

## Unaccompanied migrant minors in Europe and Mexico

### Unaccompanied migrant minors: a global phenomenon

Unaccompanied migrant children are an increasing global phenomenon. The United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child defines unaccompanied children or unaccompanied minors as “children, 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”.<sup>1</sup> Unaccompanied migrant children may have been separated from their families during their journeys, or they may have been delivered to smugglers by parents who dreamed of a better future for their children or believed that this was the only way for these children to survive. Unaccompanied migrant children may also try to reunite with their families in the country of destination. Some minors begin their travel on their own initiative, sometimes because they are orphans or because they are escaping abuse at home. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2015 98,400 asylum applications at global level were made by unaccompanied or separated children. Such a figure represents, says UNHCR, the highest number on record since it started collecting such data in 2006.<sup>2</sup> However, many unaccompanied migrant children are not registered as asylum seekers, are often undocumented and therefore fall outside of the care systems.

Left alone, unaccompanied migrant and refugee children are particularly exposed to psychological hardship and at risk of abuse, exploitation, being trafficked and even death. State action needs to take into consideration the particular vulnerability of unaccompanied minors, assist and protect them, according to the principles expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), especially the duty for every actor dealing with children to always act in respect of and guarantee the best interests of the child.<sup>3</sup> According to this principle, assessment and determination procedures should be established in order to ensure that the best interests of the child are respected and guaranteed in every action concerning children.<sup>4</sup> In particular, best interests determination procedures, on the basis of what is defined in the best interests assessment process, are meant to identify durable solutions for children



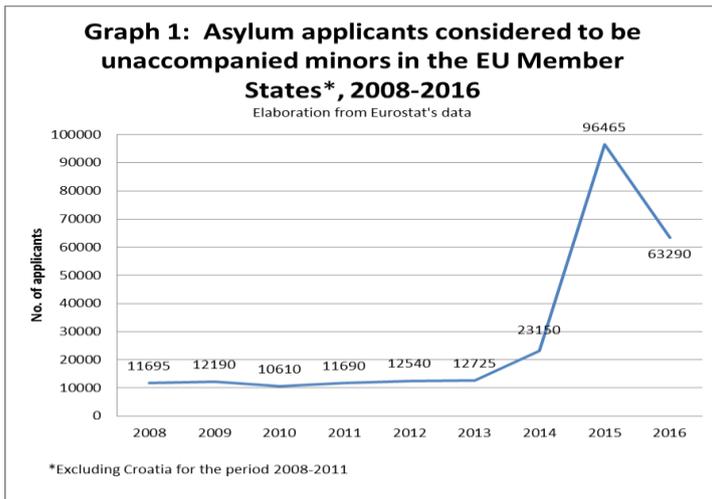
so as to ensure that “the unaccompanied child is able to develop into adulthood in an environment which will meet his/her needs and fulfil his/her rights as defined by the CRC, and will not put the child at risk of persecution or serious harm”.<sup>5</sup> Best interest determination can result for the unaccompanied migrant minor in the return and reintegration in the country of origin, in local integration or in resettlement in a third country. Whenever possible, family reunification is to be regarded as being in the best interests of the child, unless this would lead to the violation of his/her rights.

### Unaccompanied migrant minors in Europe and Mexico: a common issue

In the past few years, European countries have been confronted with a significant increase in the number of persons trying to move to Europe, sometimes in order to seek international protection. Among them, important numbers of unaccompanied children have also tried to reach Europe in order to escape persecution, conflict, violence and poverty, or to seek family reunification, and educational or economic opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

According to Eurostat’s data, the number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in European Union Member States (EU MS) in 2015 was more than 95,000. This represented a four-time increase compared with statistics from the

previous year. The number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Europe decreased in 2016 (63,300).<sup>7</sup> Last year, the top three countries for applications received from unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the EU were Germany, Italy and Austria. The majority of these unaccompanied minors were from Afghanistan (38%), Syria (19%), Iraq (7%) and Eritrea (5%). They were predominantly male adolescents and the majority of them were aged 16 to 17.<sup>8</sup>



Source data can be found [here](#).

