked, based on the applicant’s personal history and the reasons for leaving the country of citizenship or residence.

that will allow them a full transition toward autonomy. A person's autonomy involves a multiplicity of aspects, but without a doubt, the possibility of working, of having decent housing, of taking care of oneself, and of fully understanding and expressing oneself are among the main conditions for achieving independence and real integration.

The many critical challenges/problems faced by MAENAS increase as they transition to adulthood as care leavers. They are young people exempted from third-party care and are forced to leave the protection and guardianship track upon reaching the age of majority. Because of their status as ex-custodial young people, they are invisible among the invisible. They face the difficulties related to not having a family to support them, along with the complications of being regularized in a culturally unrecognized context, in the absence of social networks, and various complexities such as language difficulties, lack of recognition of prior competencies or lack of employment (Bargach, 2009, 2020).

Studies such as that of Bastianoni and Zullo (2012) show empirical evidence confirming the tasks and developmental challenges of migrants leaving care: they are without protection and called to overcome decisive integration tests for their future, such as language learning, school and work integration and even administrative and legal constraints and obstacles, all aggravated by the lack of adequate preparation for this stage (Clyton et al., 2019; Mordeglia et al., 2018). These tests do not always find effective prospects of realization so evidence of school failure, difficulty in learning Italian and inability to find a job are frequent.

In addition, there is often an excessive imbalance toward the painful experience of young people that makes them accustomed to speaking in an automated way about their past, while there is almost no space to consider their skills, competencies, desires and projects. As a result, the representation of the future tends to be presented as a passive adaptation, far from the desired perspectives and self-realization.

The main result of this dysfunctional system is that these minors voluntarily decide to interrupt their care process to go to cities in northern Italy or other European countries. In this way, their trail is lost. Since the activation of the Minors Information System (SIM, Italian acronym for Sistema Informativo Minori), introduced by Law 47/2017, it is possible to have certain and not estimated data on these minors. The removal is registered in the SIM until minors reach the age of majority or until they are located again. As of December 31, 2023, out of a total of 23 226 MAENAS present, 10 100 have been reported as voluntarily removed (43.48% of the total) (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2024).

From the monitoring of experiences of reception projects (Mordeglia et al., 2018), it is observed that other expulsion factors are also involved in this choice, which feeds the minors' mistrust towards the Italian system, as well as the lack of legal information on the procedures to regularize their legal status, the slowness in the procedures to access documents, the general conditions of the facilities, or the limited access to medical care (Oxfam & Greek Council for Refugees, n. d.).

Another difficult issue concerns the institution of "administrative prosecution". Law 47/2017, in Article 13, provides that if the minor has started a process of social integration and needs prolonged support to achieve autonomy, the Juvenile Court may order, at the request of the social services, by reasoned decree, foster care with social services, no later than 21 years of age. Nevertheless, this concept of autonomy is difficult to define and is determined mainly through the social worker's assessment, in which procedure the minor is not always involved.

In general, the concept of autonomy is erroneously linked to emancipation in terms of housing and work and the regularity of legal status. These aspects, although crucial, run the risk of being reductive and leading to erroneous assessments. Sometimes, administrative continuity is an essential tool to give the young migrant the opportunity to remain in the training and socialization courses undertaken, but since it is the Court that issues the final ruling, it does not always grant authorization. The condition of young people leaving the reception system is therefore characterized by great uncertainty, which often forces them to adapt their life trajectories to the conditions largely imposed on them by the reception system.

Another obstacle concerns the role of the volunteer guardian, as it is critical to ensure the minor's access to rights, as well as to promote their welfare and favor a process of inclusion that considers their capabilities and aspirations. Law 47/2017 is inspired by previous local experiences in cities such as Palermo and Bari, where there was a trial project involving the contribution of volunteer private citizens for the protection of these children and young people, which strengthened this role (Lunardini, 2020).

This law established a registry in the Regional Guarantors for Adolescence and Childhood offices and made training mandatory for these volunteers, including their suitability for this role in the regional registry.

Nevertheless, over the years, the good intentions of this institution have been largely unfulfilled due to the difficulties in finding people willing to be guardians. Consequently, many of the MAENAS are not under guardianship, it is not possible to create an exclusive relationship between minor and guardian, and in some situations—such as in Sicily—this role is carried out by lawyers or managers of the shelters. A basic principle is thus violated, namely the third position of the guardian concerning the adults with whom the minors interact in their daily lives.

