

unicef 

for every child

WHAT
DO YOU
THINK?



**THE VOICE OF MIGRANT AND
REFUGEE CHILDREN LIVING IN BELGIUM**

This report was drafted by Maud Dominicy. Thanks to Cédric Vallet for his careful reading and the final rewrite. Thanks to Greet De Ridder, Nathalie San Gil and Philippe Henon for their precious help in proofreading and preparing the layout for this report.

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The purpose of 'What Do You Think?' is to give a voice to vulnerable children. In 1999, UNICEF Belgium launched this initiative with the goal of making the voice of the most vulnerable children and young people (migrant and refugee children, children with a disability, sick children, children in psychiatric care, children in conflict with the law, children affected by poverty) heard at the highest level and to ensure that they can be heard by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the United Nations body that monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

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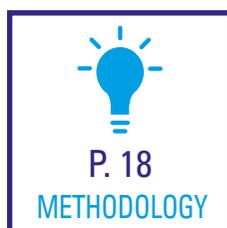
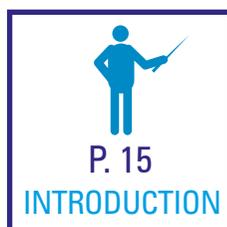
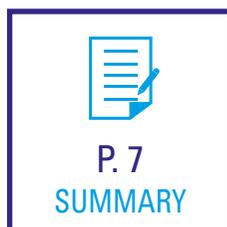
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"Everyone's voice can change people's views, life, the way of seeing things. You just have to allow a person the right to express themselves as you express yourself. That's all the problem is. You have to let people speak. Maybe we'll find we have things in common. There'll be things that I like and that you like. We'll get to know each other. That's how a friendship is created. That's what creates love."

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

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"I'm making my voice heard and I hope that someone can hear me and say: okay, we can do something. We can help you. This way, we can envisage the future. And I'll say it once more. And a thousand times more, I'll say: simply look at other people as human beings. You shouldn't say that I'm a Syrian girl. Or that I'm a refugee. Or that I'm a Shiite. Or a Sunni. I'm a human being. A human being. I have a heart. You have a heart. You have feelings. I have feelings. Please, look at me this way. I'm a human being"

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

PREFACE

THE VOICE OF MIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN LIVING IN BELGIUM

They talk about their experience and their rights in Belgium, in their country of origin and on the road.

Half of all refugees are children. There are some nine million of them worldwide who are living far from home, fleeing from conflicts, violence and poverty. The vast majority of refugees find – often precarious – shelter in Asia (50 %) and in Africa (32 %). Europe only participates in the reception of the planet's exiles to a very small extent: only 14 % of them have found refuge here.

Since 2015, the 'refugee crisis' is everywhere. This 'crisis' – which is a reception crisis above all – lies at the heart of political and media debates. But in this flood of information, some voices are practically inaudible: those of the most vulnerable among the vulnerable: migrant and refugee children.

And yet, many of them have settled in Belgium. However, they are rarely invited to talk about their life in exile or the hardships they have endured along a road full of pitfalls. There are all too few occasions to listen to what they have to say about what pushed them to leave or about their reception in Belgium.

But when they are given the opportunity, it is clear that they are driven by a deep desire to share their life experiences and their story. They want to talk and hope that we, as responsible adults, are listening to them, without patronizing them.

By expressing their opinion, these children are not always aware of the fact that they are also expressing their rights. Rights that should always be in the decision-makers' minds and that are written in black and white in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These children want to participate. To explain the road and its obstacles, the drastic nature of fleeing, so that we can better understand them. These children would like this participation to be meaningful; it should lead to something and influence the decisions directly concerning them, if only a little; the decisions relating to the rights of children in migration.

We must never forget that migrant and refugee children are children, first and foremost, regardless of their migratory status. Listening to their opinions and finding out about their experiences is not some whim nor a gift to these children. It is a fundamental

right from which they can benefit. Because children are best placed to describe their difficulties and find solutions to their problems. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives them the right to participate in the decisions concerning them.

This report offers the opportunity to read some of these children's accounts; accounts that were collected over a two-year period. You can read the unfiltered opinions, experiences, joys and sadness of these refugee children in Belgium. This is what makes it an exceptional text.

We would like to warmly thank all the children and young people who participated in UNICEF Belgium's 'What Do You Think?' project. This report would never have been published without them. We would also like to thank the educators, social workers and guardians who work alongside them every day and, without whom, this project would not have been possible. Through this report, we want to make the voices of migrant and refugee children living in Belgium heard. There is a lot we can learn from their stories.

These stories are sometimes violent and appalling. They are difficult to imagine and read. Sometimes, they are beyond comprehension. Many describe an extreme violence that no child should ever have to suffer. But as terrible as these stories may be, they are those of children and young people who survived. We didn't hear the voices of the thousands of children who died in their country or on the road. Their silence should also remind us of our responsibilities.



Olivier Marquet
Executive Director
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WARNINGS

This project involved the participation of 170 children. However, this study cannot be considered as representative of all the migrant and refugee children living in Belgium. This was not the objective of the 'What Do You Think?' project, which favours a qualitative approach, that will continue in time, over a quantitative approach.

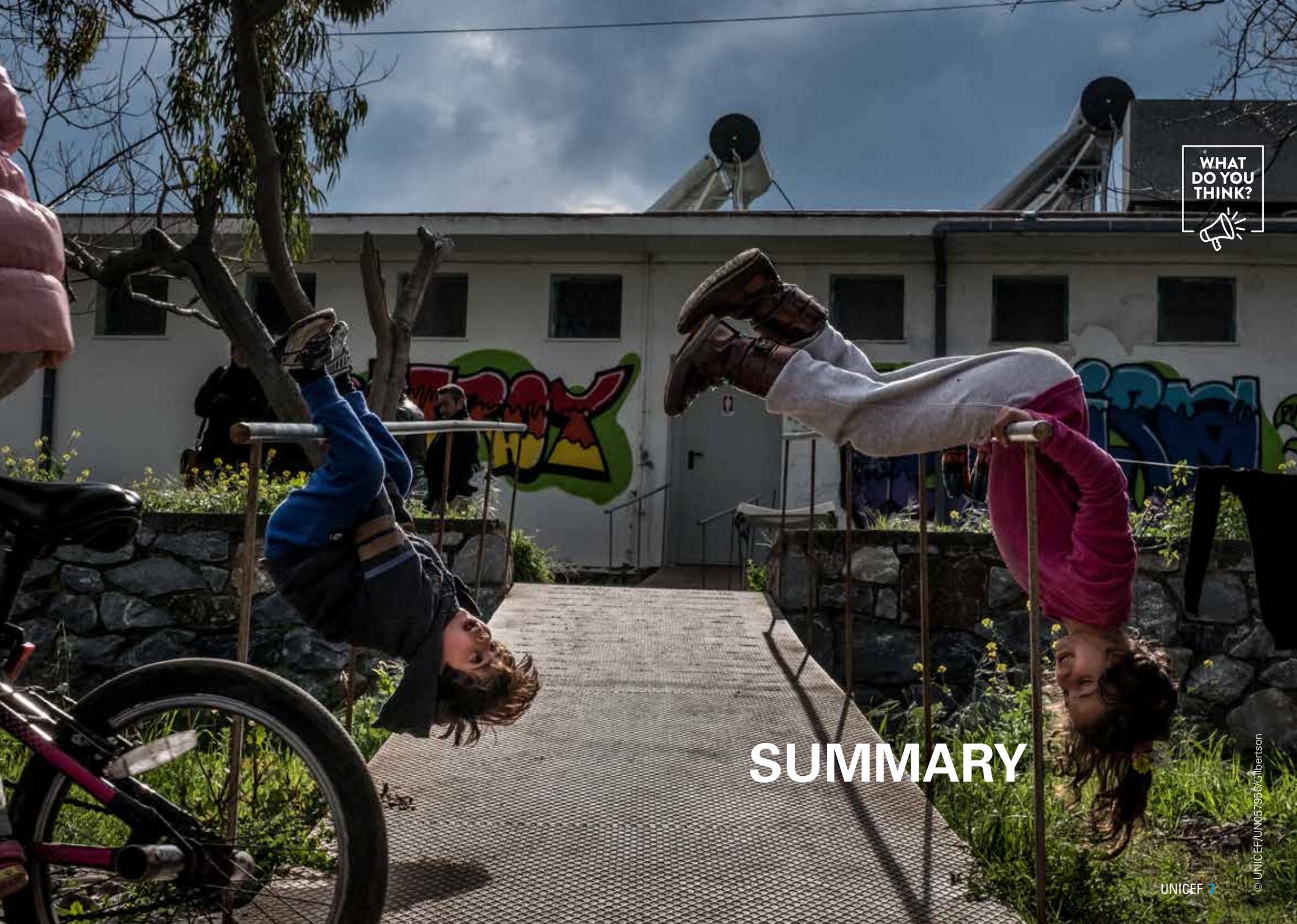
The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the children's points of view on the centres where they are currently living. Nearly all the children consulted had lived in several reception centres beforehand.

Considering the taking in charge of isolated teenage mothers, UNICEF Belgium wishes to stress the important work done in Belgium over the least ten years and thanks the authorities in charge for following up on certain recommendations that have been given by these young mothers.

DEFINITION

In this report, we refer to migrant and refugee children. This corresponds to the definition of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

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



WHAT
DO YOU
THINK?


SUMMARY

SUMMARY

“ Belgium or Syria, it wasn't a choice. There were problems in Syria, insecurity, war. There was a chance we could die. We had to flee, have a new life, a future.

Fleeing, crossing borders, on foot, by boat, by truck. Dealing with violence. Arriving in Belgium, seeking asylum, breathing, living in a reception centre, playing, but also enduring loneliness, lack of privacy, a never-ending procedure.

All these experiences were encountered by this 17-year-old Syrian girl, the mother of a young baby. She talks about her exile, her fears and her difficulties, just like the other 169 migrant and refugee children who speak in this report.

170 children. 36 nationalities. 66 girls. All these children give their account and describe their unique journey, their experiences, but also their dreams. These children, robbed of their carefree childhood all too soon, were forced to leave their country. Sometimes alone, sometimes with their family; in some cases, it is the exile that separated them from their family. They are so young and yet, they have already lived a thousand lives.

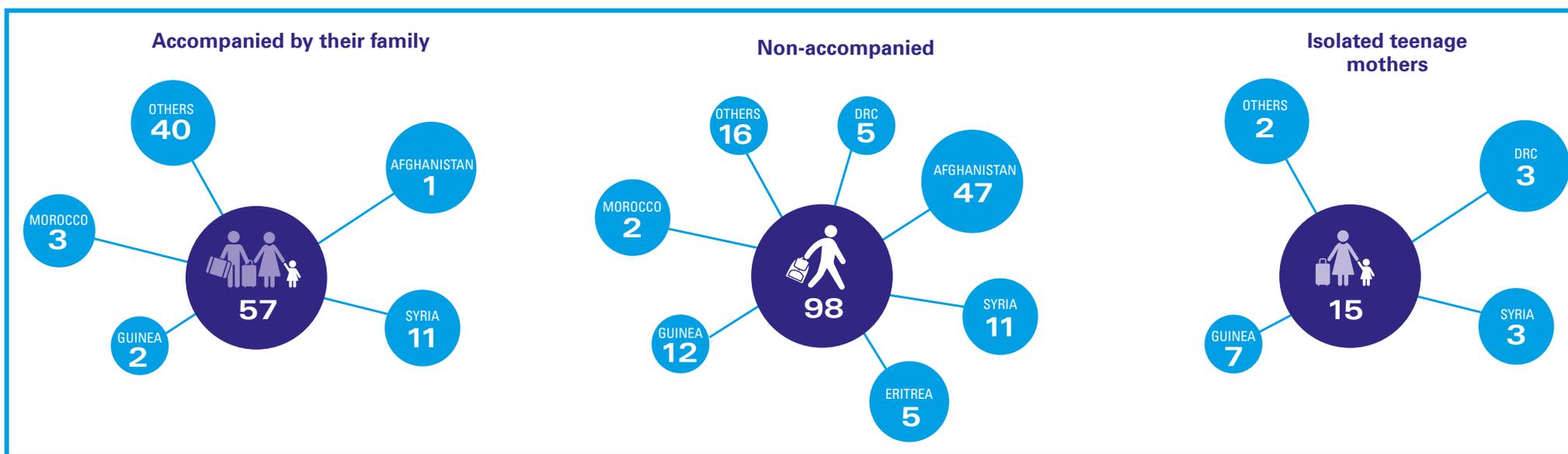
Today, these children are living in Belgium.

'What Do You Think?' is a participatory initiative. These children's words were collected over a two-year period by the UNICEF team in reception centres and schools. This report compiles their opinions and experiences in one document which focuses on what they have gone through, laid bare like a raw material.

These accounts don't simply have a documentary purpose. No. This report is a transmission belt between the words of these young people, eager to participate, and the decision-makers, who are sometimes far removed from these realities. These words have resulted in very serious and precise recommendations aimed at improving the rights of migrant and refugee children.

Recommendations that will be sent to high places, to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva and to political decision-makers in Belgium.

The profiles of these young refugees and migrants were extremely varied. The children who agreed to participate in the 'What Do You Think?' project were between eight and twenty years old. In rare cases, the words of these young adults were taken into account, if they had fled their country as unaccompanied minors.



Proportion girls/boys: 66 girls / 104 boys

Some of these children had made the journey together with their family (33.5 %), while others arrived alone in Belgium (57.6 %). One characteristic concerning some of the young girls in exile was that they were already mother to young children. Isolated teenage mothers represent 8.8 % of our sample group and are given particular attention.

Finally, we should note the broad range of nationalities of origin among these children that form a kaleidoscope of migration. Forty-eight were Afghan, 25 Syrian and 21 Guinean. Eight came from the Democratic Republic of DRC.

A common thread runs through all these stories: these children's migratory experience is recent. Some of them had only arrived in Belgium a few weeks before the interview. Others had been here for a few years. But the memory was very present; still very much alive and never far from the surface.

TOTAL

Afghanistan	48
Syria	25
Guinea	21
DRC	8
Eritrea	5
Morocco	5
Others	58
<hr/>	
Total	170

Nearly all the children and young people lived in reception centres for asylum seekers. Those who no longer lived in a centre had been through several of them. All the children and young people participated in the initiative through participatory tools.



The situation of uprooted children in the world and in Belgium



50 million
children are uprooted
in the world

396.740
children have
requested asylum in
Europe in 2016



of all migrants are
children

4.960
children have
requested asylum
in Belgium in 2016

Needs to be met

'What Do You Think?' is a sharp reminder of what should be obvious: children need to be protected and they need to be with their families. This is what children say and repeat.

This document divides the children's accounts into three main categories. Those concerning the country of origin, nostalgia and reasons for the exile.

Those describing the conditions of the flight, the migratory journey, the road.

And lastly, in a final part, the children describe their living conditions in their host society, here, in Belgium.

Here are a few salient features of these accounts:

In the countries of origin:

“ I don't like the violence of war. Children are always frightened to go to school because of the war.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

Many of the refugee children were exposed to war and insecurity. Others were faced with violence and discrimination; inequalities, poverty. In nearly every case, the exile is linked to a traumatic experience. The accounts of children who have fled war are chilling. They speak of death, forced exile, child labour, rape, forced labour, separation of families, hunger and ever-present fear. Many children also reveal discrimination linked to religion, ethnicity, gender or social status. Some girls tell of how they were circumcised or forced to marry. The majority of the children also speak of inequality and corruption. They address us directly because, in many countries, 'a poor child is worth nothing!'

On the road to exile:

“ Beware, the journey is very dangerous. I'd tell them to watch out for smugglers who are violent and take money’

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

On the road to exile, children are exposed to abuse and exploitation. They speak of the violence of the human smugglers and traffickers, who sometimes mistreated them or forced them to work. They mention the dead bodies they saw along the way. It was during this journey that some children were separated from their parents, brothers and sisters. Unaccompanied children suffer from not seeing their family. They have often travelled alone for many weeks or months, crossing countries like Libya where insecurity and racketeering reign. They issue the following warning: the road sometimes means death, rape, imprisonment and exploitation of children. Some even go so far as to discourage other children from attempting it.

Arrival in Belgium:

“ There are many advantages in Belgium. We're safe here, our future has been saved

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

The children can breathe after their ordeals. When they arrive in Belgium, the young exiles feel relieved. They live in safety here. Belgium is often associated with freedom and protection. But, above all, their haven is one of hope; the hope of a better life. The hope of building a future, going to school. The possibility of a future becomes real. Some value the fact that Belgium is a country of laws and rights that apply to ALL children- including girls and minority groups. And all of them emphasise their joy at having the right to an education. Some highlight access to healthcare and protection against mistreatment. But, above all, they allow themselves the right to dream.



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“ I can't concentrate on my studies; it's such a weight not knowing what will happen to me after the procedure.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, MOROCCO -

Of course, Belgium isn't all happiness, tranquility and protection for these young migrants. Some express their discomfort faced with the uncertainty of the procedures, which sometimes go on forever, preventing them from looking forward and undermining this secure foundation that is nonetheless so fragile. Will they be able to stay? Will they have to return to their country of origin? This emotional burden reinforces the trauma linked to exile and what they experienced in their country of origin. For the unaccompanied children who were interviewed, it is clearly the never-ending nature of the procedure that destabilises them. It often prevents them from concentrating on the present and envisaging the future.

But the lack of prospects regarding the possibilities of staying in Belgium is not the only difficulty these young people encounter here. These refugee children highlight the lack of support from guardians or lawyers. They bemoan the interventions of interpreters, which are too limited or ill-intentioned. And in the reception centres, children would like more help and to be given better information, right from the beginning, so they can better understand what game they are playing.

The majority of the children participating in 'What Do You Think?' were shunted from one reception centre to another. They feel that these changes aren't helpful at all. On the contrary, they fragment their efforts to integrate. But what all these young people unanimously criticise is the large reception centres, which aren't suitable for receiving children. They would all like it if Belgium were to favour care in small structures or host families. Children accompanied by their family who have spent many years in a centre express their preference for reception alternatives outside centres, in a house or in a flat.



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The majority of these young people find this a shame. They also regret their isolation from the host society. For a start, access to the Internet in the centres is limited, or non-existent, which isolates them socially. Secondly, many children suffer from the lack of contact with 'Belgian' children. They would like to play with them, meet them and talk with them in order to better integrate. Education and leisure activities are important for these children and these young people because it brings them stability and hope for the future.

Children like studying and going to school. They are enthusiastic and want to learn French and Dutch, and take part in activities or sports. However, outside the reception centres, it is often impossible for these children to practice a cultural or sports activity.

In our report, there is a special focus on the accounts of isolated teenage mothers. They are particularly insecure as they are subject to a range of vulnerabilities: they are minors, alone, young mothers, with no family and far from their country of origin.

Life in the large reception centres isn't suitable for these young mothers. This type of reception causes stress, which prevents them from looking after their baby as they would like to. They all ask for accommodation (protection) in small structures, in a host family or in a flat. They are looking for a calm and protective environment. The lack of information and support is also a problem for these mothers. They would like to be helped on a regular basis (also outside the ONE visits) so that they can confidently look after their child.

How can they deal with motherhood and school head on, with no real external aid? As the young mothers say: they need better school support so that they can combine their life as a mother and student. Some of them express very precise demands: help with homework in the evening, help to catch up during the holidays and closing the nursery at 6.00 p.m. All these mothers are concerned about the food given to the babies as well as set mealtimes. Many of them complain about the hypoallergenic milk that is given to the babies instead of normal milk, the water they have to buy to prepare the bottles, and the acute lack of means to acquire the essentials (water, food). They often have the impression of not being able to correctly fulfil their role as a mother and sometimes feel robbed of it.

Main recommendations

PROCEDURES THAT ARE TOO SLOW AND THE LACK OF PROTECTION HAVE DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES ON THE LIVES OF MIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN. THEY RECOMMEND TAKING ACTION IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

- 1 The procedure: have a procedure limited in time and benefit from better support from the guardian and the lawyer. Better information as soon as they arrive.
- 2 Family: be reunited with their family or have the possibility of remaining in contact with them. They would like to form links with people they can trust.
- 3 The reception centre: need for calm, rest, safety and support workers who listen. More small systems or host families for children who have arrived by themselves, alternatives for families.
- 4 School and leisure pursuits: more support for children who have dropped out of school and those who arrive at the end of the school year. The possibility of practising a sport or a leisure activity. Make Belgian friends.
- 5 Isolated teenage mothers: tailor-made support for young girls who are particularly vulnerable because they are mothers, teenagers, alone, with no family and in exile.