Even though a high number of unaccompanied minors entering the EU sought asylum in one of the EU MS, not all of them did so and the total numbers of unaccompanied minors reaching the EU are likely to be higher than that. According to the European Migration Network (EMN), in 2013 at least 8,500 non-asylum seeking unaccompanied minors entered the territory of the EU.<sup>9</sup> Unaccompanied migrant minors not applying for asylum remain undetected, unless they are apprehended by public authorities.

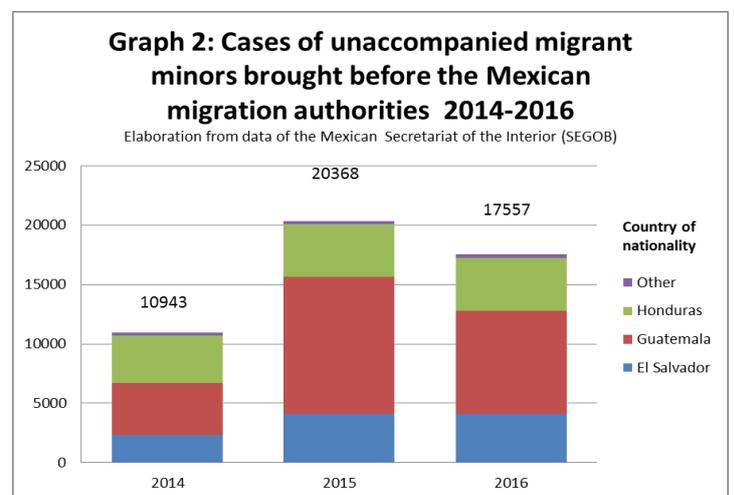
According to UNHCR, in 2016 the majority of refugees and migrants entering the EU did so through three primary routes: the Central Mediterranean (from North Africa to Italy), Eastern Mediterranean (from Turkey to Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus) and, to a lesser extent, Western Mediterranean (from North Africa to Spain) routes.<sup>10</sup> Among these flows, a significant number of unaccompanied minors were identified. In 2016, the Italian Ministry of Interior recorded 25,846 foreign unaccompanied minors arriving by boat to Italy, double the previous year's number.<sup>11</sup> At least 33,800 unaccompanied or separated children were reported to have entered the territories of Bulgaria, Greece and Italy in 2016.<sup>12</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been, in recent years, the countries of origin of significant migrant and refugee flows. Violence in society, endemic poverty and the search for better

opportunities have pushed an increasing number of people to leave these countries and emigrate to other Central American States, Mexico or the United States of America (US). In particular, increasing violence by criminal groups has been a common issue of recent times in the Northern Triangle of Central America, and has represented a key push factor for people to flee their home countries.<sup>13</sup> Unaccompanied minors have also been part of these population movements. They have usually been trying to reach the US or Mexico. The most common reasons why they emigrate are family reunification, better opportunities, violence in society and sometimes abuse at home.<sup>14</sup> Important efforts have been made by El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to foster development, improve security and promote the respect of human rights, as well as addressing issues such as irregular migration, trafficking in human beings, and reintegration of returnees and unaccompanied minors, for instance through the Northern Triangle Alliance for Prosperity initiative.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, flows of migrants and unaccompanied minors from these countries appear to persist.

The number of apprehensions of unaccompanied foreign children by the US Border Patrol at the south-west border with Mexico saw a dramatic peak in the fiscal year 2014,<sup>16</sup> when the number of apprehensions was almost twice that of the fiscal year 2013.<sup>17</sup> Among other factors, strengthened efforts by the Mexican authorities on the southern borders briefly made these flows decrease in 2015.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, they increased again in 2016,<sup>19</sup> with migrants taking more dangerous routes in order to avoid detection by Mexican migration authorities.

Unaccompanied migrant minors represent a key issue for Mexico, which has become, in recent years, a transit and destination country for a rising number of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.



Source data can be found [here](#).