Moreover, voluntary guardianship differs from regional and local realities, both in quantitative terms and in operational methods, which further worsens the situation. Even in cases where the relationship between the minor and the guardian had a positive connotation, this link is interrupted with the age of majority at the end of the foster care process as a minor, with numerous negative consequences for MAENAS. Several studies showed how minors' personal and friendship resources, the quality of the care and the relationship with professionals are crucial to resilience and the antidote to fear and hopelessness (Argento, 2019; Carlson et al., 2012; Van Breda, 2018).

Actors or executors of life projects?

Minors themselves experience solo migration as an act that marks full entry into adulthood: traveling alone, facing decisions and dangers, taking care of oneself, or going through traumatizing experiences. Travel as a rite of passage (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] and Médecins Du Monde, 2018) marks a boundary between a before and an after in their development. The decision to migrate and the journey are linked by the plane of conscience and responsibility toward the family or community.

Previous studies (De Graeve & Bex, 2016; Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017) analyzed how MAENAS were being reduced to a status without responsibilities and as individuals without political voice (Crawley, 2011). In extreme cases, they saw their freedom of

expression violated in detention by being held on arrival, as well as in their imprisonment in cells with restricted possibilities for communication and with no understanding of the reason for their detention (Connolly, 2015).

The Italian reception system tends to confine them to the margins of society, often without any legal and social recognition. These conditions nullify the efforts of the planning process undertaken with great effort both by those who receive them (services, institutions, operators) and by those who are received (Salinaro, 2021). The adoption of not very complex and inadequate approaches due to their simplicity of analysis tend to underestimate forms of weakness closely related to post-migration risk factors associated with the condition of passivity that characterizes many reception experiences (Priebe et al., 2016), which generates in MAENAS a “system vulnerability” (Crepet, 2020) with significant consequences on their psychosocial well-being. Among legal and social service providers they are considered an “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986).

An adolescent’s desire for independence, along with the forced autonomy necessary to survive conflict and flight, conflicts with the situation of dependency upon arrival. As a result, many young migrants with an administrative measure of continuation voluntarily discontinue the process before age 21. The perception that they are being abandoned at this age is widespread, extending the threshold of the critical transition to adulthood and exit from the reception system. Behind these choices, there is often a lack of trust in the foster care institutions with which they have had contact. Before speaking of a category of vulnerable subjects, it would be necessary to recognize to what extent and in what way the reception system precipitates their vulnerability.

There are many organizational, economic and ideological difficulties among the professionals of the reception services related to the confusion that prevents them from thinking of themselves as active protagonists of the reception, accompaniment and care. Thus, ethical dilemmas arise regarding how to recognize the MAENAS as protagonists and not as recipients of ready-made interventions. A foster care system must guarantee a response to their real needs, help them to mediate between personal needs and the family mandate, and make the best possible use of their own resources and those available to them to achieve an adequate level of autonomy.

Conversely, in Italy, there is a system that destabilizes the minor to the point of creating an “identity earthquake”. Upon arrival, the child’s condition is that of a minor to be protected: in their first encounter with the Italian State, they are involved in a *process of infantilization* insofar as the organizational methods envisaged tend toward an excess of protection far removed from the perspective of autonomy. Minors are subjected to a system of rules that impose certain behaviors, which creates vulnerable and dependent subjects, much more so than at the time of their entry into the foster care system.

Campesi (2015) highlights how reception centers are a real trap where processes of multiplication of dependency are implemented, reinforcing a *psychological confinement* so that communities run the risk of interrupting the autonomization itineraries undertaken and favoring a “welfarist perspective”. Specifically, the MAENAS are treated as hospital patients or non-self-sufficient persons; they are encouraged to regress, and their primary needs are attended to without stimuli to go out and interact with the local community.

Consequently, there is a risk of interrupting the processes toward autonomy that the minors initiated and experienced in their country of origin when they decided to emigrate. This social management comes to an end at the age of 18, when they are in a situation of “exodus” from the system, deprived of the requirements to continue the

foster care process on their own, thus wasting the time, effort and resources invested up to that point.

Consoli et al. (2009) pointed out how the Italian reception system has nurtured the affirmation of highly welfarist operational processes, contributing to the spread of a distorted representation of MAENAS as assisted disadvantaged subjects. It tends to implement poorly institutionalized, excessively fragmented and unequal measures that frequently delegate to voluntary and private social initiatives. This generates a vicious circle, which Fratini et al. (2011) highlight as the risk of generating parasitic and passive attitudes toward the community and society, posing an unstable and threatening future.