UNICEF BELGIUM RECOMMENDS BETTER PROTECTION FOR MIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN BY WORKING ON SEVERAL FRONTS:

- 1 Listening to what migrant and refugee children have to say.
- 2 Protecting migrant and refugee children, especially when they are unaccompanied, from exploitation and violence.
- 3 Ending the detention of children that seek to obtain refugee status or wish to migrate further, by putting in place several practical solutions of substitution.
- 4 Preserving the integrity of families, the best option to protect children and giving them a legal status.
- 5 Continuing the education of all migrant and refugee children; giving them access to public health and other quality services.
- 6 Requesting measures to combat the root causes of major migrations of refugees and migrants.
- 7 Combating xenophobia, discrimination and marginalisation in transit countries and countries of destination.





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REPORT
'WHAT
DO YOU
THINK?'

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

'What Do You Think?' allows refugee and migrant children to have their say. In 2016 and 2017, accounts were collected from 170 youngsters in Belgium. These children expressed their opinions. They were able to talk about their experiences and tell us what they have undergone. This report provides an account of their words.

Today, these children are living in peace. They are all taken care of in Belgium. But the reasons that pushed them to flee, to take to the road, have marked them forever. Because they have all been subjected to harsh ordeals, either in their country of origin or on the road to exile. Two thirds of them made the journey alone, in hostile and sometimes very violent contexts. Some of the unaccompanied young girls that we met are already mothers.



« What Do You Think ? »
allows migrant
and refugee children
to speak

All of these youngsters have endured physical or emotional suffering. They have been torn from their country, because of war, persecution or poverty. Their journey was paved with pain and brutality. The obstacles they had to overcome, at such a young age, are difficult to imagine, because their route was punctuated with death and extortion. These children emerge from it worn out, forever scarred, but also stronger. The majority of them display an unbelievable level of resilience.

Our discussions with these children weren't all pain. Far from it. These young refugees and migrants enjoyed sharing with us a certain nostalgia of the smells and tastes of their countries of origin, but also what they like in Belgium, beginning with safety.

But while these children may not feel threatened here, it isn't all a bed of roses. Some aspects of their reception here are not reassuring for them. Children spoke of their fears, their need to better define what is going to happen to them regarding their stay in Belgium. The unpredictability sometimes prevents them from looking forward and imagining a future, and dreaming.

Like the majority of children and young people, they want to live in safety, whether in Belgium or in their country of origin. They want to study and be protected. But these children haven't simply expressed their opinions; they have gone further than that and are suggesting recommendations to political decision-makers.

This report relates the experiences of these young people. It describes their fears, but also their dreams and their expectations. These accounts, which were gathered directly from young refugees and migrants, should guide the policies to implement children's rights. The right to live, the right to development, protection and- of course- participation. Because all children have the right to be heard in the procedures that concern them. And these few pages add an extra stone to this participatory building.

These children's opinions are aimed at the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and political decision-makers. The goal is clear: to improve the situation of vulnerable children. To offer them care adapted to their age and their condition. Civil society organisations can use this study to inform local, national and international authorities about the application of migrant and refugee children's rights.



NUMBER OF REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE WORLD AND IN BELGIUM



50 million

children are uprooted in the world



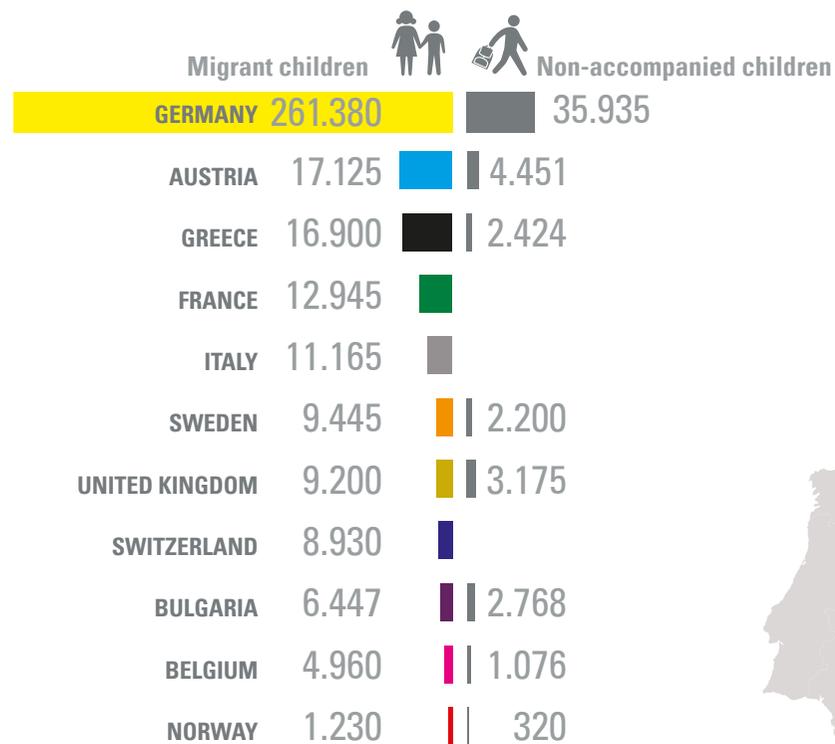
of all migrants are children



396.740

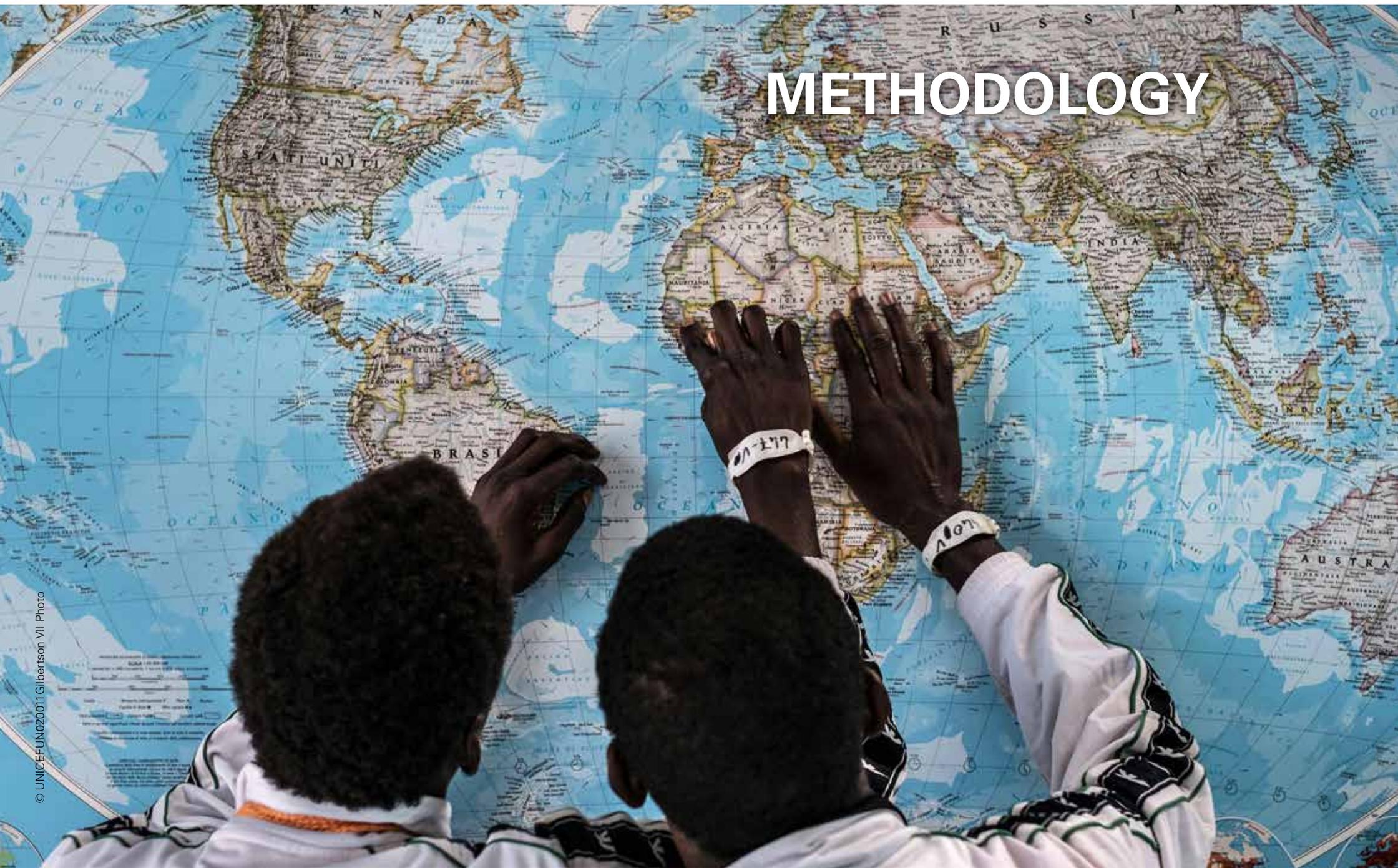
children have requested asylum in Europe in 2016

NUMBER OF CHILDREN REQUESTING ASYLUM IN EUROPE, INCLUDING NON-ACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN 2016



SOURCE : NUMBERS BASED ON THE AVAILABLE DATA EUROSTAT ON 3 MARCH 2017

METHODOLOGY



During the various meetings with the children, we explored a series of difficulties with them through questions: What were the children's experiences in their country of origin? What do they miss, what did they like, and what did they find difficult? What were their experiences on the road? What countries did they cross before reaching Belgium? What is their life like here? What do they like in their host country and what do they find difficult? What are their hopes and fears?

Getting children who have suffered trauma to participate, is a complex process that involves a tactful approach. The way the process is applied has a significant impact on the way the children will feel during and after the interviews. The children may not feel confident enough to express themselves. Some fear that their account might be used for other purposes. It is therefore essential to reassure them on these points. It is also necessary to be very clear with them: these accounts and recommendations won't have a direct impact on their own situation; because there is a very real risk that such a process may raise false expectations among the children consulted.

Once all this has been understood, a project such as this offers many opportunities, not only for the children themselves, but also for the reception centres, frontline organisations and the schools that welcome these migrant and refugee children.

The children who talk about their experience and come up with recommendations gain in self-confidence. The professionals who listen to them and support them can set up more sustainable participatory initiatives and adapt their practices to the children's needs.

The participatory methods used by UNICEF Belgium are based on a series of principles aimed at an ethical, respectful and sustainable participation of the children. During the 'What Do You Think?' process, we were attentive to several requirements:

Ethical

Considering the difficulties encountered by these refugee and migrant children during their lives, it is crucial to take precautions. First, the child has to be supported and reassured by excluding any risk of violence, exploitation, abuse or any other negative consequence that could be associated with them expressing themselves.

This might seem obvious to us, but it isn't to them. Bonds must be created with the trusted persons surrounding the children. The keyword is reassurance, in order to inspire confidence in them.

The children must of course be informed of their right to be protected. They must know where to go to ask for help. It was very quickly agreed that the children would participate anonymously. Speaking freely and confidently is an essential condition. In the final report, only the young person's gender (girl/boy), age and country of origin are mentioned. To guarantee the anonymity of the isolated teenage mothers, the age and country of origin of their baby was removed.

The children who were photographed or who took part in videos, signed a consent form with their guardian or parents. We removed any opinions from the accounts that could put them in danger, since they would be too easily recognisable.

Voluntary

The children's participation is a right, not an obligation. Therefore, it must be voluntary. They must certainly not be forced to participate or speak on all the subjects. The children have the right to remain silent on certain subjects which are too painful or too personal for them to talk about. They must be informed that they can stop participating at any moment.

Information

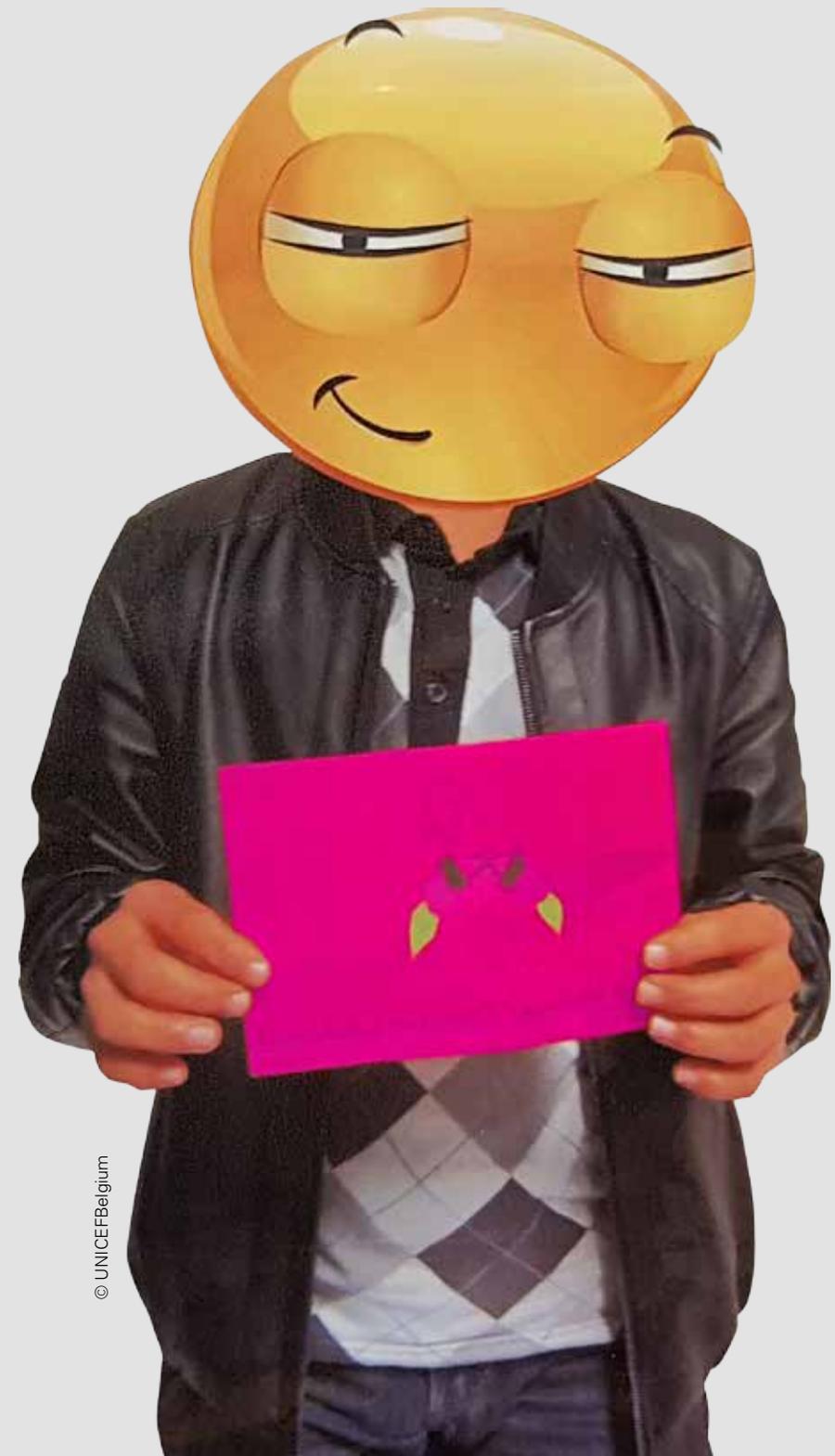
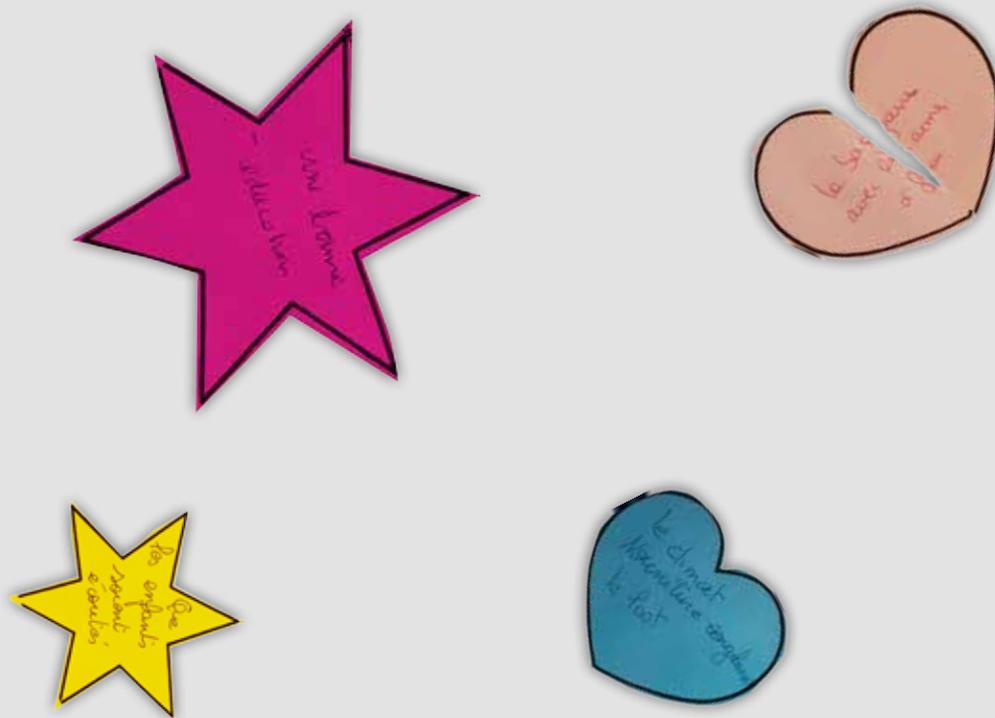
The children must know what they are getting themselves into. Hence, they must receive information on their right to express their opinion and on the fact that their opinion will be taken into account. They must be informed on how their participation will play out and of its implications. The children must be informed that their opinions and recommendations will not change their personal situation but will be submitted anonymously to the highest level (to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and political decision-makers in Belgium) in order to improve the situation of all migrant and refugee children.

Environment

To be able to gather the words of children who have been subject to particularly difficult experiences, it is crucial to create a protective environment that inspires trust in the children. They must feel at ease so that they can speak openly, remain silent if they do not want to speak, or even withdraw from the process. The use of interpreters is also important to create this environment for children who don't master the language of the host country.

Sustainability

The project was conducted over a two-year period (2016-2017), in reception centres for refugees or classes for new arrivals. We adapted to the capacities and rhythm of each centre while endeavouring to set up a sustainable process that lasts longer than just one day. Some of the centres were not able to consult the children themselves and asked external volunteers to lead the discussions. Others called on UNICEF staff. Other structures developed completely new methodologies to talk to the children and support them in expressing their experience. All this helped to strengthen the abilities of the professionals who work with these children as well as the children's ability to express themselves and be more resilient.



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Creative tools

Creative tools facilitate the exploration of the children's problems. They enable group and individual work so that all the children, regardless of their age and their knowledge of the language, can express themselves. These tools help the children to share their stories, their experiences and their opinions. They also provide a starting point for a group discussion.

'What Do You Think?' proposed several creative tools, such as making maps (body map, map of Belgium, exile map) so that the child could explain the environment in which it is living and provide ideas on how to improve this living environment.