In 2016, 17,557 cases of unaccompanied minors were brought before the Mexican migration authorities. Almost the entirety of these cases concerned children originating from the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America, and mainly aged 12 to 17.<sup>20</sup> In April 2015, UNHCR estimated that 48.6% of unaccompanied or separated children from the Northern Triangle crossing Mexican borders were potentially in need of international protection.<sup>21</sup> To date, only a minority of unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle applies for asylum in Mexico. Nonetheless, in recent years Mexican authorities have been confronted with a steady increase in the number of asylum applications made by unaccompanied children. Indeed, in 2016 only 242 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum, but applications made by unaccompanied minors in Mexico have seen an almost four-fold increase between 2013 and 2016.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Mexico has traditionally been the country of origin of migration flows towards the US, where unaccompanied minors are too common a phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

In both Europe and Mexico, migrant unaccompanied minors represent a significant phenomenon which needs to be addressed in order to protect and assist the most vulnerable, and ensure the respect of human rights. Contexts are of course different: many European States are countries of transit and/or destination of significant flows of unaccompanied migrant minors, while Mexico has not only traditionally been a transit country and recently become more and more the destination of unaccompanied migrant children, but also represents the country of origin of a significant number of unaccompanied minors trying to reach the US. Furthermore, a high number of unaccompanied minors in Europe apply for asylum, whereas in Mexico only few of them do so, even though the phenomenon of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum has been significantly increasing in the recent years. Moreover, in Mexico, return is frequently determined as the most durable solution for unaccompanied migrant minors apprehended by Mexican authorities, while in Europe return is rarely considered a suitable solution. Nevertheless, as countries of transit and destination of an increasing number of unaccompanied minors, Mexico and EU MS are facing more and more similar challenges in relation to reception, protection and assistance, and finding durable solutions for these children. Therefore, due to the similarity of challenges encountered, exchange of experiences between Mexico and European countries has become increasingly meaningful.

## The MIEUX approach

Knowledge exchange is at the core of Migration EU

eXpertise (MIEUX). A demand-driven, capacity building facility, MIEUX provides peer-to-peer expertise and tailor-made technical assistance by deploying migration experts, primarily from EU MS administrations. Since 2009, more than 120 countries across the world have benefited from MIEUX capacity building activities delivered by more than 300 migration experts.

In order to deliver effective, short-term and tailor-made assistance on how to best address the issue of unaccompanied minors to requesting countries, MIEUX can employ the following types of intervention:

- **Information, practices and know-how sharing** thanks to training sessions or meetings and seminars focused on the exchange of lessons learnt between authorities responsible for the issue of unaccompanied minors;
- **Advisory support** through fact-finding missions, elaboration/evaluation of national policies and strategies focusing on unaccompanied minors, as well as the development of manuals and handbooks;
- **Partnerships** via study visits to EU MS, regional events, and fostering dialogue and cooperation between authorities dealing with unaccompanied minors in EU MS and partner countries;
- **Networking** among migration experts and practitioners working at national, regional and local levels.

## Highlight: MIEUX's Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico



Timeframe: May 2016-ongoing

Requesting Authority: Mexican National Institute of

## Migration (INM)

**Objective:** Strengthening the efforts of Mexican authorities on the identification, monitoring and adequate protection of migrating unaccompanied minors entering into Mexico, by exchange of good practices with EU MS on assistance and protection of unaccompanied minor migrants.

### Context

The Mexican legislative and regulative framework is very advanced when it comes to unaccompanied minors. The 2011 Migration Law<sup>24</sup> and its regulation<sup>25</sup> establish the main provisions regarding the governance of migration in Mexico, as well as addressing the issue of migrant unaccompanied minors entering the territory of Mexico. In addition, the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents<sup>26</sup> and its regulation<sup>27</sup> set the key provisions in relation to the protection of children and also unaccompanied minors. According to this legislative framework, the stakeholders mentioned below are relevant in Mexico in relation to identification, assistance, protection and finding durable solutions for unaccompanied minors.

The INM is in charge of the implementation of the Migration Law and immigration law enforcement. As such, the INM is one of the agencies working at border crossing points and is frequently involved in the apprehension of unaccompanied minor migrants crossing into Mexico. In addition, within the INM, Child Protection Officers (OPIs) are responsible for ensuring protection of the rights and addressing the needs of migrant children who have come to the attention of migrant authorities. In the case of irregular entries detected by the latter, the migrant is transferred to a migration station managed by the INM in which he/she is hosted pending the end of the administrative procedure that will decide on the case and may lead to the return to the country of origin.