The independence, courage and active role that characterizes minors when they embark on their migration journey to Italy diminishes as they enter the reception system because it is common for the forms of protection to result in the partial or total denial of their self-determination and autonomy. Most of them are between 16 and 17 years old, but the possibility of making autonomous decisions about their life project appears increasingly distant, aggravated by the fact that it happens in a shorter and shorter time (in some cases, it is only a few months).

Attempting to regain their self-determination, the price young migrants pay for this constant uncertainty translates into risky choices, such as interrupting the reception process through voluntary departure, with all the negative consequences and risks this entails, such as exposure to trafficking and exploitation, being returned to their countries of origin, or readmission at the borders.

For these reasons, stopping and reflecting on the concrete forms of reception and education is crucial. Reflection and permanent questioning must be reserved for the forms of assistance, also because of the need to build long-term solutions (Kanics et al., 2010). According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child:

The ultimate goal of regulating the situation of unaccompanied or separated children is to identify a sustainable solution that addresses all their protection needs, takes into account the views of the child and, where appropriate, leads to a resolution of the situation of the unaccompanied or separated child. (Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño, Observación General N°6, 2005, para. 79)

One of the most effective options is foster care, defined as a “supportive intervention characterized by stability, continuity, and planning to allow the minor to find in another family the educational, affective and material support that their own family is temporarily unable to give them” (Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni Italiani & Cittalia, 2012, p. 160). It is a tool with great potential, but is still a very uncommon procedure in Italy; it went from 3% in 2020 to 1% in 2023, largely because they are adolescents close to adulthood who are not considered appropriate candidates for foster care.

Autonomy as a requirement for inclusion

The concept of autonomy, understood as more than a mere ability to manage a household, find a job or take care of daily tasks, is the expression of freedom acquired through the internalization of security and the awareness of being able to act in the world, transform it, and manage it, perceiving oneself as an acting and competent subject (Bracalenti & Saglietti, 2011).

Accordingly, attention is paid to the risk and protective factors associated with the MAENAS experience. It is in the foster care setting where the resources that minors possess, as well as their own and institutional capacities to adapt to the new context, must be diagnosed. The adaptation process can be considered as how risk and protective factors are harmonized to allow individuals to adapt sufficiently well to their environment (Cicchetti, 2008; Garmezy, 1993), adjusting the relationship between the person and their life context.

Microsystem protective factors include those in the sphere of subjectivity and the child's immediate environment, such as: good levels of self-efficacy, agency and self-esteem; good capacity to process life changes and one's emotions; good coping skills and good level of resilience; migration as a choice (autonomy of choice or shared migratory mandate); knowledge of the Italian language and number of languages known; and quality of friendship networks of co-nationals and other nationalities, including the presence of Italian friendships and the presence of parents and good relational level.

Regarding the mesosocial dimension, protective factors are represented by social relationships and support systems, both organized and informal, specific to this group of minors. The former include social, educational and health services, whose interventions aim to interrupt or mitigate the negative chain of risk factors to which the individual is exposed, and the activation of support networks. The importance of these services as resilience factors is accompanied by an equivalent responsibility that the reduction of public resources and the bureaucratization of the services tend to offload onto the individual operator.

The macro-social system includes social, political, economic and cultural trends and phenomena on a national and international scale (simplified document regularization policies, cultural plurality and integration prospects, and presence of European funding). The underlying assumption is that each factor, whether protective or risk factors, is related to the others, and this interaction modifies the behavior of those involved (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). A functional combination of protective factors is undoubtedly adequate to meet their needs.

Social integration (Di Rosa, 2022) more properly recalls cultural aspects, identity, social participation processes, the ability to establish relationships and manage them autonomously and, finally, to build non-rigid identities in a perspective of cultural mediation, based on the cultural references of the communities to which they belong (Catarci & Rocchi, 2017). Aspects such as education and socioeconomic mobility, access to housing and basic services and the ability to orient oneself in the territory should also be included.

In the experiences of minors, the protective factors that contribute to preventing conditions of vulnerability are represented by elements such as educational success, the presence of reference figures, the ability to reconstruct and rework one's own

history, a good level of self-esteem, being able to cultivate dreams and passions, or having power over one's own future (Devenney, 2017; Pandolfi, 2015).