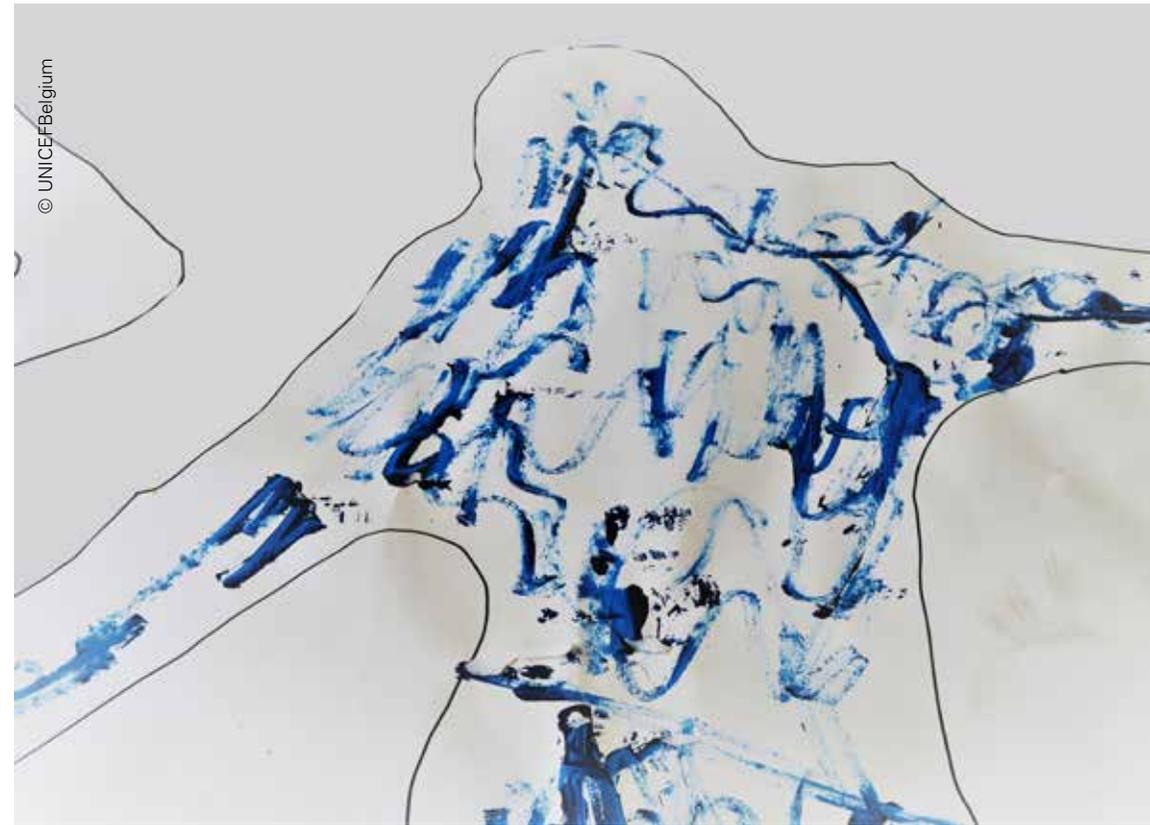
Other tools were used such as drawing, graffiti and photography, which allowed the children to share their feelings and to present their hopes for the future in a visual manner. All the proposed methodologies offer a space to reflect and facilitate expression without directing the children's thoughts, in a stimulating environment that is sufficiently reassuring to create a fundamental discussion.

The body map

The body map is explained to the children and young people as being a symbolic space. The map represents their journey and their experience of migration. The children are first invited to create their own character on the floor and paint it. We then explain to them that a part of the body represents their country of origin, while another part represents Belgium. The moderator then sets out the different elements that each person has to add to the body (e.g. where the heart is: what do the children like most in Belgium? Where the arm is: what is the most difficult thing for them in Belgium? What support do they need? Where the head is: what are their dreams for the future?).

This tool was used with small groups to ensure that important information was gathered at individual level from each child.

The body map has an advantage when working on problems: the children can support each other to draw and can express themselves almost individually thanks to the help of a facilitator who is always at their side.



Debates

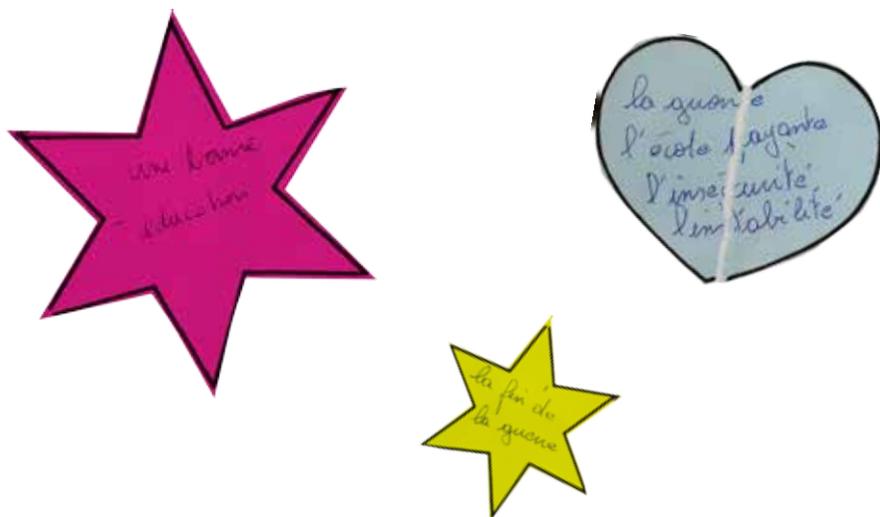
'What Do You Think?' organised 24 debates in the reception centres, frontline organisations and classes for new arrivals.

A national debate even took place in Brussels, bringing together children from different structures. The children were invited to speak because participation must be voluntary. The process was more laborious when a whole class was requested to be present during the debates.

Some groups of children were seen on several occasions. Others only once. But each time, the groups were invited to vote for their three priorities.

Every debate lasted at least three hours and included five to fifteen children accompanied by a facilitator, a rapporteur and, more often than not, a support person. Insofar as it was possible, the groups were divided into age ranges (young children, adolescents, young adults). Interpreters were present in some groups. Special attention was paid to the teenage mothers. They participated without the boys and without male interpreters, so that they had the space needed to express themselves.

Some participants asked to speak to us on an individual basis. Other children favoured a creative approach to express themselves, while others preferred to speak or write.





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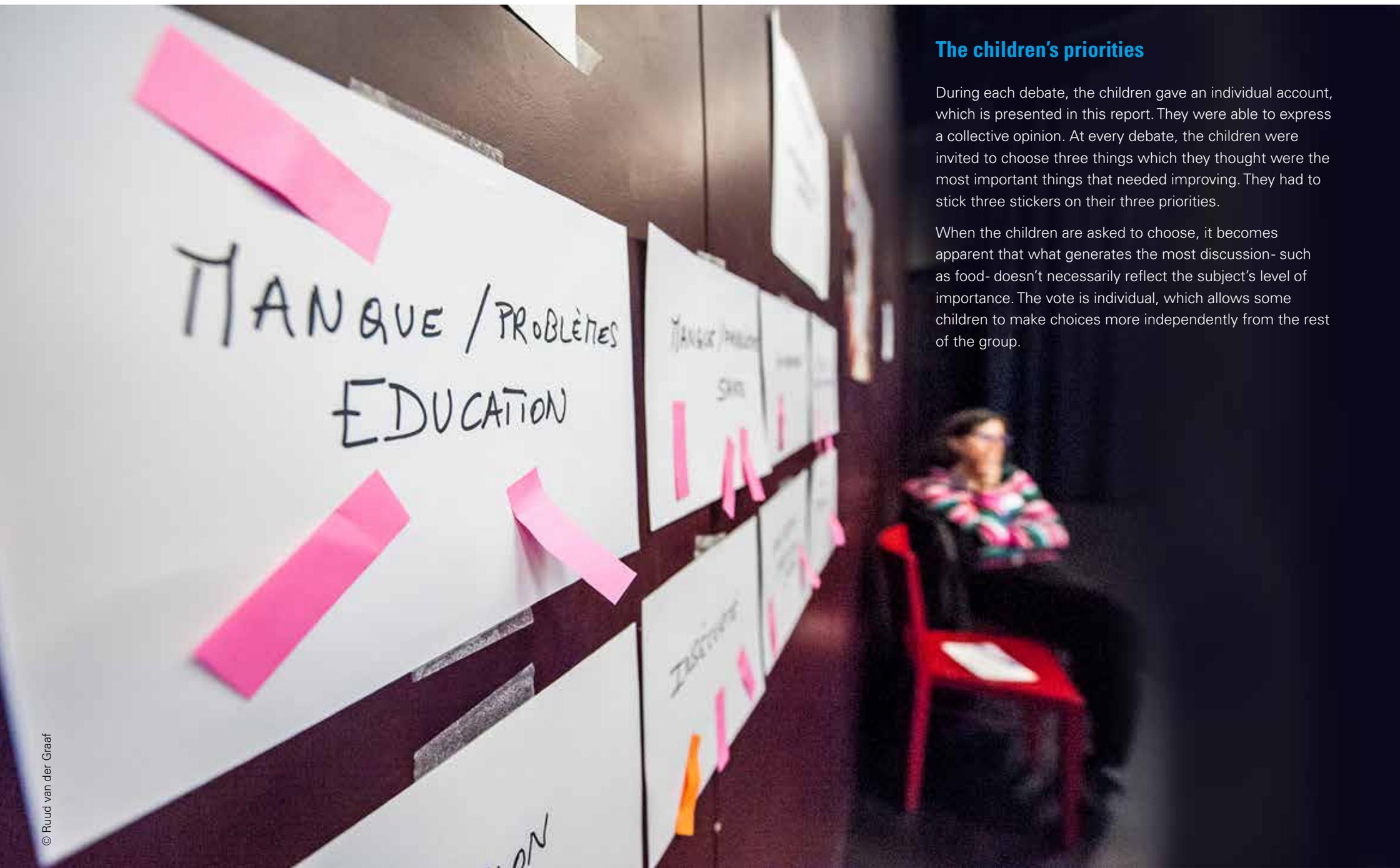


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Summary of the debates:

- ASBL CEMO/ DASPA* School class Filles De Marie in St Gilles** • 4 debates in class
- El Paso Centre in Gembloux**
 - Participation in the national debate
 - About 10 of the debates were organised in the centre
- FEDASIL Centre in Kapellen**
 - 1 debate at the centre
 - 1 debate at UNICEF headquarters
- FEDASIL Centre in Bevingen** • Participation in the national debate
- FEDASIL Centre in Poelkappellen** • Participation in the national debate
- FEDASIL Centre in Ponderôme** • 1 debate at the reception centre
- FEDASIL Centre in Rixensart** • 3 debates at the reception centre
- Mentor Escale**
 - Participation in the national debate
 - 1 debate at Mentor Escale headquarters
 - Gathering individual accounts
- OKAN* class Diest**
 - Participation in the national debate
 - 1 debate in class
- Vluchtenlingenwerk Vlaanderen** • 1 debate at VVV headquarters

*OKAN-class: classes for newcomers

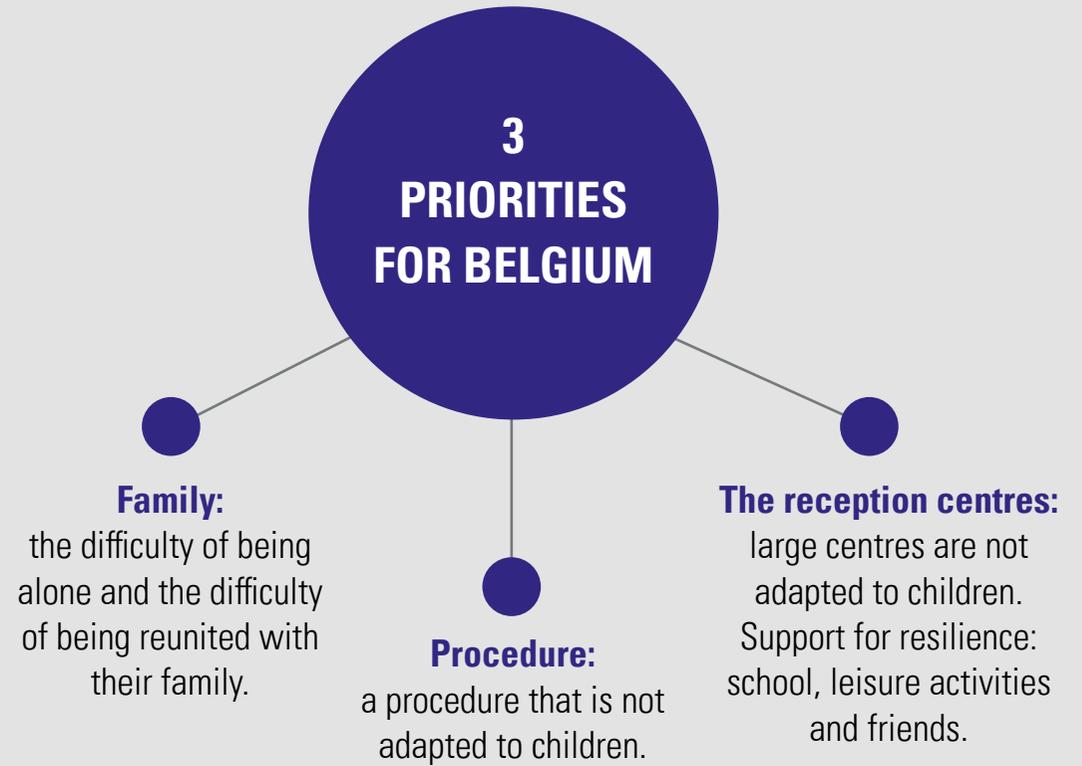


The children's priorities

During each debate, the children gave an individual account, which is presented in this report. They were able to express a collective opinion. At every debate, the children were invited to choose three things which they thought were the most important things that needed improving. They had to stick three stickers on their three priorities.

When the children are asked to choose, it becomes apparent that what generates the most discussion- such as food- doesn't necessarily reflect the subject's level of importance. The vote is individual, which allows some children to make choices more independently from the rest of the group.

THE PRIORITIES CHILDREN VOTED FOR:





EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN IN THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



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CELEBRATIONS, GAMES, SMELLS. CHILDREN OFTEN FEEL NOSTALGIC ABOUT THE COUNTRY THEY HAVE LEFT. AND THEN THEY REMEMBER THEIR FRIENDS AND THEIR FAMILY. THESE LOVED ONES THEY MISS SO MUCH, ESPECIALLY THOSE CHILDREN WHO HAVE TRAVELLED ALONE. BUT THE YOUNG REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS KNOW VERY WELL WHY THEY LEFT. THEIR ACCOUNTS ARE THOSE OF SURVIVORS. THEY FLED WAR AND RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH DEATH AND INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE, EVEN THOUGH THEY SURVIVED. OTHERS SUFFERED POVERTY, DISCRIMINATION, FORCED MARRIAGE. ALL REASONS WHICH LEFT THEM WITH NO CHOICE: THEY HAD TO FLEE.

WE MISS OUR COUNTRY

This is the first thing children in exile miss: their loved ones. Their friends and family. It is even more true for children who have arrived in Belgium alone.

I miss my family,
my friends and
the life I had.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

I miss my family.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -



I love Syria

I miss the comfort,
having a family close to
me.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

I miss my family and
my parents.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MALI -



I love
Iraq

I miss
my friends

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

I miss family life
and our
mango tree

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

A lot of children feel nostalgia for their country of origin: they talk about the joy of life, the hospitality, the celebrations, the music, the food.

“ People are always smiling in the streets in Syria. They sing and eat in the street. In our country, everyone belongs to the same family. We are one. We share laughter and tears. We share everything. For every important moment in the life of a person, we hold a big celebration, where the whole neighbourhood is invited. We dance, we sing, we eat all together. We all live together. That was the Syria of my childhood.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ What was great in Afghanistan were the Suger Feast, the Feast of Sacrifice and the New Year's celebrations. All the Muslim feasts were celebrated as they should be. The celebrations were a source of joy.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ In my country of origin, I love my family a lot. I miss fruit, like oranges.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I love the people in my country a lot. They're sociable and joyous people. I miss my town.

- 19-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I love my country. I live in Belgium, it's good, it's nice, for sure, but at the same time, I love my country. Over there, the food is so wonderful! And also, there is the fact that if you go to a town you don't know, the people will welcome you and respect you, take you to their house, make you tea.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -



WE MISS OUR COUNTRY

Some children also talk about nature, the smells and the colours:

- “ In Guinea, I used to like going to the end of the river, to the fair, to the goldmine in the village in the high plains.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -



Many Afghan children also mention the game of cricket, which they particularly like.

- “ I liked going to school in Afghanistan. I also liked playing cricket.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

- “ I'm Syrian first and foremost, then a refugee, and I love my country. Over there, the smell is different. Syria smells of jasmine, the flower of Damascus. You can see this pretty white flower everywhere in Syrian streets. It covers the ground. This ground where every small stone is pretty, because it is the ground belonging to my country.
- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -



*I thank
Belgium*

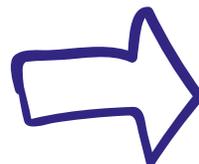
What I miss about my country are the cultural feasts. The smells and the colours in our country are different to the ones here.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -



I love Kurdistan

I want my country



- “ I liked doing sport in Afghanistan, especially cricket.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

WAR, INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE

'One day everything's okay, the next day, you've lost everything'. Children from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan talk about war. They describe the violence that swoops down from one day to the next, without distinction, and destroys everything on its way. For these children, there are no words to truly describe the acts of violence they have experienced and witnessed. No one can understand the ordeals they have suffered, except for those who have experienced war. These young refugees have seen blood, death, fear and danger. They have seen schools close, if they hadn't already been destroyed. And sometimes, it was even their teachers who were killed. They have known hunger and lost loved ones. This war is the death of childhood. Joy disappears, just like the desire to play. War leaves trauma in its wake. As they grow up, these children continue to be afraid of war.

Other children haven't lived in countries at war but have been faced with different sorts of violence. Domestic violence, violence at school, organised crime, brutality in communities. The children's accounts remind us that exile isn't a choice, but a question of survival.

“ We didn't choose to be refugees. It just happened like that and we had to make a choice. We had to escape the death and destruction that existed in the system governing the country. My message to the whole world is as follows: we are children like any others and we have the right to safety and education. We want to live with our family, just as every child wants to, everywhere in the world.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, IRAQ -

Belgium or Syria, it wasn't a choice. There were problems in Syria, insecurity, war. There was a chance we would die. There was no more healthcare, no more school, nothing. We had to flee. We had to experience new things, have a new life, a future.

- MOTHER, 17 YEARS -

“ No one likes Syria anymore. You can't imagine what we saw, the blood, the deaths, the life we used to have. I wanted a new life. I came to Belgium. I want a fresh start. I lost my country, but I'm not lost. I'm a lot stronger.

- MOTHER, 17 YEARS -

WAR, INSECURITY AND

VIOLENCE

Two young Syrian girls describe how everything changed from one day to the next:



“ One day, everything changed. I went to bed one night and everything was all right. When I woke up in the morning, everything had gone. I didn't imagine at that time that it was going to be that bad. Since the start of the war, our Syria has disappeared. The war has taken everything we had. It's not only me that feels this pain. It's the same for all Syrians. Little by little, I understood that if I wanted to live, I had to leave. So I took to the road. Everyone from my country was obliged to take refuge. We were forced to leave our beautiful country to find shelter. So that we could feel good, safe. This journey was very painful.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ Syria has become a very dangerous country because of the war. I would like to explain to you what war does when it arrives in your country, but it is difficult to find the right words. War can arrive very suddenly. One day, everything's okay, and the next day, you've lost everything you built for your life. When war arrives in your country, it brings hunger, fear and insecurity. People around you die, your parents, your friends and even your teachers.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -



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Many Afghan and Syrian children spoke about the impact of war on children. They spoke of death, suffering, hunger and insecurity, but also about the loss of childhood, the fear of going to play outside or going to school.

“ I don't like the war in Syria. As children, we can feel it in our daily lives, we don't have any food, no house, no safety..
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ When there's war, children can't play anymore. They can't be children anymore.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

War doesn't recognise children: grown-ups, children, everyone dies. That's why I'm going to tell everyone to get out of Syria. During the war, children can't play anymore. There's nothing for children. Children of six or seven years old pick up a Kalashnikov as though it's a toy. In Syria, with the war, no one goes out or comes home. The schools are bombed. The war explodes every day. There are a lot of problems. People don't like Syria. But not all Syrians are like that. Are children condemned to play with Kalashnikovs?
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ The children have no peace. The children are traumatised. There's no joy for them.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I don't like the violence of war. Children are always frightened to go to school because of the war
- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ War frightens children. War kills in a few minutes.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ War brings poverty. War offers children no future.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ People die, children don't go to school. They're wounded. The parents have no work. The children grow up and continue to think about the war. They're scared of going to school because they're scared of the war.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

WAR, INSECURITY AND

VIOLENCE

Another Afghan boy mentions the kidnapping of children:

I don't like the war. The Taliban kidnap children to integrate them into their army. Many children are obliged to stay indoors so they don't get kidnapped. Children's rights aren't respected.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

The violence of war isn't the only type of violence children are faced with. Many talk about the violence they suffer within their family, at school and in the community.

“ I don't like the lack of safety or violence against children. You're hit at school and at home. I would like it to stop because it isn't good for children.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ Violence is everywhere, in the family, at school, in the street, in public transport. The men beat the women, the girls are raped, the children are beaten up. Another problem is poverty, the lack of work, the meagre salaries. Neither the law nor the police are fair.

- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, NICARAGUA -

“ There are no rules. The violence is everywhere. I don't like the burglaries or the injustice. Thieves aren't punished, and the police are just as violent. The violence is also present in families and at school.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BRAZIL -



“ I don't like the violence, the law or the bandits in Brazil. People don't respect the law, some have more rights than others. It's not fair. There's also a lot of crime.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BRAZIL -

“ I don't like the violence or the burglaries in Brazil. I don't like the fact that children are obliged to work.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -

“ I don't like the ethnic war and the family problems in Guinea. A lot of conflicts in families are due to polygamy. A father marries two women and they don't get on. The co-wife mistreats the children of the other wife, which can force children to run away from home.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -



DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITIES

Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Muslims, Peuhls, Malinke. Belonging to a certain group is becoming a standard or a reason for persecution. The children clearly express this. For them, it is mistaken to believe that all humans are equal regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender or social status. They have first-hand experience of discrimination and old hatreds between ethnic or religious groups. The divisions between Shiites and Sunnis, for instance, are at the basis of discrimination and violence. Many ethnic groups criticise, insult and fight each other. Some have the power and the others not. They don't agree and they kill each other. These divisions catch up with them, even in their country of exile. In Belgium, the children are never really at ease or at peace. They live in fear that their loved ones will get killed. As for the girls, they have endured very harsh treatment, just for being girls. When they leave their country, they are fleeing forced and early marriages. Sometimes it is also female genital mutilation, rape or the brutality of a husband that they forever want to forget. It is the lack of protection that pushes them to leave in search of a freer life.

“ People never like each other after war. They'll look at you: are you Christian, Muslim, Sunni, Shiite? Before the war, no one paid any attention to all that. But since the war, they do. If people continue to think like that, our problems will never be solved.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ You can't get married to someone from another ethnic group in Afghanistan.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I don't like the ethnic wars, the ethnic discriminations and the poverty in Guinea. The ethnic wars between the Peuhls and the Malinke create inequalities. The important positions are given to the Malinke, who will always favour people from their ethnic group. Even when the police have to intervene, they aren't neutral. And some are never punished, even when they commit offences. The law isn't neutral. That's because of the ethnic conflict.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

“ Before the war, there weren't any differences between people. Shiites, Sunnis, Muslims and Christians. Everyone stuck together. Why is there war now? Why don't Shiites speak to Sunnis anymore? Why don't Christians speak to Muslims anymore? Why the racism? Why the war?

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ The politics between the Peuhls, Malinke, Susu, there’s too much racism. They shoot at each other. They don’t agree. Some are in power and the others aren’t. That’s what people are like. They criticise each other, they insult each other, they fight each other. That’s why I’m in Belgium.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

In many countries, these children describe how girls do not have the same rights as boys: they are forced into marriage, they undergo female genital mutilation, and they are obliged to wear a hijab. They can’t talk to boys or fall in love. If girls don’t listen, they could be killed!

“ If a girl has problems in Guinea, I will tell her to come here, because here, you have enough to eat and you don’t get beaten. In Belgium, girls are respected, they’re not forced to marry, there’s no forced marriage.

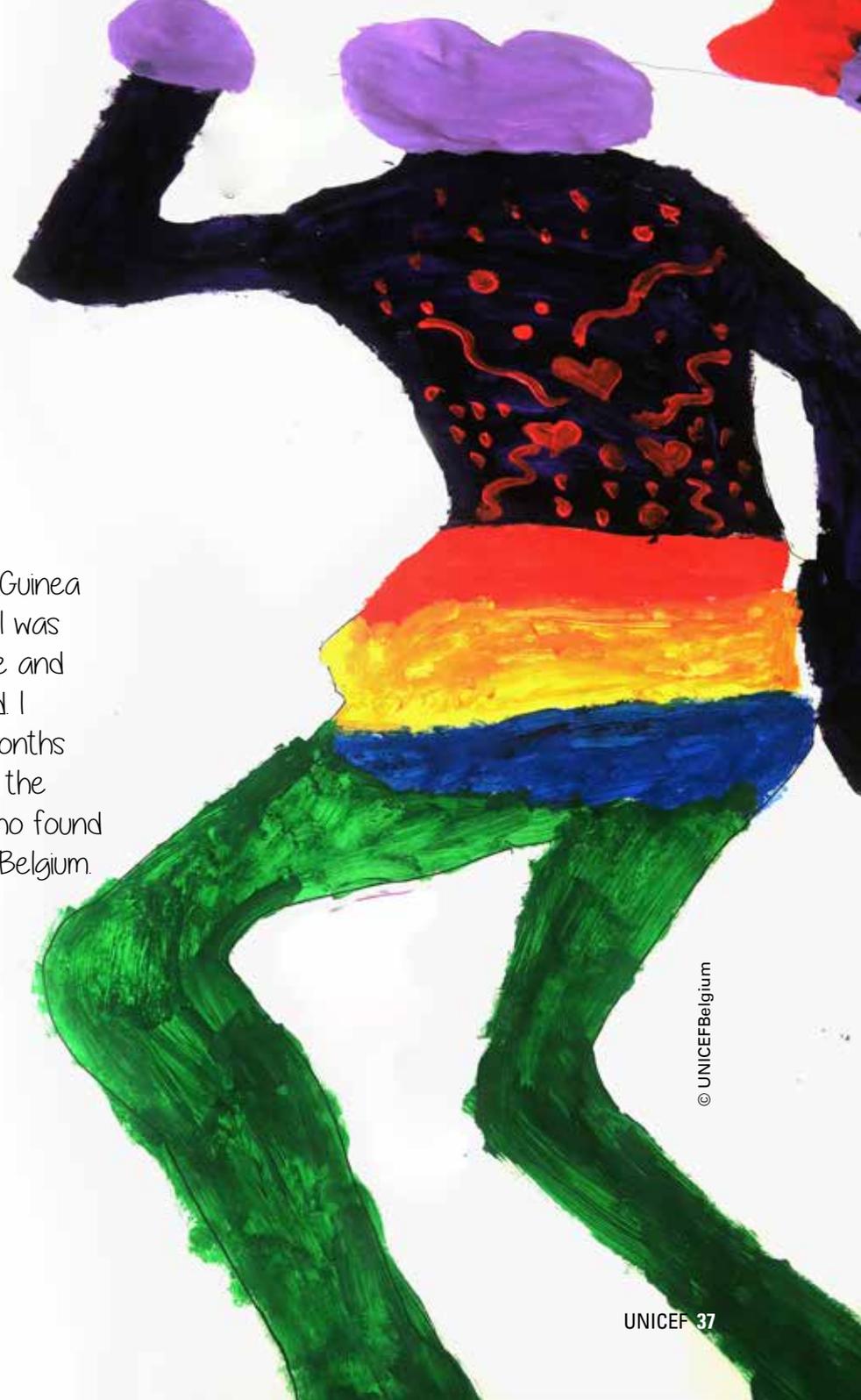
- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ What hurts me is that, in the population, you have to say whether you’re Sunni or Shiite. And yet, everyone’s the same. Everyone is made the same way.

- 13-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I’m a Guinean refugee. I left Guinea following a forced marriage. I was subjected to physical violence and mistreatment by my husband. I fled my country after five months of marriage. I was helped by the mother of my best friend, who found a contact person for me in Belgium.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



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DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITIES

A young girl tells how her father forced her to marry an older man and how she was able to escape.

“ I lost my mother, my father and my twin sister in a car accident at the age of two. I was brought up by my father’s half-brother, who is Muslim. I was made to become a Muslim without wanting to. I grew up in this family until the day my uncle decided to marry me off to a man older than me. And because Cameroon is a corrupt country, no one can complain to anyone. So, I left the family home for my husband’s house. Once over there, he abused me. But thanks to the help of the daughter of my husband’s third wife, I was put in contact with a smuggler who asked me for a precise sum, which I stole from my husband. That’s how I ended up in Belgium. Forced marriage is a bad thing, because it destroys your life and your choices and it makes you lose your family and friends. I had other plans, I wanted to continue my studies to become a mechanic, meet the man of my choice and build a nice family.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, CAMEROON -

A young mother tells how she fled to escape a forced marriage:

“ Life is very difficult for girls in my country. We don’t go to school. When you’re young, you have to stay at home and work with mother. Afterwards, around 11-12 years old, you get married to a man about 30-40 years old. I want to study, become a doctor, do something with my life. My dad comes from Afghanistan. He’s very religious. My mum comes from Pakistan. She didn’t want me to go to school. Dad wanted me to. Mum wanted me to work in the house, but I didn’t want to, I wanted to leave. First, I went to Spain, but I wasn’t helped, so I came to Belgium.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

Several girls talk about female genital mutilation and the impossibility of escaping it if they stay in their country.

“ Female genital mutilation is still practised in Guinea. It doesn’t end. I’ve been circumcised. If you don’t circumcise your daughter, you have problems, mothers are forced. If you don’t do it, you’re considered a prostitute, you’re not a woman. It still goes on, people don’t stop doing it.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ If you don’t undergo an excision, you’re mistreated, ridiculed, you won’t have a husband, you’re worthless and your life might even be in danger.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

Young girls speak of the sexual violence they were subjected to

“ I didn't choose Belgium, or Europe. In my province, where I was living, people get killed, raped, all those things happen. There was no safety. There's a lot more of it in our country than in Europe. You leave your family, you're all alone. You give yourself courage, you don't look back.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

Boys are also concerned with the rights of girls. For young Afghans, the country's future lies in the education of girls:

“ If something should be improved in the future, then the young generation should have the chance to contribute to it. Girls and women who want to study should be given this right, because education is a right for boys and girls. It shouldn't only be men who have the chance to study. Women too.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ Let women participate in society and treat them the same way. Everyone must be treated the same way and deserves respect.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

I've portrayed rape, not war, death, misery. If I were president, I would help the poor, I would sort the country out and I would make sure that everything was okay. I've drawn a tear to represent war. I've done two drawings with the face of a woman and a little girl to represent the rapes in DRC and to say that it isn't just women who are raped, but also children.

- 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -



POVERTY AND

CORRUPTION

Inequalities and corruption. Nearly all the children consulted mentioned both. For them, the wealthy have all the rights. The poor have none at all: no right to go to school, no right to healthcare, no right to be protected against torture or ill-treatment. Even when they can go to school, poor children believe they have no future. In their opinion, money means immunity. Those who have money can pay for their diploma and even become a doctor. Those who don't have money and who are sick can't even get care. But what still plagues some of these children, even when they simply think about it, is hunger; the hunger that creeps into stomachs in the early morning. Finally, we should point out that a large majority of children draw attention to the need to improve healthcare and education in their country of origin. Having hospitals, good equipment and good doctors are all things that matter to them.





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According to this boy, poor children are worth nothing:

“ If you're sick, you can't go to the hospital and you're not taken care of. If you kill someone and you have money, they let you out of prison. Money is more important than people. Poor children are worth nothing. You also need money to go to school and to pass the year.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

This girl talks about child labour and daily hunger, which poor children suffer from. A hunger that isn't understood by rich people, in her opinion:

“ Children mustn't go in the mines or do this kind of thing. That's what bothers me. Poverty is... Imagine you tell a rich person that there are poor people. They won't believe it, because they're rich, they have money. They won't really know, they won't have the same feeling as us, as the poor people have. They really suffer. In the morning, they wake up, they're hungry. They have to go to work or ask for money to eat. Whereas a rich person always has food in front of him. The rich always have food in front of them.

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

Several children from European countries whose parents decided to come to Belgium to work, also spoke about increasing inequalities and poverty in Europe.

“ In Greece, there's no work, a lot of people have left.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GREECE -

“ In Italy, there are a lot of work problems, there isn't a lot of money... shops are closing. There isn't a lot of work on farms.

- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO, WHO LIVED IN ITALY -

“ The crisis creates a lot of money problems, there aren't many jobs... and that has an impact on us, the young ones.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, PORTUGAL -

“ I don't like the injustice in Portugal. Some people have more rights than others. There isn't a lot of work and the salaries are very low.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, PORTUGAL -

“ I don't like poverty. Families that don't have a lot of money don't have many rights.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ROMANIA -



EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN ON THE ROAD



HARROWING

JOURNEYS

The journey to Belgium isn't only perilous. It's brutal. You can die. Some children even warn against it: 'Don't come over, the journey is too dangerous'. You have to cross deserts, mountains, oceans, piled into tiny boats. You have to ignore the borders. But, above all, you have to deal with smugglers.

The lack of legal migration routes pushes children into the arms of criminal networks, which organise people smuggling in dreadful conditions. These organisations hold people to ransom, threaten, abandon the weakest along the way and sometimes rape women, and sometimes kill or exploit children. There is nothing but danger on the journey. This young Afghan remembers his brother being captured in Iran before becoming a slave and running away. This 16-year-old Eritrean still vividly remembers the images of corpses left in the desert. Others lost their parents on this hellish route through the central Mediterranean. Sometimes, the journey also means being separated from your family. These loved ones who are then so difficult to find again.

A large number of unaccompanied children from Afghanistan spoke of exploitation, abuse and the violence of the smugglers on the journey through the eastern Mediterranean. Some even go so far as to discourage other children from coming over.

I would tell them no! Don't come over, the journey is too dangerous. The smugglers are violent. I would tell them we're doing very well in Belgium, we can study, there's no violence. But no, don't come, because of the journey and the smugglers!

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ The journey is very difficult, with a lot of deaths. It's very difficult.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ The smugglers steal your money, they force you to work.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I would tell them to come. But beware, the journey is very dangerous. I would tell them to be aware of the smugglers, who are violent and take your money.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

HARROWING

JOURNEYS

This boy speaks about the kidnapping of his younger brother who became a slave in Iran:

When you want to come to Europe, it's very expensive and very difficult. You have to cross a lot of high mountains, the sea. I did the journey by car and on foot; I walked at night, because we had to hide all the time. I passed through Iran, Turkey, Greece, France and Belgium. I left, and a few days later, my mother and my younger brother left too. But my mother has a problem with her foot, so she couldn't walk very well, she went back to the village. My brother was kidnapped in Iran. In the mountains over there, there are people who kidnap strangers when they see them. And then they ask for money: 20,000 dollars, 25,000 dollars. They took my brother. They forced him to work as a slave. If you can't pay, they force you to work, otherwise, they hit you, beat you. They even attacked my brother with knives. He was 14 years old. They kept him for four years. We had no news, we didn't know whether he was dead or alive. One day, he saw an opportunity and ran away. He's in Turkey now, I was able to speak to him not so long ago. I hadn't intended to come to Belgium. I left. I arrived in Greece, someone told me about Belgium, so I came here. I arrived here five years ago, I was 16 years old.

- 21-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

Many other unaccompanied children who have taken the Central Mediterranean Route have been witness to extreme suffering. Some have seen corpses in the desert. Others have been witness to unspeakable violence in Libya.

I went from Eritrea to Ethiopia, then to Sudan, Egypt, Libya, and then, from Libya, I went to Italy, then France, and finally Belgium. Sometimes we travelled by car, sometimes on foot. There were several of us, some of them I knew, others I didn't know. It was very difficult in Libya... The people who took us into the desert were armed, and if we said anything, they killed us. There were women with us, and they took them aside and did what they wanted with them. If anyone was too thirsty or couldn't walk anymore, they left them. If anyone wanted to protest against it, they also left them in the desert. For the crossing to Italy, it wasn't a boat, it was more... like a kayak, I think. It was really small, but with 400 people on board, or maybe more. I wasn't too scared, because from the moment I set off, I had the belief that I would be able to do this journey.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, ERITREA -

“ It's dangerous to leave the country, and the route through the Sahara is very dangerous. You have to be careful during the journey, walk at night. I saw people die.

- 18-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ERITREA -

Some children also lost their family during the journey. Some parents died on the way. Other parents, brothers or sisters, are held up in other countries.

“ I miss my family. I miss my mother. I waited for her here for two years, so that she could join me. But she'll never come. Because she died in Slovenia. She was on her way here. That still hurts me. I'll never forget that.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ The serious problem in Syria is the war. Stop the war and everything will get sorted out. I'm happy here, but my sisters are held up in Turkey.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -



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CHILD LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION

IN TRANSIT COUNTRIES

Some of the children we met told us about the detention and exploitation they experienced in transit countries.

“ I was incarcerated for 15 days in Turkey and seven days in Greece.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

A boy tells how he worked in Turkey for five years:

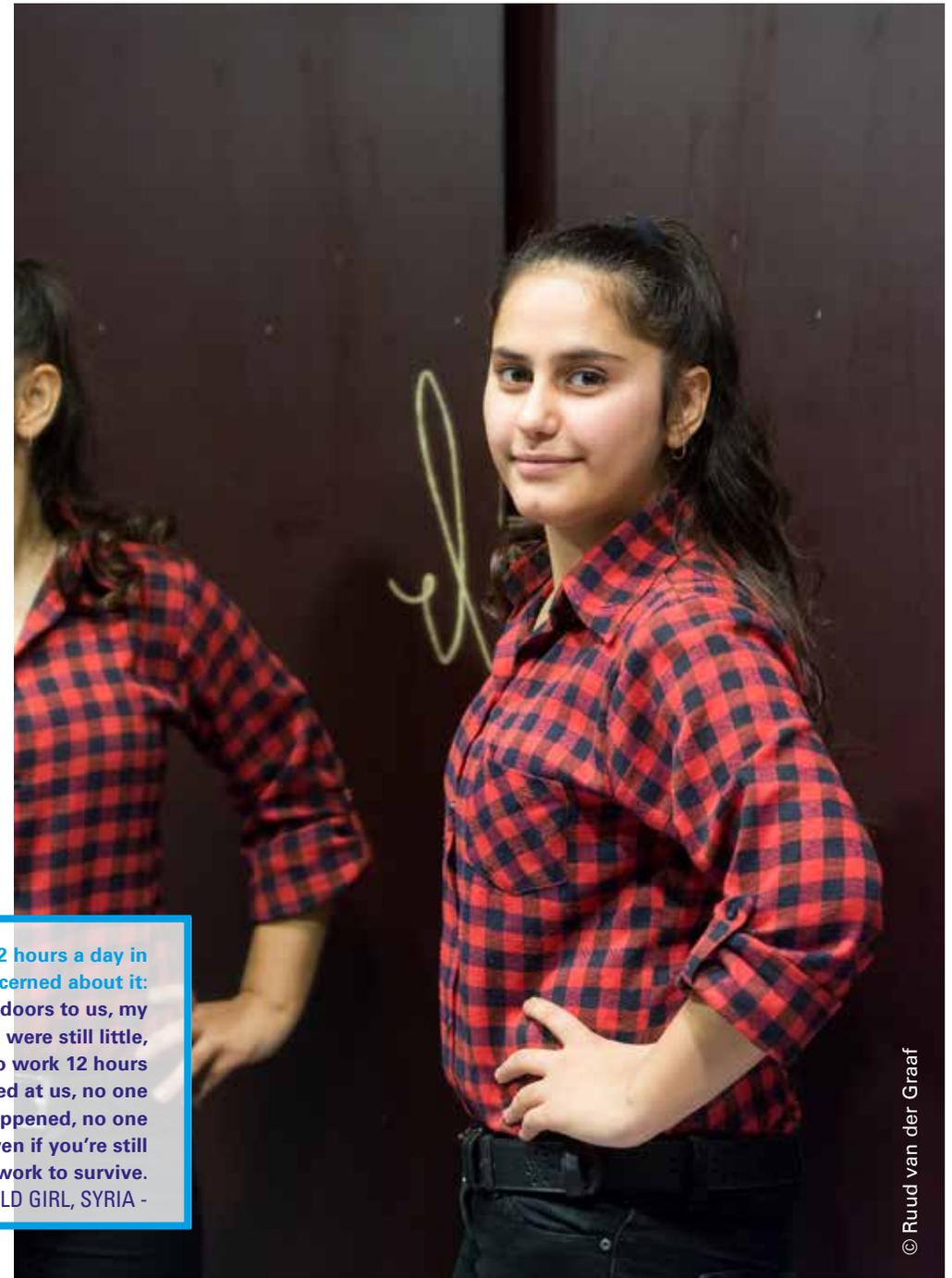
“ When children haven't got any money to go to school, they have to work. That's the way it is. If you haven't got any money, you have to work to eat. Even in Turkey, I had to work for five years (from 11 to 16 years old). My 15-year-old sister still works in Turkey for 200 euros a month. My little sister, who is eight, doesn't go to school. She doesn't know how to read or write, she doesn't know how to do anything

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

Two girls explain that they had to work 12 hours a day in Turkey and that no one was concerned about it:

In Turkey, when the country opened its doors to us, my sister and I were 10 and 11 years old. We were still little, but we had to work. Sometimes, we had to work 12 hours a day. We went to Turkey, but no one looked at us, no one did anything for us. If something had happened, no one would have noticed. We had to work. Even if you're still little, you have to work to survive.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -





© Ruud van der Graaf

I would like to thank Belgium. Thanks to Belgium, I don't have to do heavy work. In Turkey, I had to work 12 hours a day over there, and because of that, I still have backache.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

These unaccompanied Syrian girls also worked in Turkey before giving birth to their baby in a refugee camp in Greece:

“ I worked in Turkey to go to Greece. My baby was born in a refugee camp in Greece.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I didn't go to school for six months. My baby was born in a refugee camp in Greece.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

The length of the journey to reach Belgium varies considerably from one child to another. It took some children three months to get here, others several years.