Nevertheless, when it comes to unaccompanied minors, the INM is obliged to immediately channel the child to the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF) which has the task to assist and host them in facilities adapted to their specific needs. Unaccompanied minors are meant to be hosted in migration stations only for the time needed to organise the transfer to a DIF facility. Nevertheless, the DIF does not currently dispose of enough space to host all unaccompanied minors apprehended by Mexican authorities.

In accordance with the Regulation of the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents, a Federal

Attorney's Office for the Protection of Children and Adolescents has also been recently established under the DIF.<sup>28</sup> The Federal Attorney's Office, and not immigration authorities, is in charge of assessing and determining a child's best interests. Such an arrangement has the objective of ensuring a thorough procedure for each case, fully protecting children's rights.

If the child applies for asylum, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR), the agency in charge of carrying out refugee status determination, comes into play. Furthermore, a specific body under the Secretariat of the Interior, the National System for the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA) has recently been created to foster inter-agency cooperation and coordination on the issue of unaccompanied minors.

On the fourth anniversary of the 2011 Migration Law, the INM requested MIEUX assistance in order to strengthen the capacities of Mexican authorities dealing with unaccompanied minors. Indeed, confronted with unprecedented flows of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, facing the challenge of putting into effect new legislative and regulative measures and improving inter-institutional coordination, Mexican authorities were interested in exchanging good practices with EU MS and conceiving new ideas on how to better assist and protect unaccompanied migrant children.

*“Exchange of experiences has been key in identifying the particular needs for adequate protection of unaccompanied children, thus guaranteeing their rights through the regulatory framework...”*

Alejandro Austria de la Vega  
INM, Mexico

Focal point for the MIEUX Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico



## Approach

In line with its peer-to-peer approach, experts from, Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden have been deployed by MIEUX in order to support Mexican authorities in their capacity building efforts, and to foster exchange of good practices on the issue of unaccompanied migrant minors between Mexico and EU countries. The expertise of the latter has been and will be used in order to carry out the following activities:

**Activity 1: Consultative bilateral meetings with key government stakeholders and an interactive coordinating session involving the main Mexican institutions dealing with migrant issues** in order to explore, define and identify the needs of key stakeholders involved in migration management and addressing the issue of unaccompanied minors. Through this activity, assessment and determination of the best interests of children were identified as key issues on which capacity building and exchange of good practices between Mexican authorities and EU MS experts might be extremely useful. Indeed, EU countries have significant experience in addressing the issue of unaccompanied children and have developed systems to ensure their effective identification, assistance and protection, and search for durable solutions. In addition, unaccompanied children have been the focus of action at EU level, for instance through the “Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014)”<sup>29</sup> or also the recent communication on “Protection of children in migration”.<sup>30</sup>

**Activity 2: Seminars on best interests assessment of unaccompanied migrant children** which aimed at gathering key stakeholders involved in the protection of unaccompanied children and at increasing cooperation and coordination at different levels. The seminars were also used to exchange good practices and discuss areas of improvement in the protection of unaccompanied migrant children between experts from EU MS, Mexican actors from the DIF, COMAR and INM, and representatives of embassies and consulates of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

**Activity 3: Regional workshop on assistance and protection of unaccompanied migrant minors** gathered together representatives from the following in order to exchange on good practices and how to conceive a unified regional response to assist and protect unaccompanied minors: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, the US and EU MS experts, as well as major UN agencies dealing with the issue of unaccompanied minors such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations



International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

**Activity 4: Handbook on Working with Unaccompanied Minors.** This was developed thanks to Dutch expertise, with the handbook having the objective of proposing to Mexican stakeholders some key suggestions on the basis of consolidated EU practices on how to best address the issue of unaccompanied minors in the Mexican context, also in accordance with international standards. The handbook focuses on key issues such as inter-agency cooperation, child best interests assessment and determination, as well as return and monitoring.

**Activity 5 (to be implemented): Seminar on EU best practices in sustainable return and post-assistance reintegration of unaccompanied minor migrants, as well as presentation of the handbook.** The seminar will have both the objective of presenting good practices in EU countries with regards to sustainable return and reintegration of unaccompanied migrant minors in their country of origin, and presenting the suggestions proposed in the Handbook on Working with Unaccompanied Minors. The seminar will involve all the relevant Mexican institutions and agencies dealing with the issue of unaccompanied minors.