While it is true that they cannot change their past, they can be supported to act on their present and especially on their future through an individualized reception characterized by the consolidation of protective factors. Accompanying itineraries toward autonomy should be enabled in the regular *modus operandi* as additional itineraries to those offered by the reception projects. The objective of these measures must be to support minors in their departure from the context of arrival by personalizing interventions and activating a reference network to which the young person can refer.

Toward an emancipatory community

Offering channels of accompaniment for the autonomy of these minors cannot be done without redefining the sense of belonging to the host community (Sampson & Gifford, 2010): taking care of the contexts in which migrant adolescents live, in terms of time and spaces for sharing, fostering new social ties, and guaranteeing all of them the same possibilities of choice. The lack of a sense of belonging to a context can trigger dynamics of passivity and lack of responsibility.

First, it is essential to foster a sense of belonging to a place and community by constructing social networks that provide greater stability and the necessary support to overcome difficult times. When there is an impediment for these adolescents to access the spaces and resources of society effectively, there is a denial of recognition of their adolescence.

Going through phases such as adolescence must be functional to settle down, to build a secure base and to access life opportunities. Often, the stigmatization suffered by these minors has immediate effects. They are represented as marginal subjects, with consequences especially in their life planning: society and the institutions that care for them raise young adults who do not feel they belong to it.

“Without proximity, without listening, there is no community” (Byung-Chul, 2021, p. 53). There is a need to focus on the need to leave room for the freedom to be oneself. At the core of the relationship with professionals and the community is the question of their recognition as unique and singular persons with particular needs that cannot be standardized. To do this, a person must be seen and heard as an individual by the community and understood according to their constructive self-perception within an environment where all people are equally valued and their contributions are appreciated and accepted (Fraser, 2000).

The community is called to exercise individual and collective responsibility by making its members' identities visible. It is built when its members intervene with their personal, generational, professional and institutional features to implement projects of growth and change in which there is global and reciprocal involvement and empowerment.

As such, the issue of recognizing minors as rights holders by professionals is essential. Otherwise, when MAENAS are represented as an impersonal group, they are denied full access to participation in the community. The questioning of standardized practices and the search for strategies that better meet their needs is therefore a complex challenge for those responsible for their education and inclusion in the host

society and in the formal and informal contexts where these young people face new existential challenges.

For these reasons, intervention “outside” the foster care system is highly effective in creating a community where the public, private and third sectors cooperate, achieving real inclusion in the employment, housing and sociocultural spheres. A community is created by enabling close and familiar ties between center staff, tutors, support or foster families, friends or employers, or other adults who assume the role of points of reference (Di Rosa, 2024).

The Italian reception system has a network designed for this purpose at the formal level, but it lacks effectiveness and efficiency at the operational level. In the professional daily experience, stable forms of coordination and comparison are often lacking, preventing minors from experiencing foster care as a plurality of contexts and from perceiving each phase or action as part of a unitary process (Argento, 2019). Redefining the reception system in terms of “educating community” means eliminating the idea that the responsibility for the healthy growth of these young people is the exclusive prerogative of institutional actors (prefectures, reception centers, councilors), as well as encouraging the participation of the entire community to take charge of the future of these young people. Operational measures that can be effective include (Argento, 2023):

1. The creation of a network of reception companies, called upon to play an active role in the training and integration of minors.
2. The activation of learning and socialization experiences involving local partners.
3. The dissemination of the social dossier that allows the community and the children to build future projects in a shared and coherent manner.
4. The construction of a new narrative based on the lives, experiences and projects of the MAENAS.

Activating the community is the way to mediate between the user’s needs, the services’ resources and the opportunities that can be activated in the territory. Community work means precisely building networks, finding common meanings and nurturing a sense of identity that, while safeguarding the history and roots of the territory, knows how to welcome innovation by producing the necessary change to prepare a shared citizenship.

It is not enough to work only on minors; it is necessary to create favorable conditions for inclusion by changing the roles of those representing the different places at the community level. The intervention must be oriented to promoting a welcoming *culture*, which identifies spaces and collaborations with recognized interlocutors or subjects in the various communities or immigrant groups.