“ I had to escape my country. I was alone, I was 14 years old. My exile lasted three months: I passed through Iran, Turkey, then Greece, before reaching Belgium.

- 14-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I left Syria six years ago. I spent five years in Turkey before arriving in Belgium.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -



CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN BELGIUM

HOPED-FOR SAFETY

Children feel safe and tranquil in Belgium. They cherish this newly acquired freedom. They are happy to go to school and to finally be able to hope to build a new life, and have a future. Some even speak of the fact that in Belgium, their rights are respected.

The majority of children emphasised positive experiences.

- “ Freedom means living how you want to. It means respecting everyone. All that is possible in Belgium, and that’s why I came here. I simply wanted to have a normal life. I may no longer be carefree, but I still have hope. I’m happy to be here, but I only dream of one thing: that peace will return and that I can go back home.
- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -
- “ Belgium is the country of my dreams, because here, I can study. And I can go to school. And here, everyone respects the rules, and everyone respects each other.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I love everything in Belgium!
- 9-YEAR-OLD BOY, ANGOLA -
- “ Since I came to Belgium, I feel safe with my son. I wasn’t safe, I fled to come here.
- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -
- “ Here, it’s always calm. School is good. Everything’s good here.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

- “ There are many advantages in Belgium. Here, we’re safe, our future has been saved. We can do something good for our future, study
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ Here, I like school and studies. I also like the future opportunities we have in Belgium.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -
- “ I like the food in Belgium. I like the fact that there is work and safety. It isn’t dangerous here.
- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, NICARAGUA -
- “ It’s nice and safe in Belgium. Children here don’t have to work and they can study. Women are respected.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -
- “ Belgium also helps the poor, the disabled and refugees. It’s a very orderly country. It’s clean here. There’s no rubbish in the street.
- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, PERU -
- “ In Belgium, there are more rights for children and young people, there is more room for women in Belgian society
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, IRAN -





HOPED-FOR SAFETY

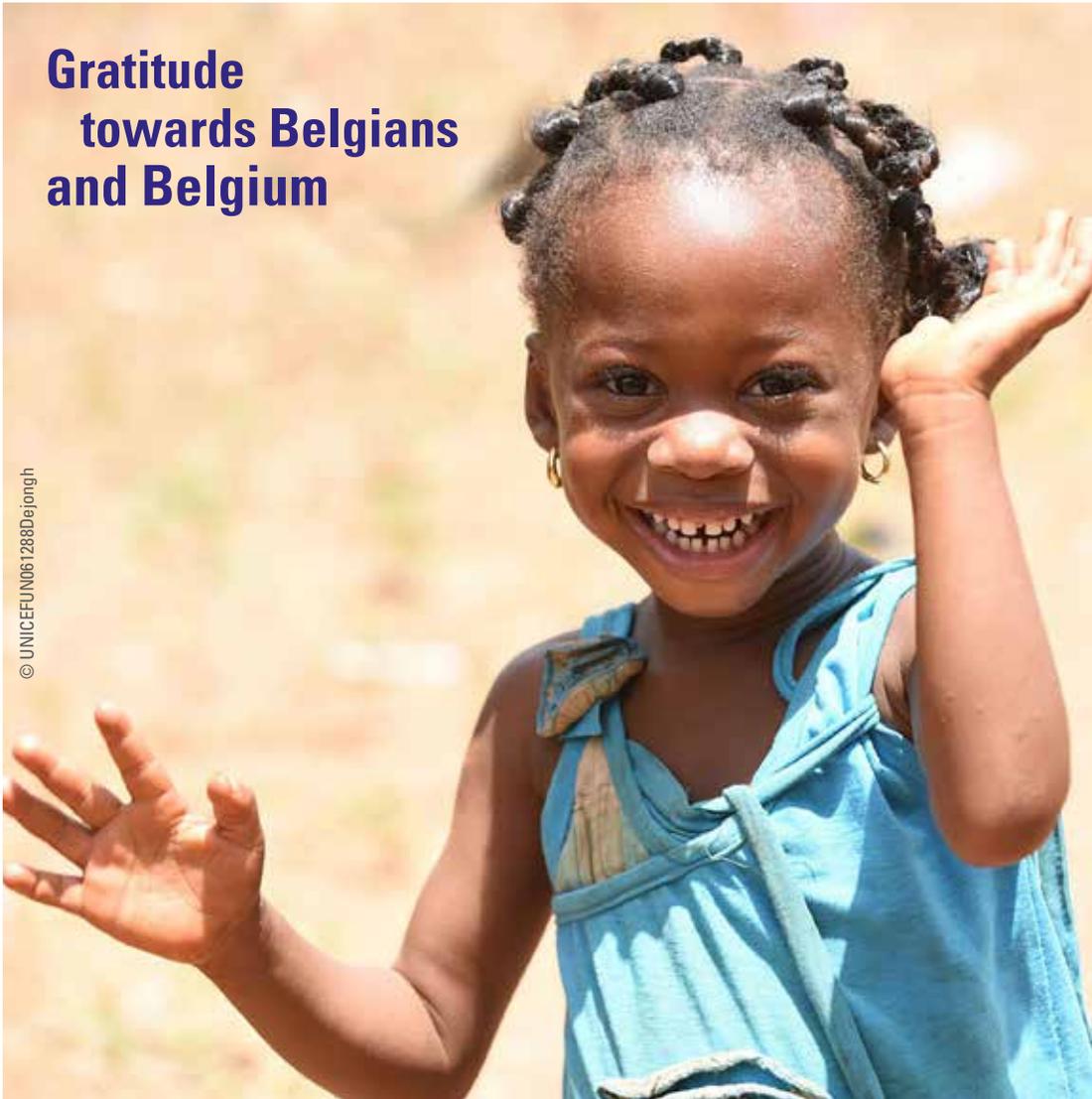
This young Syrian girl considers Belgium as a father who opened his arms to her when she needed protection:

“Belgium is my second country. It’s a bit like Syria was my mother, and Belgium, my father. A father who opened his arms when I needed him, to protect me. I’ve got a future in Belgium, like a second life. I learnt how to be independent, to live alone. I don’t need anyone today. Before, I would fall a lot, I would hurt myself. But every day, I climb another step. Every day, I’m a bit better.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

Gratitude towards Belgians and Belgium

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Many children have expressed their gratitude towards Belgians and Belgium. They feel respected and welcome. They can think freely. They are grateful that they have been so warmly welcomed. And, above all, they appreciate all the fun activities the country has to offer. Swimming pools, parks, games. In short, the burden is getting lighter.

“ Here, everything is good. Belgians are very respectful. The majority, in any case. It's wonderful. There are many good things here. Back home, foreigners aren't well-accepted. Here, I have the right to live like you. Back home, some people don't accept foreigners. They aren't open. Here, there is freedom of religion: Christian, Muslim, atheist, everything is respected here.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ People in Belgium help us; they're like family for me.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ People here are respectful; here, you're well-treated.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ What's good in Belgium, is that there are laws. And the people too. It's not like back home, here, they don't bother you. But at the same time, it's strange here, for instance, neighbours don't know each other, they don't speak to each other..

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, ERITREA -

HOPED-FOR SAFETY

Gratitude towards Belgians and Belgium

“ Thank you, Belgium. Thank you to all the countries that have received us.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ I like everything in Belgium, the people are really nice!

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ People are kind in Belgium, I like school and my friends.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I like the weather and the nice people in Belgium. I like the food, the chocolate and the tourist attractions.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ROMANIA -





During a debate in a reception centre, a group of children between eight and twelve years old drew up a list of things they liked in Belgium:

“ What we like in Belgium is Brussels, the Atomium, the zoo, the animals, manga, TV programmes like ‘The Voice’, the cinema, family, pretty girls, football, football stadiums, the swimming pool, bicycle rides, the beauty of the country (‘it’s beautiful!’), the Foire du Midi in Brussels, bowling, the trainees at the centre (‘Mégane’), and because there are people we like!

Another group of children aged between 13 and 15 years old did the same exercise:

“ What we like about Belgium is the MENA centre, friends (‘soul brothers and sisters’), laughing, the teachers (‘my cookery teacher’), autumn, summer, pine cones, love, school, sport, football, the size of the country. Here, there’s no war, we have activities, we can spend time with friends, go out with girls.

Raising greater awareness among Belgians

While tranquility and freedom are precious assets that migrant and refugee children happily welcome, Belgium is no land of milk and honey either. Some children tell of negative experiences, linked to a lack of understanding about their realities. Some children have been faced with racism. Some young people complain of racially motivated identity checks. They recommend raising greater awareness among the Belgian population as well as among frontline professionals (the police, municipal employees) so that they have a better understanding of their reality.

“ I would like to have the chance to meet you, talk with you one day. I would like you to learn to know me. When you speak to me, I would like you to talk to Z, to me as a person. And not just to a Syrian refugee. But what I would like above all, is that you understand that every person is different. You can't just talk about 'refugees', we are all different people, with a different story. In my mother tongue, Arabic, there's a proverb that says that. Look at your hand: every finger is attached to another one. And yet, every single one is different to the other ones. Well, in a group, it's the same thing. Every person is different, even if they belong to the same group. Me, I'm Z. .

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ For me, the main problem is that Belgians don't know refugees. A girl in my class thought I was someone from another country. She didn't really understand. People don't know where we come from and they think all sorts of nonsense about us.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I went to school in a very small town. The people were really racist towards us. They had no contact with us

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ Racism is everywhere, throughout the country, and we should adapt. We have to learn to deal with it, because it's everywhere, not only in Belgium, but worldwide. There is also racism between the young people at the centre. When they talk about Afghans, they say mean things. We must learn to communicate together.

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

“ The police should defend children, but half of the police officers don't. Fifty percent of police officers are nice and 50 % are bad. I would like the police to get to know us. In Brussels, if you're tanned and you're wearing a cap, you get checked. A young white man with a cap will never get checked. That's why young people snap.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, MOROCCO -

“ I often get arrested by the police. It's happened twice at the train station in Gembloux. If I became prime minister tomorrow, I would tell people to be nice to North Africans and all foreigners. I would make sure there was less racism.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, ALGERIA -

“ You have to go to the town hall to change your orange card or to receive a stamp. The woman at the counter is really unpleasant. Once she said to me, 'This card isn't clean, come back another time'. Even though I speak Dutch as well, when she sees Fedasil on the card, she's unpleasant.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -



THE FAMILY

A primary protection unit

Some children came here alone or were separated from their family on the way. Some parents have remained in other countries, such as Turkey. Others came to Belgium with their brother, their sister or their parents. The children who came with their parents highlighted the importance of being accompanied and supported by their family.

“ We’re nothing without a family!

Several children who came with one of their parents regret having made the journey to Belgium. They would have liked to have been consulted about their parents’ plans for exile.

“ I wasn’t asked for my opinion. I came with my mother. My father and my brother stayed in Morocco. If I had to write to the children in my country, I would tell them to stay there.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -

“ When you take the decision to migrate, the children must be consulted, otherwise they can become depressed. It’s not easy in the beginning when you arrive in Belgium, you really have to make an effort, the language is different, it’s difficult to make contact with other people. In the beginning, when I arrived in Belgium, I was scared of not making any friends.

- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -

Challenges for unaccompanied children

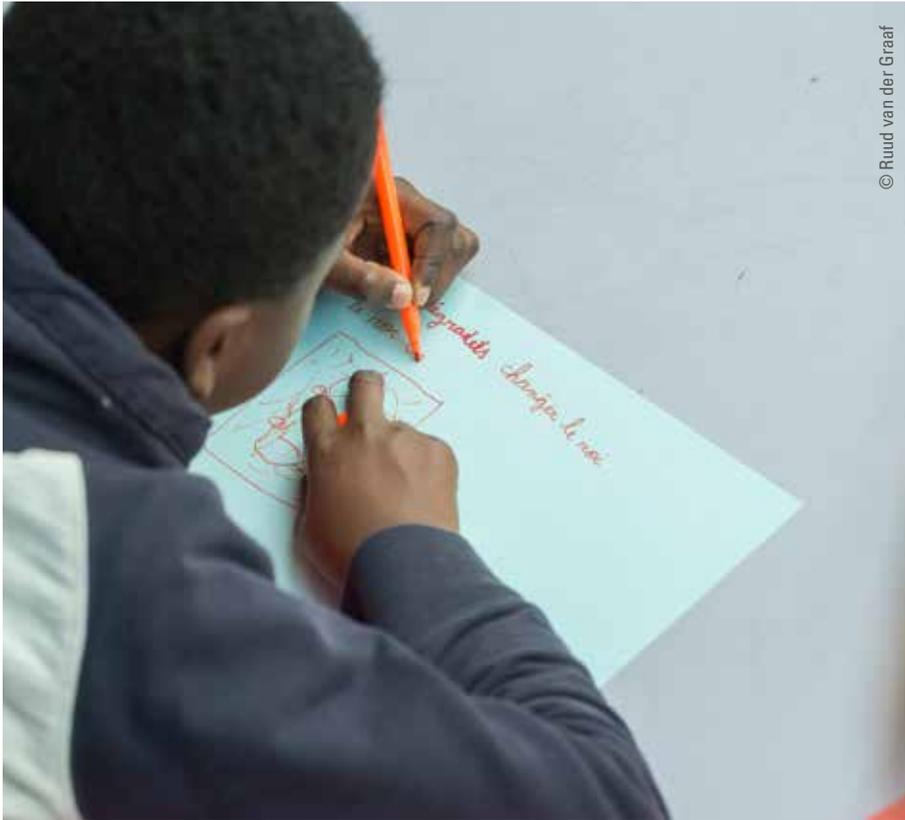
Children who have come alone think a lot about their family. They miss their mum and dad. They would like to have someone who supports them, who listens to them, who takes care of them every day. Children who live independently particularly suffer from this situation. What they miss is a dad or a mum who is waiting for them at home when they come back from school, who asks them how their day was, who makes a nice meal for them. A parent who reassures them when they are down, who enables them not to be frightened the next day and helps to set limits and rules. They often feel alone and isolated, overcome by everyday tasks.

“ The most difficult thing is being alone. When you’ve finished school, work, an activity, a trip, you hope that someone is waiting for you at home, you want to be able to tell someone about your day. But you have to keep everything in your head, the good and the bad things. Everything will explode one day. I miss my mother especially. Before, my mother was there when I came home. Sometimes here, I think ‘Oh, my mother will be there’, but no, no noise, nothing. She isn’t there. I stay all alone. You can’t do anything without your family.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ In the evening, mum told me to go to bed and woke me up to go to school the next day. I don’t have that anymore. I don’t have meals prepared by my mum anymore. It’s difficult for a lot of things.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -



“ For a child, there’s a big difference between being with your family or without your family. With mum and dad, you don’t have to think about anything, but when you don’t have a family, you have to think about a lot of things. You’re all alone, you go home, you’re all alone and you don’t know what’s happening to your brother and your family. You don’t feel good, you’re worried.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ I work, I go to school. Before, my mother cooked. My father was a teacher. So I studied with my father. Here, a lot has changed, no one can help me.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ It’s very different with or without mum and dad. Mum and dad aren’t here. It’s difficult. Here, there’s just me, not my mother, not my father, not my brother. It’s very difficult for me because I’m not very old.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ Here in Belgium, young people want to live alone, but they don’t know what it is. Of course, three days alone, even a year, that can be good. But for a whole lifetime, it’s tiring.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ Family can help us develop our real values. They help us progress faster than when you’re alone.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BURUNDI -

This Afghan boy who arrived alone in Belgium tells how in Afghanistan, you don’t live alone. Everything is done with the family:

In Afghanistan, you live with the family. Life is with the family. Here, you’re all alone. Mum and dad are very important. When you lose your mum or your dad, you’re very unhappy, you cry a lot. Here, you don’t have your mum. When you have your mum and dad, you’re not scared of anything. Here, you have very big problems. When you’re all together, you aren’t worried. When you’re young, you need help with everyday activities. But now, we have to do everything by ourselves.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

THE FAMILY

Difficulties of reunification



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Children who have arrived alone want to be reunited with their family. But the family reunification procedure is an administrative maze in which they get lost. According to the children, the documents they are asked for are impossible to find.

“ To feel less alone, it must be made easier for parents to come over.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ When we want our family to join us, we're asked for documents that are impossible to find. I won't be able to invite my family over here, because it's impossible to get the requested documents. As for the documents, just think about it. If you flee your country, how are you supposed to have documents from your town's police station? With the war, it's impossible to get these documents. They asked me for my parents' marriage certificate.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ Now, the majority of people from my country are refugees, scattered all over the world, like my grandmother. My grandmother took care of me throughout my whole life. Today, she's in Turkey. I had to leave her behind because she was too sick and too elderly to continue the journey. I'm trying to bring her over to Belgium, but I can't. I really miss her!

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

Alternative care

Even if it isn't possible to replace a mum or a dad, many children who have come here alone emphasise the importance of having a mentor family, a mentor father or mentor mother, or an association that protects and supports them like a family. A few of the children talk about the essential role of associations like Mentor-Escale, which allow them to mix with trusted persons.

“ Having mentor families helps. I have one, and thanks to them, I feel better and more confident.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

Two months ago, they started a 'Buddy' project at the centre. It is a sort of mentoring scheme with people from the commune. A volunteer who lives in the neighbourhood offers to take care of a young person from the centre. My Buddy gave me a lot of information.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ Mentor-Escale is like a family. When I left the reception centre, I didn't know anyone, and they were the ones that helped me get my papers in order and look for accommodation, so that I could integrate in Belgium. Mentor-Escale also helped me find a school. Mentor-Escale still plays an important role in my life today. When the school needs to talk to a parent, I ask them to call Mentor-Escale. When I don't feel good psychologically or I feel down, when I want to speak to someone I trust, I always come to Mentor-Escale. And when I'm happy too.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, CAMEROON -



This girl talks about the importance of being surrounded by trusted persons:

“ When I have a problem or when I simply want to speak to someone, I go to Mentor-Escale. It is very important for me that there are people I can trust and with whom I can talk about very personal things. I've got no one else for that.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

THE PROCEDURE

A heavy burden

The uncertainty concerning their stay in Belgium has a considerable effect on the children. They do not know whether they will be authorised to remain here or whether they will have to return to their country of origin. The procedure is a recurring problem among all the children. The wait makes them feel insecure. Many children are subjected to permanent stress associated with waiting for a decision. Some deplore the fact that some children are treated differently. They don't understand why some obtain an answer very quickly, while others have to wait for years.

“ The asylum procedure is difficult to understand. It's a difficult issue. Some young people have been here for four or five months and others for much longer before receiving an answer: positive or negative. Why? Why do some people receive the decision more quickly? We would like there to be more clarity right from the start, as soon as we arrive. It would be clearer and we could start our lives.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ I don't like the asylum procedure. I've no patience, I don't like waiting.

- 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DJIBOUTI -

“ I don't like having to wait for papers.

- 12-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ On the first day, I saw someone who had been here for four years, so I thought that if the same thing happened to me, I wouldn't be able to handle it. Waiting for four years is far too long for me.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ It was very difficult for me to get the official papers. My father has been here for 16 years and he still doesn't have them.

- 14-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -



“ They say I must wait and be patient. Owing to the stress and bad circumstances, I'm in very low spirits.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

I know someone who has been here for two years and who already speaks Dutch very well. All he does is wait; that causes a lot of stress.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ It's difficult to get papers. My father has asked twice. The first time, the commune said no.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, NICARAGUA -

For unaccompanied children, waiting for a decision concerning their application for asylum or to stay is an additional burden. Some of these children have spent more time here than in their country of origin. They have been able to learn the language, go to school and integrate, and they are afraid of having to return to a country that they no longer consider theirs.