*“...what I really like about MIEUX is the approach that we can all learn from each other and share experiences, and that it is not only about us going there and telling them what to do. It is rather a process of learning from the different systems and looking at good practices and how these can be applied in the different contexts.”*

Mikaela Hagan  
Save the Children, Sweden  
Expert for the MIEUX Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico

## Outcomes

Thanks to all these elements, the MIEUX Action implemented in Mexico has been able to produce the following outcomes so far:

- Enhancement of capacities of Mexican authorities on child best interest assessment and determination procedures. In particular, INM local offices in the whole of Mexico could participate via videoconference in the second activity, and more than 250 people could be trained on best interest assessment and determination procedures.

*“...taking into account their quick responsiveness from the beginning, working with MIEUX has represented an excellent opportunity to reinforce communication between the various Mexican authorities involved in this issue. This has allowed greater rapprochement and trust, as well as integrated and coordinated work...”*

Alejandro Austria de la Vega  
INM, Mexico

Focal point for the MIEUX Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico

- Inter-agency coordination. Indeed, involving the key Mexican institutional stakeholders working on the issue of unaccompanied minors in the activities, as well as showcasing examples of how inter-agency coordination was working in some EU MS, the Action was able to foster active and coordinated interaction among those actors.
- Exchange of good practices and fostering partnerships among Mexican authorities and experts from EU MS. In line with the peer-to-peer approach of the MIEUX initiative, the Action was able to foster mutual transfer of knowledge and experiences on the best way to tackle the issue of unaccompanied minors in Mexico and Europe, and thus promote North-South partnerships. Experts from EU MS were indeed able to identify some good practices implemented in Mexico that could inspire the conception and implementation of good practices in their respective countries. In addition, exchange of good practices among experts of EU MS participating in the Action and thus North-North partnership were also results of the activities. Furthermore, gathering together Mexican authorities and representatives of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, South-South exchange was also

promoted. Knowledge acquired by officials trained during the second activity has also been used in consultancies provided by Mexican authorities to other Latin-American countries, further supporting South-South exchange and partnership.

- Cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination of unaccompanied migrant minors from the Northern Triangle. Indeed, during the Regional Workshop on Assistance and Protection of Migrant Unaccompanied Minors, representatives of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and the US were gathered in order to exchange on the best way to conceive a regional response to the issue of unaccompanied minors.
- Handbook on Working with Unaccompanied Minors which provides some key suggestions based on EU good practices on how to address the issue of unaccompanied minors. The handbook will be used to further support the capacity building of Mexican authorities in this field.

## Unaccompanied migrant minors: how to respond to and protect children in Europe and Mexico



If migration is too frequently associated with a condition of vulnerability, unaccompanied migrant minors represent a particular category at risk. The level of vulnerability to which they are exposed and the widespread diffusion of the phenomenon make the assistance and protection of unaccompanied migrant minors a global challenge from which Europe and Mexico are not exempt. On the one hand, important numbers of unaccompanied minors are crossing

the borders or landing on the shores of European countries, on the other hand high numbers of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are leaving their country of origin and crossing the border with Mexico, which has become more and more the destination country of unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle. Some common challenges are faced by EU MS and Mexico in identifying, receiving, protecting and finding durable solutions for these unaccompanied minors. According to MIEUX's experience, the following points can be considered of particular relevance in Europe and Mexico:

- **To ensure a right-based approach when creating new laws and policies which have an impact on children and especially unaccompanied migrant children.** To protect the rights of the children is a duty for States. The CRC, together with general comments and recommendations to the States, defines the obligations of the latter in order to protect the rights of children, and the measures to be implemented to respect such obligations. When creating new law and policies that might affect children, and especially unaccompanied minors, it is essential to ensure that they are in line with a child's rights-centred approach. For instance, the Mexican General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents, and its regulation, put the rights of the child first and establish strong guarantees for them.