Implementing territorial policies—especially in fragmented contexts—that promote the enhancement of social capital and encourage aggregation, exchange and the role of social intervention together with the multiple existing actors means activating social support networks around this group, both for their psychosocial well-being and for access to greater employment opportunities (Mulvaney-Day et al., 2007), and

creating inclusion itineraries that relationally connect the various subjects with the local community resources that could respond to the multiple needs of the MAENAS. A network between the various services allows a more comprehensive approach to the different needs of the person (Catarci & Rocchi, 2017).

The construction of a sense of community depends on the responses migrants receive from the context: if a discriminatory and unwelcoming attitude prevails, the risk of being unable to activate in a resilient direction increases. The activation of a direct relation with the territory is essential (Kohli & Mather, 2003; Lawrence, 1992) to foster processes of self-sufficiency, the search for ways to regenerate the lost sense of belonging and to be responsible for one's own life. For this purpose, the experience of solidarity, understood as a commitment to the community, can effectively contribute to the process of recognition of the capabilities and identities of minors ("Il benessere dei minori," 2018) and, therefore, of their self-esteem. All this would make it possible to solidify the desire to settle new bonds to create a sense of belonging from which to imagine a future.

Constructing an emancipatory educational community means proposing an open welcome that values each singularity and prepares the MAENAS to be active community members. A community is emancipatory if it succeeds in spreading the practice of reflective decentralization combined with the practice of reasonableness. Reflective decentralization implies a constant exercise of reflection on the implicit dimensions of one's beliefs, capable of generating greater tolerance and understanding. On the other hand, the practice of reasonableness refers to the habit of bringing to light the underlying reasons for one's actions and beliefs.

These aspects are essential for developing attitudes of respect for diversity and fostering a continuous negotiation of meanings. A community is emancipatory if it manages, at the same time, to consider the future consequences of the individual's choices concerning others and is solidified in the capacity to aspire to a common future in a perspective of common well-being.

Conclusions

In working with MAENAS, the intersectional approach and community practices constitute a desirable positioning to better understand their specific features, far from distorted representations and categories and stereotyped and excluding representations. This positioning implies the person's centrality with their characteristics, potentialities and freedom of action, which considers them not an emergency but a structural component of society and seeks to enhance their social capital. These effects are declined on young migrants regarding agency and empowerment and affect their capacities and the extraordinary generative potential of a confrontation with those directly involved.

With a view to integration, community work fosters the creation of an inclusive social fabric by promoting initiatives dedicated to the community rather than to individuals and linking people and groups to undertake common actions useful for tackling problems and conflicts and developing a sense of belonging and social well-being (Allegri, 2015; Twelvetrees, 2006).

It is crucial to abandon the myth of the goal, to focus on the road ahead, and to become active and responsible protagonists of their own life projects. For minors,

moreover, reaching an adequate level of autonomy means having the opportunity to reshape their own narrative, leaving behind the fatalistic dimension of their destiny, with respect to which they often feel powerless and forced to make decisions hetero-determined by the reception policy system or by their own migration mandate.

For the actors operating in the foster care system, this translates into understanding minors as an opportunity to contribute to the development of integration processes and, therefore, to influence social policies and create an intercultural society. There is a broad consensus that to curb the spread of risk factors of reception itineraries, the possible solution is not so much to regulate the creation of new institutions or new mechanisms to achieve significant changes but that social inclusion, in fact, is the result of innovative configurations that can emerge from social practices (Allegrì, 2015; Polizzi et al., 2013) and most of the time start from micro-experiments capable of generating the unprecedented. Generate alludes to the desires and the will to bring to the world something that has not been realized or that is conceived as unfeasible.

A community can be defined as such if it combines identity and otherness; equality and difference; memory, actuality and potential for the future; dialogue between people, nations and generations; and efficiency and solidarity. To achieve this, it must be guided by an ethic of responsibility, the implementation of agency and a prospective planning approach, that is, one that does not forget the present but always takes up the challenge of tomorrow. It is, therefore, necessary to reactivate vital energies, promote empowering actions, offer adequate spaces for speaking and listening, and recover and reinforce the idea of a strong community capable of supporting everyone—including young migrants—in their personal growth and their constant search for the common good. All this is subject to the difficulties arising from the new plans implemented by the Italian executive branch and the search for a “European alliance” on migration.

Reconsidering the relationship between the theoretical debates conducted by academia and the tools implemented in foster care services will benefit children, the communities where they settle and the shaping of State agendas and policies. Failure to do so will lead to its perpetuation as a public problem and not as a political opportunity.

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