“ It's really difficult! When you're 18 years old, they tell you you have to leave. You've studied or you're still studying, but you have to leave the centre and maybe return to a country you don't know anymore! It's very difficult. There are children who have spent their life in Belgium from the age of five to 18 and they're told they won't get their papers. We must be given an answer much more quickly, at 14 or 15 years old, so that we can envisage another future or begin another procedure.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

“ There are people who have been here for 12 years without having any papers.

- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BURUNDI -



THE PROCEDURE

A heavy burden

The uncertainty linked to the future, the lack of clarity regarding the right to stay in Belgium, prevents certain children from focusing on the present. It makes making any plans for the future very difficult.

“ The future is dismal for me. With the asylum procedure, I'm not sure about the future. I have no idea what will happen after my interview at the police station. What's next? What's going to happen? The person conducting the interview is in control. My future depends on one person, I think about that every day.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I don't know what I'm going to do in life. I don't know what I'm going to do in the future. I've been here for three years and I have no answer.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, MOROCCO -

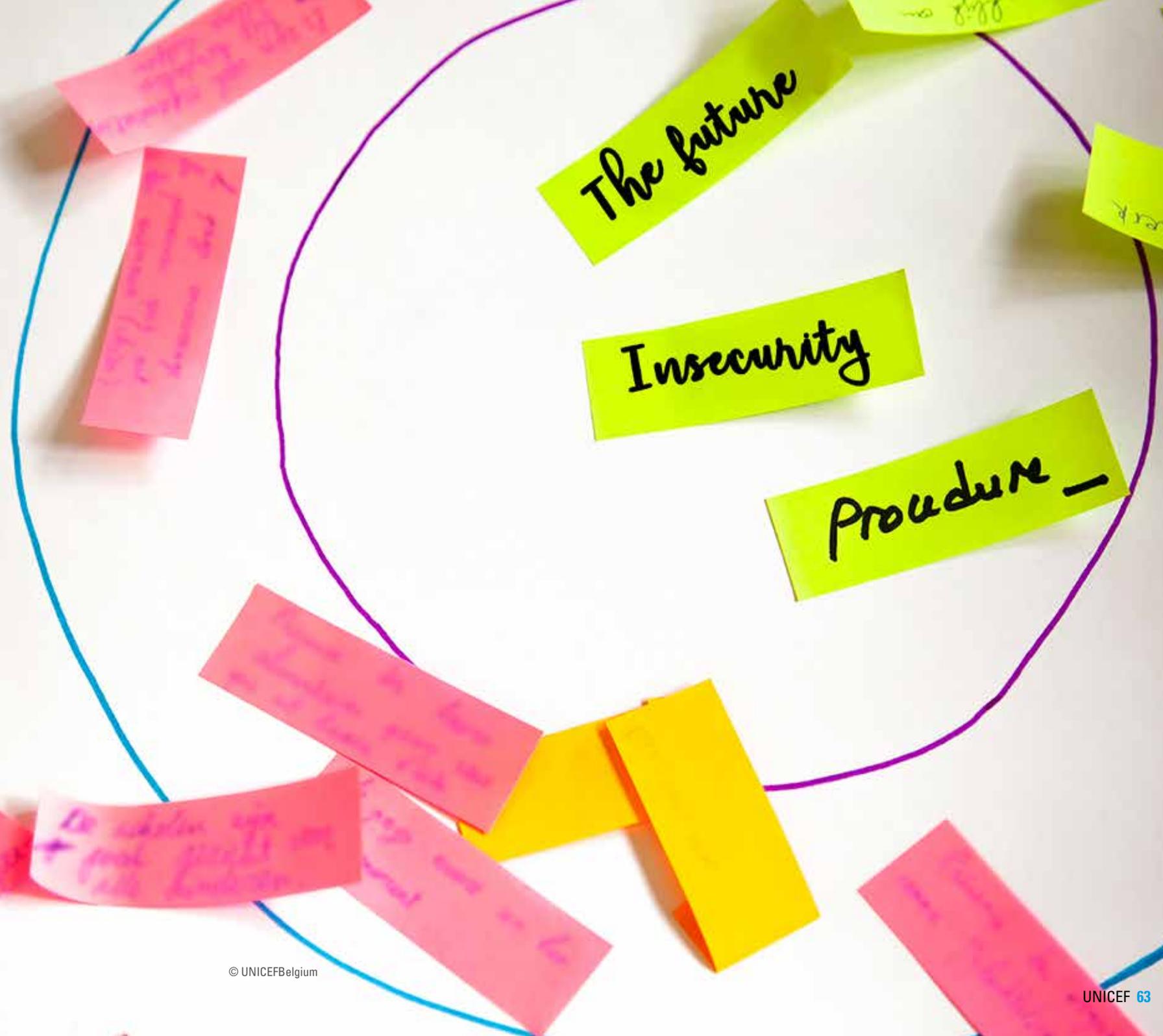
“ I can't concentrate on my studies; it's such a weight not knowing what will happen to me after the procedure. What will happen to my family?

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

'The procedure is too long'. Many of the children complain about it, because they consider it to take far too long, which prevents them from living fully in the present, focusing on school and feeling confident about the future. The children would like to have more clarity concerning this procedure. How long can they stay and what will happen afterwards? What will happen if the decision is negative? For many children, it is very difficult to live with this uncertainty. It leads to stress and tensions. The children recommend a procedure limited in time.

“ The procedure is very difficult for children who are alone here in Belgium. The procedure is far too slow. Some of them wait four, five, six years before getting an answer. In our group, some young people have been here for three years and still haven't got an answer. It's impossible to imagine the future in these conditions. You don't know where you'll have to go afterwards, you've studied, but what's the point in studying if you don't know where you're going to go? Everything is ruined. There should be a procedure limited to one or two years for unaccompanied children. There should also be less time between the second interview and the answer. If we get an answer faster, we can start another procedure. If that takes more time, we should at least be told why it's taking so long. Children that have spent five years in Belgium and who arrived here when they were little, should receive papers, because they don't know their country of origin anymore

- GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE BETWEEN 8-17 YEARS OLD, FROM AFGHANISTAN, GUINEA, DRC, CAMEROON, BURUNDI, MOROCCO, BRAZIL, ALGERIA -



THE PROCEDURE

A heavy burden

“ We would like to know more quickly what our future will be, to have a faster procedure. Some children have been here for two years already, sometimes even five years!

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ We're here now, but when will that change? This uncertainty is very difficult to bear, we really have to live from day to day. In my opinion, it would be better if everyone knew how long it takes and if everyone had the same deadline, for instance, one year.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ We're all happy to be here, but I agree: the procedure is the biggest problem.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ The procedure is too long; set the same period for everyone. We're human beings after all, not cows or pigs. We're human beings. The only thing we do here is sleep and eat.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

The children consulted recommend clear and adapted information as soon as they arrive. Any written documents should be accompanied by oral information.

We've received a brochure with information. According to the brochure, the waiting time isn't long, but in practice, you sometimes have to wait up to two years to get an interview.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ It's good to receive information in the beginning. We received information in a brochure. But I can't read the brochure and we weren't given any oral information.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -



Guardians and lawyers offer inconsistent help

Children left to fend for themselves on the way to the Immigration Office. Others find themselves without a lawyer on the day of the interview for an asylum application. And others are surprised to receive such little information. And yet, children who arrive alone in Belgium are allocated a guardian and a lawyer who are supposed to help them out. According to the children who speak in this report, the involvement of these two 'figures' is variable. The children often have the impression of being alone during the various stages of their procedure. It is not very easy to go to the Immigration Office alone, because you do not know the way or the country's language. Several children have even had to walk for a long time to find the Immigration Office or the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons. It is not easy for them to take trains to go to a city they do not know. Their guardian or lawyer has not always prepared them. The children said that they were missing information on the procedure and that they are not always informed about the decisions taken.

“ They told me to go there alone. I got confused when I was there, close to the Office. There are a lot of entries, a lot of exits, I didn't know what to do. I walked around with my child all day long. My guardian came to fetch me at the Gare du Nord, then, after the appointment, she left. I didn't even know where to buy the tickets, where the platform was. It went very badly. To find the Gare du Nord, find the right platform, buy my ticket and go back to the centre, it took me more than three hours, I arrived here at 8.00 p.m., even though my appointment was earlier, at 4.00 p.m.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I missed my first appointment at the Immigration Office. Now, I'm used to it. No one wakes you up here. Back home, it's your family that wakes you up. Now, for the interview, I've decided not to go to sleep, because I have to get up early to go to the Office and I'm scared of not waking up. I went alone to the Office and I saw my guardian there.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ If you have an appointment, you don't know how to get there, take the train, how to go about it. Back home, it isn't complicated. Here, it's complicated. A lot of papers, you have to go to Brussels, you're given papers. It's difficult for me.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ Apparently, minors must be accompanied, but it isn't true. You should be better accompanied. You're given the documents, but nothing is explained to you. If you don't speak French very well, you don't understand, for instance, what happens when you're 18, where to go for the appointments and all that. They gave me a map, but I don't speak French very well, so what am I supposed to do?

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

THE PROCEDURE

Guardians and lawyers offer inconsistent help

“ I'd like to have more information, it's not at all helpful not knowing. My lawyer is in Louvain-la-Neuve. But here, they can change your lawyer without you knowing. At the centre, they change the young people's lawyer, just like that, it happened to a girl here. They at least need to give you the information.

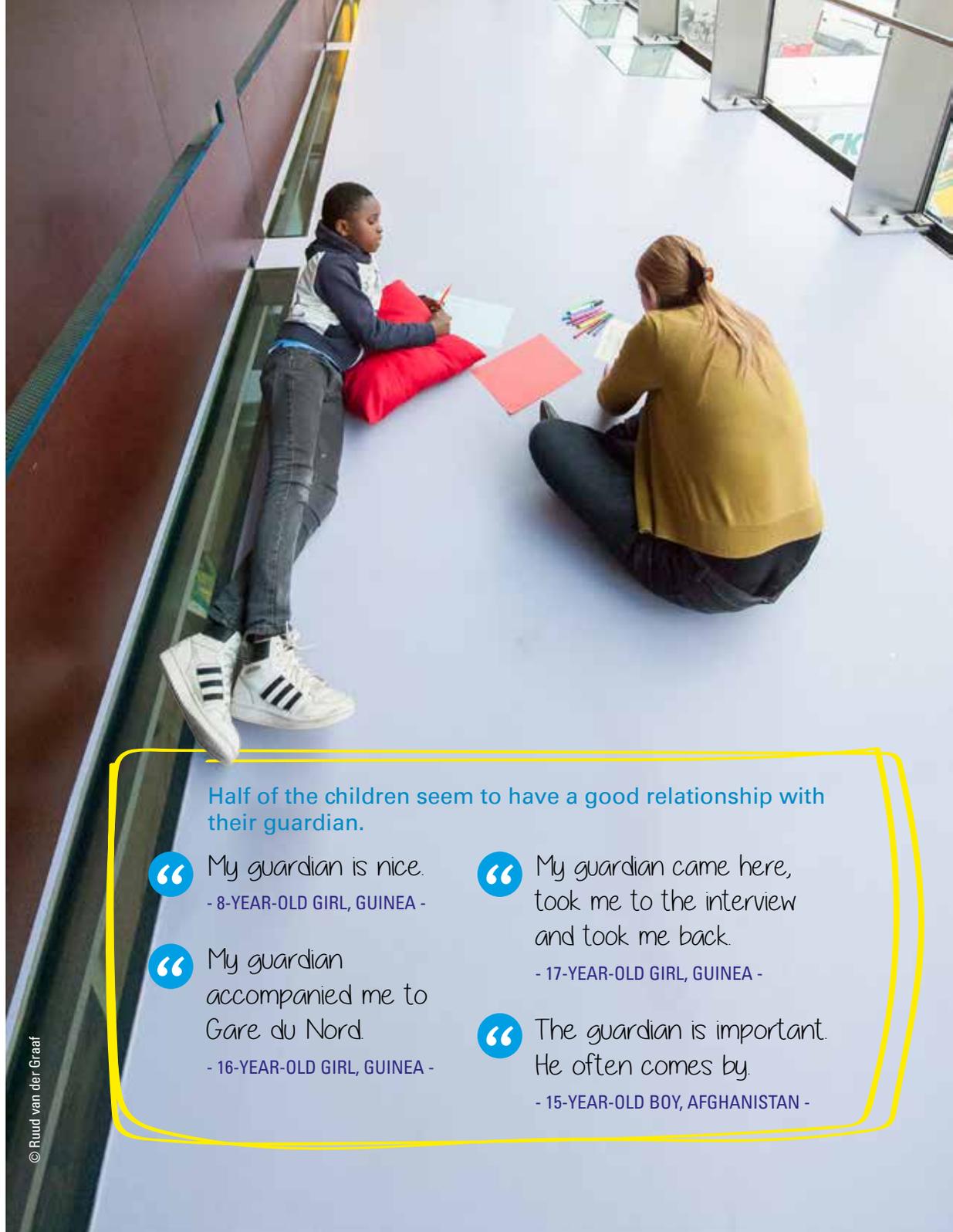
- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I received information through my lawyer. I said I would tell the truth. On the day of the interview, my lawyer wasn't there. The guardian wasn't there either, I went to the interview alone.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I've already had two interviews, but the lawyer wasn't present, and he isn't available for an appointment. I get the impression that neither the lawyer nor the interpreter listen to me. The lawyer must help me. There really isn't enough information, that's the problem. What are the different possibilities? I don't know what the possible situations are, and I should know them, I would be prepared, I would like to know. I would like to have the information, be prepared and accompanied.

- 19-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -



Half of the children seem to have a good relationship with their guardian.

“ My guardian is nice.
- 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ My guardian accompanied me to Gare du Nord.
- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ My guardian came here, took me to the interview and took me back.
- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ The guardian is important. He often comes by.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

The other half of the children don't have a good relationship with their guardian. They are disappointed by the lack of trust and the fact that they don't listen. The guardians are seldom there (some children have only seen them once) and they don't inform them of the procedure. Some children would like to change guardian, but they don't know how.

- “ I've changed guardian three times. I don't know who I can trust anymore.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ My guardian never comes to the centre. One day, he was supposed to come, but he never came. He didn't even apologise.
- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -
- “ I would like to change guardian, but it didn't work. It's difficult to change.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ My guardian makes me do things like going to eat at Quick, but I don't like it. She forces me to talk. She talks too much. She always decides about my life. She says I'm too young. But it's not true!
- 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL, CAMEROON -
- “ The guardian I had before, I saw twice. Afterwards, he went to work in Switzerland. I was provided with another guardian. She never tells me anything. She doesn't give me any information on the interviews or the procedure. The former guardian who left, kept me informed.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

- “ My guardian travels a lot. Every time I try to get in touch with her, she's abroad, in Brazil, in Italy, in Bolivia, etc. I can't reach her over there. It was the lawyer who replaced her at the interview. But other than that, everything's okay. I have enough information.
- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -
- “ I've been here for a month and I've never seen them.
- 11-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ The guardian doesn't really support us. He passes by every three, five, six months for two hours.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ The guardian should take on this role (of parent) more. They should pass by more often. Not just telephone. Not every three months. They should go and see the young people.
- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BURUNDI -
- “ The guardians know nothing about our reality.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -
- “ It's difficult to talk to the guardian. I've never said it, but I'm taking the opportunity to say it here.
- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -
- “ I was told that the guardian is like my mother, like my father. A mother or a father can't do that and say, 'Come and join me over there'.
- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -



THE PROCEDURE

The interpreters are not (always) allies

During the interview with the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, children who do not speak French or Dutch can benefit from the help of an interpreter. The handful of children who spoke on this subject consider that the interpreter did not always understand their story or that they did not play their role. Some even find that the interpreter interferes in the procedure. One boy stressed the fact that an interpreter should be present at each meeting with the lawyer.

“ When we went to the appointment with the lawyer, there was an interpreter the first time, but not the second time. You have to tell your whole story to an interpreter, who often modifies the information. I get the impression that the interpreters aren't objective, or that they don't always translate correctly. There should be an interpreter at every meeting with the lawyer. Otherwise, you have to do it yourself, I'm learning Dutch now. But it's still difficult.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

The interpreter didn't come from the same country, they didn't speak the right Portuguese. The information got mixed up and was misunderstood.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

At the Immigration Office, the interpreter does the commissioner's job, but not his own job as an interpreter. They say to us, 'It's not true, you're not 16 or 17 years old. You're 18 years old'. By doing that, they're not interpreters anymore.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

THE PROCEDURE

Age tests

In case of doubt concerning the age of a foreign minor - after verification of their documents or if the child does not have any - the child must undergo an age test. The handful of young people who talked about this subject had a very bad experience of this test. For some of them, this test is not fair and symbolises a sort of mistrust regarding their story. The young people find that this test isn't reliable. It can be upsetting, because it sometimes modifies the perception of their own story and casts a doubt on their word. This test raises many tensions. Some children are therefore given an age that is older or younger than the age they stated upon arrival.

“ As regards age, it's not a fair situation; no one knows, except our parents. I was 16 when I arrived, I'm sure of my age, they told me 'you're 18' and it's written 18 in the letter. I think this method isn't fair, I find it difficult that someone else is telling you how old you are. The fact that we don't receive any explanation about the results makes it all very difficult to understand.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ The age determination test isn't fair. We're not animals, but human beings like you. Why don't you simply listen to us? In other countries, like France and Germany, they don't do this test. That's what I've heard. I went to the Office of the Commissioner General with my birth certificate, and they told me it was a false birth certificate, and they took it from me and never gave it back. The Immigration Office told me that they couldn't give me back my certificate because I could sell it to someone else.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ I did the age test when I arrived. I was 16 at the time, I had to do the test. After four months at the centre, I did the test again. Everyone was 19 years old then and one of the young people who was 20, was estimated as being 16 years old.

- 19-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I'm 16, but the system said no, you're 19. I can appeal, but I didn't. They told me it was negative, and at the centre, they told me that it wouldn't change anything. I know that I could make an appeal, but it's too difficult to sort out with the lawyer, there's not enough time.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I'm 16, but according to the test, I'm 17. If everything is a lie, then people will say that I'm a 'liar' and everything will be slowed down, it's not good for me. It's inhuman: they say I'm lying, I'm not lying, I do the test, and they believe me, or not.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES

Constant changes

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The majority of the children we met had been shunted from one reception centre to another. A young boy explained that he had been in four centres since his arrival in Belgium. This fragmented reception doesn't encourage the children's integration in their local environment. Especially when certain refugee children don't feel sufficiently informed about how the centres work, which complicates their adaptation. Added to all that are the linguistic problems. Some French-speaking children were sent to Flanders, thus increasing their feeling of isolation. Others were moved from a French-speaking centre to a Dutch-speaking one (or vice versa). Each time, they had to relearn the language, find a new school, make new friends, deal with a new social environment and, sometimes, new rules. All these changes are very difficult for children to deal with:

“ The people at my old centre weren't nice to me. The boys were nasty. No one spoke French. They spoke Flemish. I was all alone there, it was difficult.

- 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ At the beginning, I found it difficult to understand how the centre worked. You come from another centre, you don't know anyone, and no one is there to advise you. In the other place, they rang a bell when it was time to eat. Here, there are set mealtimes. But I didn't know. I missed several meals and I didn't eat for a day. Then I asked people and now I understand better.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ I've been here for eight, nine months and in Belgium for two years. Before, I was in Mouscron. I left because the centre closed.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES

Constant changes

- “ I've been in Belgium for nearly five years. I was in two centres and a social centre for one year.
- 9-YEAR-OLD BOY, ANGOLA -
- “ I've been in the centre for three years and in Belgium for eight years. I've been in four centres, including one in Flanders. I was in a social centre for four years.
- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -
- “ My first centre was in Germany. There were a lot of people there. I prefer the centre here.
- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, ALBANIA -
- “ I've been here three months. I spent a week in the emergency centre for the homeless in Brussels.
- 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DJIBOUTI -
- Some children who arrived alone do nevertheless appreciate going through a referral centre when they arrived in Belgium:**
- “ I think it's good to be in a centre in the beginning, and to meet people with experience of living here, to start learning to speak French. If I had lived alone when I arrived, I wouldn't have met anyone.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I was at the referral centre, it was good!
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

The food in the centre is 'Belgian'. Someone who has just arrived has never eaten a dish like that and doesn't know what it is. No one is here to explain to us, except the ones who've been at the centre for a long time, who've been here for two years, sometimes even five years. We're obliged to eat, because it's either that or nothing.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

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Food: the culinary shock

It's a major subject of discussion among the children. The food at the reception centres is clearly a problem. Potatoes every day. And it is 'either that or nothing', says a young Afghan. For these children, food is the memory of family meals, smells from their country of origin. It is an emotional link with their history. In other words, the collective meals at the centres are not a success. Several children who have arrived alone would like it to be easier to cook for themselves, but that often seems to be very complicated; others would like to eat alone with their parents. However, while the children have a lot to say on this subject, it isn't the theme at the top of their agenda. It is only a priority for the teenage mothers.