*"I think there are some interesting developments in Mexico that Europe could actually benefit or learn from, and that is that Mexico, in law and policies, is really promoting children's rights."*

Mikaela Hagan  
Save the Children, Sweden  
Expert for the MIEUX Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico

- **To develop and implement a coherent national policy and legal framework on unaccompanied minors.** The issue of unaccompanied minors is a complex phenomenon and demands a focused, systematic and coordinated approach by national authorities in order to be effectively tackled. A coherent policy framework, such as a national strategy on migrant unaccompanied minors, can be an important tool in order to ensure a comprehensive and integrated response to this phenomenon, fully taking into account a child's needs and rights, and creating an institutional environment where all the different institutional stakeholders can effectively

coordinate and cooperate with each other in order to assist and protect the unaccompanied child. Italy has, for instance, recently approved a law that specifically addresses the issue of unaccompanied migrant minors.<sup>31</sup>

- **To establish and implement best interests assessment and determination procedures, as well as appropriate safeguards for unaccompanied migrant children.** Indeed, in accordance with the CRC, the best interests of children shall be taken into consideration in all legislative, administrative and judicial proceedings and decisions related to unaccompanied minors. In particular, procedures in line with international standards<sup>32</sup> shall be put in place in order to ensure that, in each individual case, the best interests of children are identified and guaranteed, from first contact with the minor to determination of a durable solution. Protection actors shall play a key role in these processes. The creation and implementation of solid best interests assessment and determination procedures, as well as of safeguards for them,<sup>33</sup> still represent key challenges for many States around the globe. Nevertheless, some significant elements in this sense can be found in Europe and Mexico. For instance, in the Mexican context a Federal Attorney's Office for the Protection of Children, and not immigration authorities, is in charge of the best interest assessment and determination for unaccompanied children. Solid guardianship systems, which are for instance present in the Netherlands and Sweden, can play a key role in ensuring that the best interests of the child are taken into account and protected.
- **To define coherent roles for institutional actors responsible for unaccompanied minors and to foster cooperation and coordination between them.** From detection to identification of durable solutions, a variety of stakeholders are in contact with unaccompanied minors such as immigration, child protection and enforcement actors. It is therefore essential to establish a clear and comprehensive framework of responsibilities for all these stakeholders. Furthermore, in order to ensure a unified approach to unaccompanied minors, exchange of information, cooperation and coordination among them shall be fostered. As mentioned above, a clear legislative and policy framework is essential in this sense. Specific

institutional arrangements and protocols of cooperation can also be key elements. The creation of a joint file can also ensure that all information is collected and made available to all the various actors involved. In addition, the establishment of a coordinating body, such as the one created in Mexico (SIPINNA), can be another effective solution to promote inter-institutional cooperation and coordination.

- **To ensure adequate reception conditions for unaccompanied migrant minors.** Since their apprehension by border authorities, unaccompanied minors need to be accommodated and cared for in conditions adapted to their specific needs and vulnerability as children. In every case, detention should be avoided as much as possible and, as expressed in the CRC, it must be used only as a “measure of last resort and only for the shortest appropriate period of time”.<sup>34</sup> In most European countries, alternatives to detention are ensured and specific facilities and/or foster families are used to host unaccompanied migrant children. Foster care is generally considered to better address the needs of the child.<sup>35</sup> In Mexico, the Regulation for the Law on the Rights of Children prohibits the detention of children in migration stations or in any other migration detention centres,<sup>36</sup> but practical and operational challenges sometimes make it necessary to use closed-door facilities. Nevertheless, pilot projects are currently being implemented in order to provide reception of unaccompanied minors through alternative solutions.<sup>37</sup>
- **To identify and respond to victims of trafficking and crime.** Left without care, unaccompanied children are particularly at risk of being trafficked. It is therefore essential to identify unaccompanied minors who are victims or potential victims of trafficking and provide specialised assistance and protection to them. Specialist knowledge and skills are required for this. Trained guardians and personnel dealing with unaccompanied children have a major role to play. The development of specific tools, such as indicators for the identification of victims, can be essential in ensuring that cases of trafficking are detected. The existence of efficient national referral mechanisms can also be key in order to coordinate inter-institutional action, and ensure identification of and support to unaccompanied minor victims or potential victims

of trafficking. In Europe, many countries have developed such mechanisms. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a national referral mechanism has been established in order to identify and protect actual and potential victims of trafficking, among them unaccompanied children.<sup>38</sup> In addition, at European level, an EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator fosters cooperation and coordination among EU countries and relevant stakeholders on this issue.<sup>39</sup>

