

Peer to peer support for volunteer guardians for UASC

Documentation of the experimental phase conducted in Catania and Palermo between June and October 2019

Introduction

In Italy, the reception and protection of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) is systematically regulated by Law 47/2017. Article 11 introduced the new voluntary guardianship system; a volunteer guardian is a person who becomes the legal representative of the UASC, a key point of reference who not only represents the child's interest, but also provides personal and emotional support and guidance.

Since the very beginning, UNICEF and UNHCR have been engaged in supporting the new voluntary guardianship system in collaboration with local authorities and the National Ombudsperson for Children and Adolescents. Guardians need both technical and emotional support in order to properly perform their role and ensure full protection and inclusion of UASC. To this end, an experimental phase of 'peer to peer support groups' has been conducted in collaboration with the Italian Refugee Council (CIR) and Penc Center, in order to facilitate the sharing between guardians of personal experiences, challenges and emotions, as well as information about procedures and practices related to the social inclusion of UASC.

Methodology and outcome

Generally speaking, peer to peer support is a process involving individuals with similar experiences, facing similar challenges, who benefit from sharing emotions, experiences and knowledge and from mutual support. The experimental phase was conducted in Catania and Palermo. In both cases participants, a total of 18 volunteer guardians, were selected according to specific criteria aimed at ensuring diversity and variety in profiles and skills.

In Catania, the 'peer to peer support groups' focused on facilitating the sharing of participants' experiences in supporting the social inclusion of UASC. Five sessions, facilitated by experts from CIR, with support from UNICEF and UNHCR (a psychotherapist and an educator, with the support of socio-legal experts) took place. One meeting was conducted by the guardians without facilitators, in the presence of an observer.

In Palermo, the 'peer to peer support groups' were conducted by Penc Center and involved two different groups of guardians that met four times. The sessions were facilitated by two ethnopsychologists, with the support of cultural mediators. The main objective was to stimulate and encourage the emergence of the deep relationship dynamics between guardians and UASC and to reflect on expectations, projections, emotional investments and limits.

In both cases, each meeting was divided into specific sessions and special attention was paid to the guardians' participation, aspects related to personal experiences and the circularity of communication.

Direct observation of group dynamics and feedback provided by guardians at the end of the experimental phase showed that the benefits deriving from the 'peer to peer support groups' are related to three different levels:

1. Individual level: the guardians believe their doubts on how to carry out their tasks more effectively were clarified during the sessions; they reached a better understanding of limits and resources available to them; and they also identified new strategies for stress management.

2. Membership level: the guardians realized they are not alone and that they can share their experiences with peers and formulate proposals and solutions together.

3. Relationship level: the guardians could explore and become more aware of the complex relationship existing between them and the children. They realized the importance of listening to what UASC have to say.

Recommendations

To national authorities responsible for child protection:

- Specify clearly, during the adoption of the implementing decrees of law 47/2017, the methods for assessing the best interests of the child, specifying the role of the volunteer guardians.
- Promote the involvement of the figure of the guardian by the other actors involved in the child protection system; facilitate sharing and mutual knowledge opportunities, also establishing guidelines on the role of guardians, social services and reception staff, in the determination of the best interest of the child.
- Promote a legislative reform that clearly identifies which institution must guarantee support to volunteer guardians in the exercise of their functions, including through the provision of adequate financial resources. This support should continue after the UASC turn 18, taking into consideration that the guardian is no longer his/her legal representative and the limits of confidentiality.

To the National Ombudsperson for Children and Adolescents:

- Promote the 'peer-to-peer support group' model at national level, also through the operational units within FAMI project "Monitoring of voluntary guardianship for UASCs in implementation of art. 11 l. 47/2017".
- Bring the issues and problems highlighted by the guardians, as well as the proposed solutions, to the attention of the appropriate institutions.
- Promote the sharing and dissemination of existing good practices regarding informal networks of volunteer guardians aimed at sharing experiences and solutions, which have already been partially identified by the aforementioned FAMI project.

To stakeholders involved in the local child protection system:

- Promote the 'peer to peer support groups' model in other contexts, given the low cost and the small number of professionals that is required.
- Complement existing support services for volunteer guardians with peer-to-peer support, facilitated by qualified professionals.
- Inform aspiring volunteer guardians of the possibility of peer to peer support during initial trainings.
- Promote legislation and data collection that take the transition to adulthood into account, in continuity with the results of the recent joint UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM publication, in collaboration with ISMU.