“ People older than me, who are 50 or 60 years old, when they come from their country, they never go to eat. In the morning, they don't eat. At midday, they don't eat. In the evening, they just want to prepare a meal themselves.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We'd like to cook in the room, but we can't. You have to register to cook. You can't just do it like that, you have to put your name down on a big piece of paper.

- 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALBANIA -

“ I miss not eating with my family. Here, anyone can come and sit next to you.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

“ I don't like it when the others eat with their hands next to me.

- 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALBANIA -

“ In my centre, I had to make sandwiches in the evening after the meal. I received a packet. Sometimes, it wasn't okay, so I ate in the morning and the evening, but not at lunchtime.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ When I was at the centre, I ate bread with chocolate every lunchtime.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ There are potatoes every day.

- 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALBANIA -

THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES

Pocket money

Pocket money is a source of concern for all teenagers, and all the more so for young exiles who feel isolated and receive no 'extras'. The children speak freely about this subject. They receive 7.40 euros in pocket money a week and consider it to be very little. Some would like to buy food, sweet drinks, clothes, a telephone card, or even a public transport ticket or do sports outside the centre. But they can't. 7.40 euros does not give them any room for manoeuvre. With such a small amount of money, they consider they can't do anything.

“ When we need clothes, it's not possible. We receive 7 euros; it's enough to buy a Coke, not clothes. Here, we have the chance to receive clothes every three months. It's on a set date, at a set time. If you're not there, you don't receive anything, and you have to wait three months. Often, the clothes don't fit, they're old and torn. Last week, my shoes were already broken, the sole had come off. And I have to wait three months before receiving new ones.

Some children receive 7 euros and, in general, they try not to eat outside the centre, so they can save up to buy clothes. There's a very big difference between the centres in Belgium. People are received better in the smaller centres, you receive clothes every month there.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ 7.40 euros a week for everything, that's nothing!
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We don't receive money for clothes. We only have second-hand clothes. The clothes the Belgians give are ones they don't wear.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We should have more money. When we go to school and it's cold, the clothes aren't suitable.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ There's a place with clothes in the centre. When you go there, you receive clothes, but they aren't always the right size.
- 20-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BURUNDI -

“ It's only after one, two, three months that you can have a bit of money. Hard luck if your trousers rip. We need money for clothes.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We need a bit of money to phone, for clothes, food.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ I ate nothing at school at lunchtime. Nor at 4.00 p.m. I had to wait until 6.00 p.m. If I got up late, I didn't have my bread and butter and I had to wait until 6.00 p.m. With a bit of money, I could have bought myself some food.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We have no money for a ticket. If it's not for an appointment, you don't get any.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ I had no tickets left to go to the gym and I was told to pay, it wasn't possible.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

My problems are: food and tickets when you want to get around. Otherwise, I think the centre is very good. I would like to do more of my own cooking.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ For public transport tickets, you sometimes want to go and visit Brussels, buy things, but with 7 euros, you pay 3 euros for the outbound ticket, 3 euros for the return ticket, what have you got to buy something? What's left? Nothing, you have to stay here.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

Some young people would like to do a student job to earn a bit of money.

“ The adults sometimes work, but the children go to school. You can't work, you only have 7 euros a week. You go to school every day, it's difficult.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

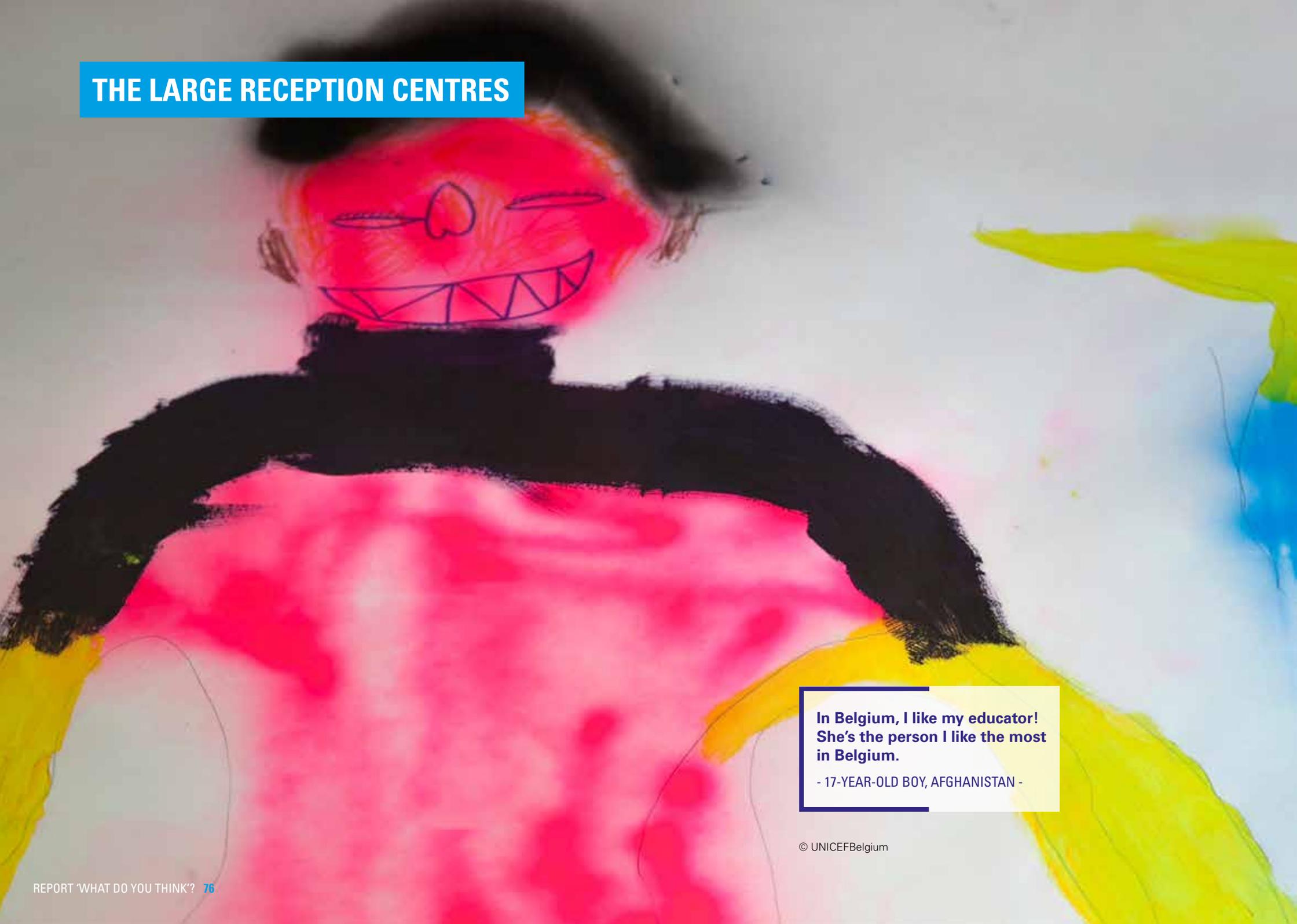
“ For me, the most difficult thing is finding a student job. If you are an unaccompanied foreign minor, you can't have a student job.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -

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THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES



**In Belgium, I like my educator!
She's the person I like the most
in Belgium.**

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

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Erratic support

According to the interviews conducted with the children, help given by the educators at the reception centres is very erratic. Some children are very grateful for the support that the staff at the centres give them every day. Others are not quite of the same opinion and complain of a real lack of support. They mention shortcomings in the information given to them. A group of young people emphasise the lack of respect towards them from authoritarian educators. One boy thinks that those who behave badly may get better support. A young girl says that she was completely left to her own devices. All these difficulties are exacerbated when they are experienced by unaccompanied minors.

“ Regarding the organisation of the centre, an educator gradually helped me. It was thanks to the social worker. I explained to her and she spoke to the educators. Afterwards, an educator came to see me.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ Lieve at Fedasil is nice. At least she helps me.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I find that the support at the centre is sometimes good, sometimes not. When I'm sick, I'm only given medicine. But I need help.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ We would like the educators to stop giving us orders, to be polite, nice, respectful and understanding, that they listen more, that they support the young people with their plans. They should put more trust in the young people. We should be able to get advice when we need it and only when we need it, they should stop giving us orders. The adults should be more respectful to the children.

- GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE BETWEEN 8 AND 17 YEARS OLD, FROM AFGHANISTAN, GUINEA, DRC, CAMEROON, BURUNDI, MOROCCO, BRAZIL, ALGERIA -

“ When there are fights at the centre, those who behave the worst are favoured, they can go to a smaller centre with better support.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

In the centre where I was, there weren't enough educators for the unaccompanied foreign minors, I had become completely independent.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BURUNDI -

“ The educators should come on the first day. Show us around, explain how things work. But they don't explain

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES

The large centres: living environments and tensions

Refugee and migrant children are highly critical of the large reception centres. Many negative elements were expressed by the children. These large structures aren't adapted to their age. These centres are considered as 'depressing, violent and dirty'. Many children are unhappy about the resulting crowding in the centre, the violence, the fights and the fact that there are several people to a room, mixing with adults, putting up with the noise day and night. The children complain about not being able to sleep and, subsequently, not being able to concentrate at school. Unaccompanied children would like tailor-made support in small structures.

As for children accompanied by their parents, when they have spent many years in a reception centre, they express the simple desire for a 'normal' family life, in a flat or in small reception structures, far from the large centres.

A lot of residents

In the large centres, the difficulties of unaccompanied children are particularly glaring. They mix with a lot of people there, including adults. They share their room. They complain of the noise and the lack of sleep. They don't like this sort of reception.

- “ It's an enormous centre here and things aren't as good. For example, the children are a lot more emotional here. Some children suffer emotionally because it's depressing.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ The first year was the most difficult. I slept in a big centre with four people in the same room.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -
- “ Many things were difficult in the centre where I was living: the food, four people in the room, being far from home, the racism. My centre was very far away. Everything was far. You had to walk for five kilometres to go to the shop. There were four people from different countries in the room. We were all very different. We didn't eat the same thing, we didn't speak the same language. I don't speak English.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ Before, there weren't as many refugees in Belgium, so the refugees quickly went into social housing. Now, there are too many refugees. There were far too many people in my centre. There were a lot of problems because there were so many people from different places. When people have been there for more than six months or more than a year, it would be better if they moved to accommodation outside the centre.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, IRAQ -

“ In a large reception centre, there are unaccompanied minors and adults, with six in a room. In the evening, they listen to music and I can't sleep. The centre is far away from everything, and after six in the evening, there aren't any more buses, there's no meal if I arrive late, even when I have to work. I would like a room to myself, so that I can sleep properly and study when I want to.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ It was difficult in the centre (I was in two centres). There were four of us in the room, there was a lot of noise in the centre's common room. It was difficult to study, sleep, go to school.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -



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THE LARGE RECEPTION CENTRES

The large centres: living environments and tensions

Violence and hygiene

Violence, arguments, fights and the lack of hygiene are particularly unbearable for the children.

“ It’s dirty in the centre. There are fights all the time here. The centre is crazy and dirty. Crazy because there are problems sometimes. The problems are the adults. They argue. I’d like to live in a flat.

- 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL, CHECHNYA -

The hygiene, here at the centre, it’s very dirty. Cockroaches in the room and fights.

- 9-YEAR-OLD BOY, ANGOLA -

“ The people aren’t okay here. I’ve had problems with people. There are arguments all the time.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

Alternatives

Unaccompanied children dream of a calm and well-defined environment. They would like tailor-made support or a host family.

“ We need support. We have already experienced a lot of things and it’s good to live in a calmer environment where adults help and support us. Even if we don’t always like it, we need to be encouraged to go to school, go to bed on time and respect the rules.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I would like to go to a host family.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

After having spent many years in reception centres with their family, the children would like some privacy. They would like to live in a house or flat, far away from the reception centres. However, those who manage to get to this stage are quickly faced with the difficulty of finding decent accommodation. A difficulty that is particularly acute for unaccompanied minors who have to leave the reception centre when they reach the age of 18.

“ I live in a centre with my family. I sleep in a room with my mum, my sister and my older brother. It’s difficult, because my

brother is already older. I don’t go out of the room much, because there are so many people in this centre. I would prefer to live in a house

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ It’s difficult to find a house because of discrimination and prejudices.

- 14-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I live in Namur and I pay 600 euros for housing Belgians don’t want.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ It’s very difficult to find housing. You’re asked a lot of questions: about work, welfare

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ I’ll be 18 in a few months’ time and I’ll have to leave the centre. I don’t want to, I’m not ready. I’ve been looking for housing for three months, but I can’t find any. What am I going to do?

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -



It was very difficult to find housing. We had to wait for two months to move in somewhere.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

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FANTASIA

SUPPORT FOR RESILIENCE: SCHOOL, LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS

School: stability and hope for the future

The children like school. They all want to learn French or Dutch, and all of them express the desire to start or continue their studies. This is actually what they are doing, because in Belgium, education is a right for all children, regardless of their migratory status. Children who speak one of the national languages and who haven't dropped out of school, can directly attend a normal class. For the others, getting up to speed and learning the language are done in a class for new arrivals (DASPA/OKAN classes). Children who have suffered major trauma, or those who live in a large reception centre, find learning the language and returning to school difficult. The length of the school day, the lack of sleep and the pace of the lessons can cause adaptation problems.

■ It's difficult because...

“ It's difficult to learn a new language.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ARGENTINA -

“ The school day is too long.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

It's chaos at the centre. Many people do what they like and make noise late into the night. It's very difficult, because I have to study and get up to go to school. I fall asleep late and I'm often tired in the morning.

- 14-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ School is difficult, because I have a lot of problems and I can't get to sleep and it's difficult to go to school.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ War causes lifelong trauma. Children see their parents die. War is a shock. Some have become blind, others deaf, others handicapped. The children are destroyed inside when they see the being dearest to them killed or beaten. Young people who are the victims of war lack love, parents, friends, brothers who are attached to them. They're alone in the playground. They have a bubble in their heart, sometimes they let go and get annoyed and violence erupts. It's never too late to make up for it. Maybe people will get closer to each other to change that.

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

SUPPORT FOR RESILIENCE: SCHOOL, LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS

School: stability and hope for the future

■ The children like school

Despite the difficulties, all these children like school and its reassuring environment! School helps them to overcome the traumas they have suffered and provides hope for the future.

“ I get support from the support workers and teachers. They don't hit you when you do something wrong, like in Afghanistan. They're nice.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ People are kind in Belgium, I like school and my friends.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I like school, speaking French.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, DRC -

“ It's a good school.

- 13-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -



School is good.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I like speaking French with my friends at school. I like school!
- 11-YEAR-OLD BOY, IRAN -

“ Here, I like school and studying. I also like the prospects for the future we have in Belgium.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -

“ I do secretarial studies at a school in Zaventem. Sometimes, it's difficult for me, because I'm a new student and I've only been studying Dutch for a year. I would like to succeed in my studies, work, have a family. I hope I'll be able to go back and visit my country one day.
- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

The children all appreciate the DASPA/OKAN* classes and willingly learn French or Dutch.

“ I think it's a good idea to have DASPA classes in Belgium.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -



*OKAN-class: classes for newcomers

“ It's difficult to make new friends in the normal class. OKAN is easier, because everyone is in the same situation. It's difficult to understand everything in class. When you're in the normal class, there aren't many people, either pupils or teachers, who speak to you. It's also difficult to learn a new language.
- 18-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

I learn a lot of things at school, it's really good! I know all the children in the OKAN class but not all the children in the other classes. It's difficult when you leave the OKAN classes. You miss OKAN. They speak quickly in the other classes

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

■ Not easy to make Belgian friends

The children would like more contact with young Belgians of their age. This would help them to learn the language and extend their network. However, the DASPA/OKAN classes mean that they are separated from the other classes. And some migrant or refugee children sometimes encounter hostility, or mistrust, from Belgian pupils.

“ We would really like to make Belgian friends so that we can learn the language better.
- 14-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ In the OKAN classes, we're separated from the others. It doesn't really matter. But it upsets my friend. During an OKAN course, another pupil said to her, "You're an OKAN, you're not at home here". Why do we have to be separated in this way? In my school, the 'normal' pupils have a break between 11.15 am and us at 12.45 pm. I would like to have a break at the same time as them; I should be given the opportunity to learn Dutch. It's not good to separate us.
- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ANGOLA -

“ During the course, all the young girls were very curious. They asked a lot of questions, but during break, they didn't talk to us and we were left alone.
- 18-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

SUPPORT FOR RESILIENCE: SCHOOL, LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS

School: stability and hope for the future

■ What special needs are there?

Those children who haven't been to school for many years, or those who arrive at the end of the school year, need more support after school or during the holidays.

This 14-year-old Syrian girl has never been to school. She would like help with her homework:

“ School is very difficult for me. I never went to school in my country. I would like someone to help me think about my future so that I can succeed. I would like help with my homework after school. It's very difficult for me to make any plans for the future. I'm scared of not succeeding, of failing at school.

- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -



This young girl, who arrived at the end of the school year, didn't want to sit doing nothing while she waited for the new school year to begin in September. She asked for remedial classes in French and maths, and she obtained this support. In her opinion, as soon as a young person arrives in Belgium, they should be offered classes such as these.

“ I'll be going to school. I don't know how it works here. I can't say anything for the moment. When I arrived, I was simply told that I was going to be enrolled for the new school year in September, because it was currently the exam period. I asked to have lessons here and a volunteer gave me some. I wasn't here in May, I was in another centre. I went to classes in the other centre. Here, I'll be going to school. I told the volunteer I wanted to continue school, and she offered me maths and French lessons during the month of June. During the holidays, the volunteer was on vacation. There's no chance to learn languages. I said I wanted to study and they said they would go and ask for a volunteer to come and help me. I didn't want to stay here doing nothing. It's me who asked for the lessons, because I didn't want to left by myself like that. Ideally,

they should have offered it to me. But it's me who asked for it. I don't know if all the young people receive this help. Everyone has their own ideas and needs. But it would be good to talk about it to every young person and explain properly how the classes work here. Talk about it upon arrival.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

Some young people regret not having received much information regarding the possibilities of studying or training for something. As they approach the age of 18, some young people would like to learn a profession or continue their studies. But they don't know how to go about it or even if they can do a course or still go to school.

“ When I came here, because this is my second centre, no one showed me anything. I arrived here in June and I don't know if I'm going to school or if I'm doing a course, because I'll be 18 soon. I still haven't been enrolled at school. I don't know anything. I didn't ask my social worker, because I don't know who to ask.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ I'm going to ask the social worker. I haven't asked yet. They haven't explained to me. It would be better if the social worker asked the questions and explained herself. I would like to be given the information upon arrival. I've also heard that when you're 18, you don't go to school but to training. But how can you do training if you haven't studied?

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

Young mothers face particular difficulties to combine going to school themselves (getting up, going to school, doing their homework, studying) and taking their child to school or to the nursery (preparing their baby, taking them to the nursery or school, going to fetch them, taking care of them after school): [See the dedicated chapter on isolated teenage mothers.](#)

A photograph showing four young girls sitting on the floor of a tent, playing with dolls. They are surrounded by various dolls, including a Barbie. The tent is made of white fabric, and laundry is hanging on a line in the background. The scene is lit with natural light, suggesting daytime.

SUPPORT FOR RESILIENCE: SCHOOL, LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS

**We have activities
in the centre.**

- 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALBANIA -

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Leisure activities: a driver for resilience and integration

Just like all children around the world, migrant and refugee children like to play. Playing, doing a leisure activity or sport are marvellous ways for young people to develop. They are real tools to overcome hardships, regain interest in the joys of life and show resilience. It is also through leisure activities and sport that children form links with the country's inhabitants and integrate with its social fabric. A few children have the chance to practice a sport or an activity. Unaccompanied minors particularly appreciate the support provided by associations who offer them activities on Wednesdays or at the weekend. However, the majority of children indicated that they didn't have the opportunity to practice a sport or have fun outside the reception centres or school. Several boys were prevented from playing football in a club and bitterly regretted it.