- **To link child protection concerns, and immigration and protection procedures.** Unaccompanied children represent a particularly vulnerable category. This vulnerability, and the specific needs and rights of the child, should be taken into account in immigration and asylum procedures. The best interests of the child should therefore be protected at every stage of these procedures. Ideally, child protection procedures, and immigration and asylum procedures, should be streamlined in one process where the principle of the best interests of the child sits at the core and protection actors are involved. In Mexico, OPIs within the INM ensure that children’s rights and needs are always taken into account when migrant authorities deal with them. In addition, a MIEUX action on Asylum and Integration is being currently implemented in Mexico in cooperation with the Secretariat of the Interior and the INM. This Action also focuses on how to take into account the needs and rights of children in asylum and international protection procedures.<sup>40</sup>
- **To establish appropriate mechanisms for the integration of unaccompanied migrant minors in the host country.** Indeed, local integration can be identified as a durable solution in the best interests of children. When this is the case, it is key that services should be in place in order to support such integration. Access to education and vocational training, which should be guaranteed to every unaccompanied and separated child and adolescent irrespective of his/her status,<sup>41</sup> represents an essential tool in order to foster the effective integration of children in the context in which they live, and supports their entry into the local labour market. Furthermore, actions focusing on a long-term perspective, and accompanying children in the transition into adulthood when they turn 18, are essential if integration is considered the most

suitable solution for unaccompanied minors. As an example, in the United Kingdom a personal adviser is assigned to look after children/care leavers from the age of 16. The personal adviser must coordinate the drafting of a pathway plan in cooperation with the person concerned. For unaccompanied minors, the pathway plan covers employment, accommodation, education and health, as well as other potential needs arising from their immigration status, such as the possibility that an extension of the leave to remain will be refused.<sup>42</sup>

- **To monitor the return and reintegration of unaccompanied migrant minors in the country of origin.** The return of a child to his/her country of origin should be implemented if considered as a durable solution in accordance with his/her best interests. Monitoring return represents a key tool in order to know what happens to a child once he/she is back in his/her country of origin, and to ensure that the return and reintegration process promotes the well-being and integral development of the child. Despite its importance, monitoring of return is generally lacking. Nevertheless, some good practices can also be identified. For instance, in Europe the HIT Foundation (the Netherlands), in partnership with Micado Migration (Germany), Nidos and the University of Groningen (the Netherlands), implemented a Monitoring of Returned Minors (MRM) project that aimed at contributing to the more sustainable and safer return of minors to their country of origin, and developed a monitoring model for the return of minors on the basis of best interests of the child criteria.<sup>43</sup>
- **To strengthen cross-border cooperation.** Indeed, unaccompanied migrant children represent a cross-border phenomenon which, in order to be addressed, requires cross-border cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination. For instance, in order to carry out family tracing, cooperation with authorities in the country of origin might be needed. In the same direction, every initiative implemented by the host country that aims at returning the child and reintegrating him/her in the country of origin, always in respect of the rights of the child, cannot be successful without effective coordination with authorities in the country of origin. Cross-border cooperation, especially with countries of origin, represents an important issue for both Europe and Mexico. In this sense, the Regional Workshop

implemented in the context of the MIEUX Action on unaccompanied minors in Mexico stressed the importance of going beyond national boundaries and of creating a common regional approach in order to efficiently address the phenomenon of migrant unaccompanied minors. Gathering together representatives from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and the US, the workshop resulted in an increased understanding of the phenomenon, and in the exchange of practices and tools implemented in the different national contexts, as well as in the identification of steps to be taken, also in the field of trans-border cooperation, thus contributing to the definition of a coordinated approach to the issue of unaccompanied migrant minors in the region.

- **To participate in and foster exchange of good practices among practitioners working with unaccompanied migrant minors.** Indeed, good practices are implemented around the globe on receiving, protecting and finding durable solutions for unaccompanied migrant minors. Peer-to-peer exchange can represent a powerful tool in order to address these challenges through learning from others' experience and supporting the generation of innovative practices in different national contexts. Fostering peer-to-peer exchange, promoting partnerships and facilitating networking among experts and practitioners in the field of migration are at the core of MIEUX's approach. Such features are of key importance when it comes to the subject of unaccompanied migrant minors, which represents a common issue for Europe and Mexico, as well as for other countries around the globe, and on which good practices can be promoted, adapted and implemented in different national contexts through dialogue and mutual learning.

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