Children like to play

“ Here, we live in security. After school, you can do activities, hobbies.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ In Belgium, I like the leisure activities, going to the cinema and the park.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -

“ There's a lot to do in Belgium, you can do a lot of activities and visit lots of places.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -

“ People help. I can do volleyball in Belgium. I couldn't do any sport in Afghanistan. I like playing the flute. In Afghanistan, I couldn't play the flute and when I did, there were arguments with the neighbours. Here, there aren't any arguments.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ There are games in the centre.

- 12-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

“ Football clubs, sport, it's important.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

These unaccompanied foreign minors who live independently (alone outside the reception centres) appreciate the associations that allow them to do activities on Wednesdays, at the weekend and during the holidays:

“ Sometimes on Wednesdays, we go and cook at Mentor-Escale and we demonstrate how to prepare Afghan food. Sometimes, we also eat Belgian or African dishes there. There are often activities and celebrations at Mentor-Escale to which our friends are also invited.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

Mentor-Escale is also a place where I can take part in activities, such as singing, eating together, doing treasure hunts and going to camp in the summer. These are all the reasons why I say that Mentor-Escale is a family for me.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, CAMEROON -

“ I've been coming to Mentor-Escale for a long time, at least four years. Sometimes, I come for the cookery workshop or to play table football.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

Difficult access to leisure activities

These children also tell us how difficult it is for them to take part in an activity outside school or the centre.

“ For me, it's also very difficult to have any leisure activities. I'd love to do sport, I'd like to play basketball or volleyball, but I can't for the moment.

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ROMANIA -

“ We can't go on school trips because we don't have any papers

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, IRAN -

“ Sometimes, you want to go and visit Brussels, buy things, but with 7 euros, you pay 3 euros for the outbound ticket, 3 euros for the return ticket, what have you got to buy anything? What's left? Nothing, you have to stay here at the centre.

- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

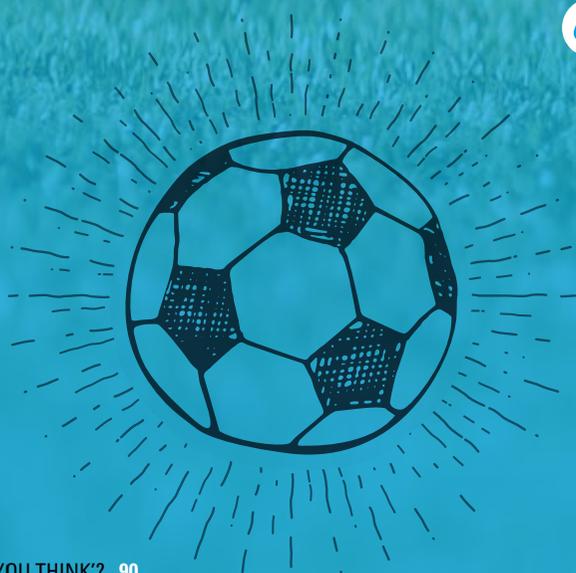
“ When I was there, at the centre, I had no tickets left to do sport after a few weeks and I was told to pay, but I couldn't. When I went to the Office of the Commissioner General for the interview, they asked me 'Why don't you go and do sports?'. I replied, 'Because I haven't got any money'. They told me it was good to do some.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

SUPPORT FOR RESILIENCE: SCHOOL, LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS

Leisure activities: a driver for resilience and integration

The majority of boys would like to play football outside the reception centre. They would like to enrol in a club, take part in training and play matches, but they are prevented from doing so because they have no papers.



“ At the centre, I asked to be enrolled in a football team, but the educator didn't do anything.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I can't play my sport. I'd like to play football, matches. Here, children can't do any sport. We can only do sport here, among ourselves.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

We can go to football training once a week for an hour or two. Now, it's the holidays. It will start again in September. But we can't go to all the training sessions, for us it's just once a week. We would like to go to all the training sessions and matches.

- 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, GUINEA -

“ Young people need more support for their plans, find good football clubs, have budgets for targeted projects.

- GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE BETWEEN 8-17 YEARS OLD, FROM AFGHANISTAN, GUINEA, DRC, CAMEROON, BURUNDI, MOROCCO, BRAZIL, ALGERIA -



■ **Social networks, looking for a good connection**

The young people are disappointed that the Internet isn't available in all the centres. Connection to the Internet would offer a window to the world, allow them to look for information but, especially, help them to remain in contact with their family.

“ There was Wi-Fi for minors at the centre. Wi-Fi is good, because it helps you to stay in contact with your family.

- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ There was no Wi-Fi at my centre. The computer wasn't working. You couldn't speak with your family and your parents, even if you wanted to speak to them.

- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, SOMALIA -

“ You have access to a computer for half an hour a week in the large centres, but the computer is so slow and freezes so often that it's practically useless. Having better Internet access would be a positive thing. We could search on the Internet to find out what there is to do in the surroundings, but we could also contact our family or our friends, consult translation sites or look for information.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

ISOLATED TEENAGE MOTHERS

Mothers, minors, alone, without a family and in exile, all at the same time

They are 16, 17, 18 years old. They come from Syria, Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and Cameroon. They are isolated minors and mothers. Some of them left their country with their baby. Others gave birth in a refugee camp in Greece or Belgium. They are all very vulnerable young women, because they have many issues. There is loneliness on top of the trauma of exile, the lack of family support and the difficulty of assuming the role of mother when they are so young themselves. Many of these mothers are angry. They feel dispossessed of their motherhood, their ability to take care of their child. They would like to make choices for their baby. Be able to buy them clothes, prepare the food of their choice for them. But the lack of money and lack of privacy that prevails in the reception centres causes deep anxiety, making them feel as though their every movement is restricted. These anxieties resurface when their child is sick and they ask for support. Added to this is a deep feeling of insecurity. Going to school under normal circumstances within this context is an impossible task. One young girl even has the impression of being a 'prisoner', of being 'handcuffed'.





Considering the taking in charge of isolated teenage mothers, UNICEF Belgium wishes to stress the important work done in Belgium over the least ten years and thanks the authorities in charge for following up on certain recommendations that have been given by these young mothers.



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ISOLATED TEENAGE MOTHERS

Large reception centres: the loneliness of the mothers

The young mothers who live in large reception centres vent their anger. Some of them feel like prisoners, handcuffed. Others feel depressed. Their accounts, tinged with suffering, reveal the difficulty of living in a large reception centre when you are a mother, a minor, alone, without a family and in exile, all at the same time. All of them would like the chance to be more autonomous. They would like to be allowed to be mothers for their children.

“ You’d die if you spent a day here. You can’t cook, you can’t treat illnesses, you can’t look after your baby. I can tell you, but there the difficulties are endless. We don’t choose this life. There are lots of people living here, full of viruses and germs for the babies. This worries me, and I can’t sleep. So I pray to my God, because I haven’t got anyone. The baby cries, for a long time. I’ve got no help. I’ve got no money: 7.40 euros per week for me and

3 euros for the baby. What can you do with 7 euros? My baby doesn’t want to eat, the food isn’t good. I can only breast-feed, but I haven’t got enough. I can’t give my child just anything. I’ve got no money for clothes for the baby. I can’t buy anything, because I haven’t got any money. We’re alone, with our babies, no one can help us. We have to do everything with nothing.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I haven't got any family. I didn't choose this life. I feel like a prisoner, handcuffed. We have to eat at set hours, 6.00 a.m., 12.00 noon, and if you don't eat then, you don't get any food. For instance, if I'm hungry at 9.00 a.m., there's no food.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ It's difficult not having a house with your baby. The centre isn't adapted to children, like the bathrooms, the meals. It would be good to have my own flat, for me and my baby. I want to study the language, start a new life, find a job. But I have to wait, because it's the summer and there are two months [without school]. In Turkey and Greece, I didn't go to school for five years.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The environment at the centre isn't adapted to mothers and babies. I want to bring up my daughter alone, not at the centre. I don't want her to be brought up by others, with other children. I want to teach her the things that I want to teach her.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ My room is very small, small like this table here. My child can't move. I have to go somewhere else to play with my daughter. I asked if I could change room, but they said no.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ It's difficult to be a mother. I wanted a host family, but I don't know who to tell.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The main difficulty is the centre with a child. In other countries, you get a flat with your baby. Here, you're in a big centre.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

I don't like living in a centre, in a structure. In my opinion, the best thing would be to put us in a centre for mothers, and not in a centre like this, because they can't always take care of you, there are too many mothers. I want a small centre where there are only mothers and where I can get help. If I go to Clairs Vallons, I will be in a unit with mothers. It's not for all mothers. It's just for mothers from the centre who have problems, it's like a hospital.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

ISOLATED TEENAGE MOTHERS

The food, the milk, the lack of autonomy

For the young mothers who speak in this report, their baby's food is a priority. They speak of the constraints concerning mealtimes (set times), the milk which isn't adapted to their child, the cost of basic necessities such as water or powdered milk, and the difficulty of getting it. All of them dream of being able to cook for their child. All these stories show that these young mothers sometimes sink into despair faced with the powerlessness and lack of autonomy they suffer on a daily basis.



“ Here at the centre, the babies have something different, special food. They don't eat the same food as the adults.
- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ They gave me a grater and fruit to make food for my baby.
- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ Feeding the children is difficult and stressful. She eats the food, she drinks the milk, but she doesn't eat the vegetables at the restaurant.
- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I have dreams, I dream of cooking what I want for me and for my baby, at whatever time I want and not eating what I'm obliged to eat. I hope someone will hear me, listen to me, in Belgium.
- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The food isn't good. For the babies, it isn't good. My baby spits out what I give him. Here, we don't have any money to cook. I'd like to have some money and cook for myself. I haven't got enough money to buy food for the baby. We receive 3 euros a week for the baby and there are also clothes. I give the baby the food from here, but he has diarrhoea. So I don't take what they give us here anymore, and I have to cook for him and prepare his meals. But it's difficult without enough money.
- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The main problem is the food. There’s already the issue with the baby milk. Then the baby food. If we want jars, we have to buy them.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

These young mothers talk about the milk which isn’t suitable and the water they have to buy to prepare their child’s bottle:

“ They gave us some milk that was different to the other milk we received. But the babies were used to it, and so they refused the new milk. When we said something, we were told that the doctor said that it was all okay for the babies. But my baby drinks normal milk. Now it’s milk for allergies. I’ve tasted it, it’s bitter, my baby doesn’t want it.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I experienced the same thing regarding the milk. And when I gave the milk to my baby, he didn’t want it. When we say something, they reply that that’s the way it is. Now, I have to give my baby milk no. 2 and I received the no. 3, which isn’t the right milk.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

In my other centre, you received bottles of water. Here, you have to buy the water for your baby or take it from the water fountain. A carton of water costs 6 euros. You get 11 euros with the baby, you buy food for the baby and afterwards, you have nothing left.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



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“ They won’t give me powdered milk because my child is three years old. But the milk in the cartons doesn’t keep. I haven’t got a fridge in my room, so if I open a carton of milk, it goes off.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

ISOLATED TEENAGE MOTHERS

Health

If their children fall ill, the young refugee or migrant mothers are all alone. They have to manage everything, with very little help. They say that no one really listens to them, that there is no support, and that they are extremely tired when their sick babies cry during the night. Some of the young girls are saddened by the fact that they are not taken seriously and that they are even suspected of using their child as an excuse to miss school. All these factors cause stress and have a negative impact on the health of these young mothers. Their accounts reflect an alarming lack of support.

“ I have to do everything. I have to do everything by myself. I take care of everything. If my little girl is sick, I have to stay with her, no one helps me. For instance, she had spots the day before yesterday, like chickenpox. She was crying all night long, she was crying. I took her to see the doctor, and he said: ‘It’s nothing serious, go back to your room’.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ It’s difficult being a mother here at the centre. You don’t feel good mentally, you’re stressed, and therefore, your child doesn’t feel good.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ Before, Madame Françoise looked after the babies, but she can’t look after all of them by herself. Now she’s in the nursery.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The baby has something, he’s got something on his face and the medication isn’t doing anything. No one helps me. I get the impression that I’m not being taken seriously.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The doors are closed at night, so if the baby vomits, you can’t go out and wash it. There’s no hot water to wash it. You have to do everything by yourself, without water in the room.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ When we go to the doctor’s, they say it’s because we don’t want to go to school. There’s no family to help us.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ You haven’t been able to sleep all night because of the baby. The educators know, but it’s me who has to inform the nursery. You get into trouble if you forget to say the child is sick.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

I had no support when I gave birth. It was a caesarean, it was very difficult. I feel like crying every day. I don’t sleep enough. There’s no one here to help us, we have no family.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

The lack of hygiene in the toilets and bathrooms is also of concern to the young mothers.

The bathroom is very dirty. The toilets too. I told the person who cleans that it isn't clean enough. But nobody checks whether the bathroom and the toilets are properly cleaned and if the work has been well-done. There's still excrement sometimes. My baby had allergies because of the filth. The person only comes to clean once. Now, the bathroom is locked. Some people put dirty water in there and throw rubbish in there, even though it's the bathroom for the babies. The bathroom is locked at night.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

Many of the young mothers criticise the lack of privacy in the reception centres. Their accounts indicate that these young women are frightened for their safety and that of their babies at night. A feeling that is expressed in their fear of leaving their baby during the night when they go to the toilet.



“ At night, when the educators go home, I have to take my baby with me. When I need to go to the toilet in the night, I take the baby with me.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

I'm scared to leave the baby alone in my room. He might wake up, be frightened and start crying. When you've got everything in the room, you do what you want. Even if the room is small, you can manage in there instead of going out.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

I'm too scared at night and I don't dare to go out at night to go to the toilet. The toilet is close to the educators' office, not in the corridor.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ It would be good if every girl had a key to the toilet. If you lose the key, you pay it back. That way, you open, make yourself comfortable, then you leave. There's no key for the moment, it's open.

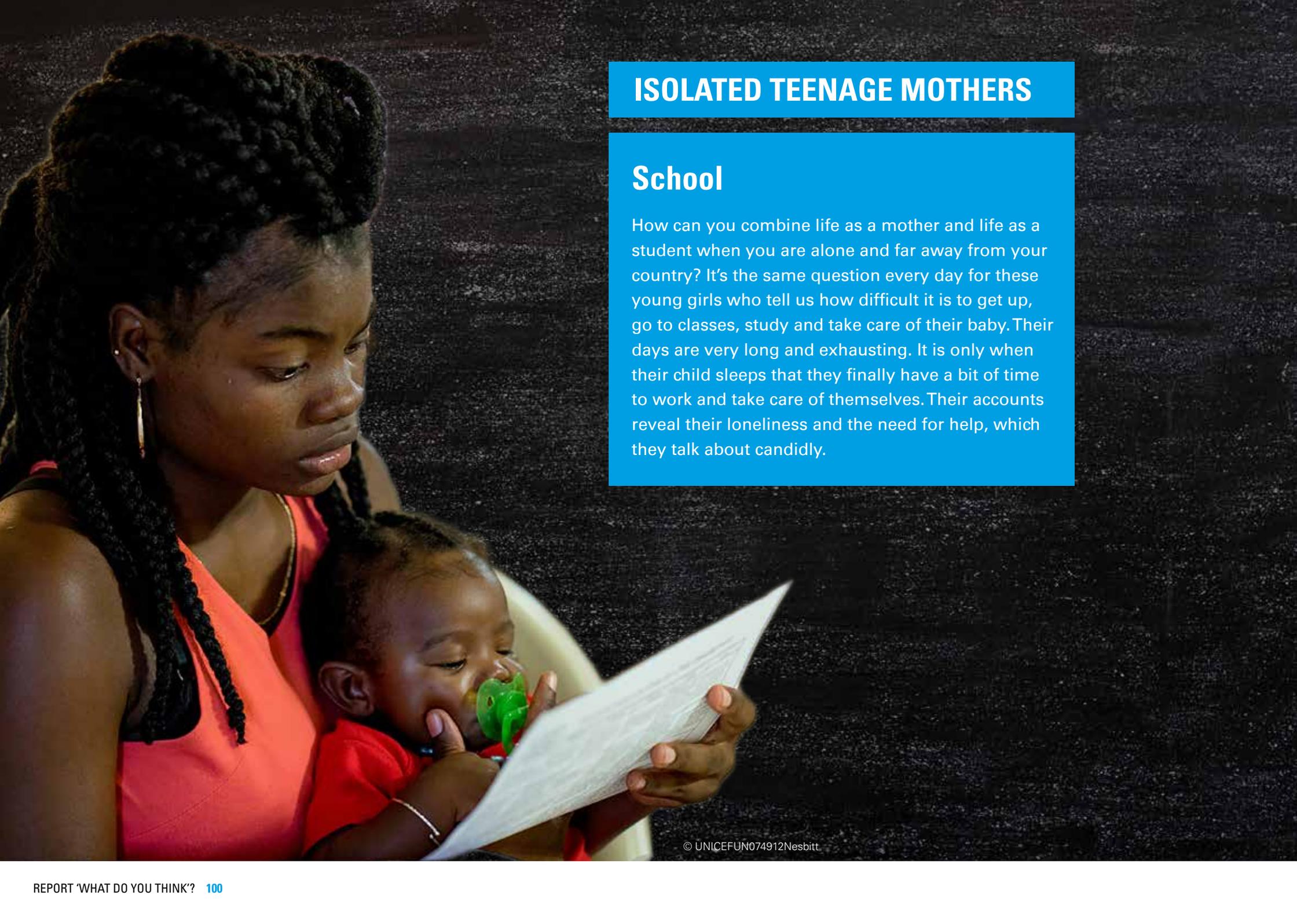
- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ The centre isn't adapted to me. For instance, you're in your room, you want to go to the toilet, no one can look after the baby, you've no one by your side. You have to leave your room to go to the toilet. If you have everything in the room, you can at least leave your child in the room. I put my baby on my back to go to the toilet, otherwise the baby cries at night.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ We don't have any privacy here either. If I have to go to the toilet at night, I'm wearing shorts, I have to get dressed again and take my baby with me because I'm frightened of leaving it alone.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



ISOLATED TEENAGE MOTHERS

School

How can you combine life as a mother and life as a student when you are alone and far away from your country? It's the same question every day for these young girls who tell us how difficult it is to get up, go to classes, study and take care of their baby. Their days are very long and exhausting. It is only when their child sleeps that they finally have a bit of time to work and take care of themselves. Their accounts reveal their loneliness and the need for help, which they talk about candidly.

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I don't go to school yet, but I've heard that it's very difficult to go to school and leave your baby here in the nursery. The nursery closes at 5.00 p.m. and you have to hurry, run. Otherwise you have to ask someone else to come and fetch your baby, but we don't have anyone here.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

I've got problems with school. I have to go, and I have to take my daughter to the nursery. Sometimes, someone helps me to go and fetch her. If I'm late for the nursery, the school refuses to let me leave earlier. I have to get up at 6.00 a.m. to get myself and my child ready. I need help so that I'm not late.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



It takes 10-15 minutes to get to the school, which closes at 4.20 p.m.. You have to run back, because the nursery closes at 5.00 p.m.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

The nursery at the centre should close at 6.00 p.m. because we don't have time when it's 5.00 p.m.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

The nursery isn't a problem for me. But school finishes at 4.20 p.m. You get here at about 4.40 p.m. You quickly have to go and fetch your baby. When you get back from school, you have to go and take care of your child straight away, you have to feed it, wash it, and when it's asleep, only then can you take care of yourself, you have homework to do.

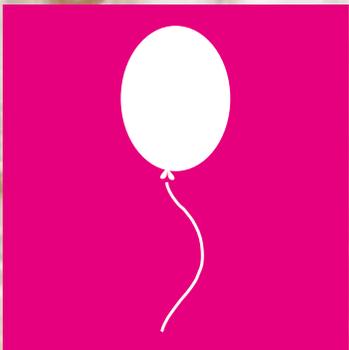
- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

There isn't a place in the nursery for my daughter, but I'd still like to study. It wasn't possible to study in Africa, but here, you have the chance to. You have to give those who want to a chance, even if there's no room in the nursery. What am I going to do if I don't go to school? Because when you're at school, you're busy, you think about other things. When you're with your child all the time, you're a bit tired, and if they go to the nursery, it's easier.

- 18-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

There's no tap in the rooms. You have to go out. There's a bathroom for the babies in the corridor. You have to take everything with you.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



**HOPES AND
DREAMS
OF MIGRANT
AND REFUGEE
CHILDREN**



The hopes and dreams of the children are closely linked to security, stability and freedom, the possibility of receiving an education, working and improving the situation of children in their country of origin. They hope for a better future for all children and protection against abuse. The majority of them hope to remain in Belgium. Others dream of returning to their country, without war, and, above all, being reunited with their family.

“ I dream that the war has ended so that all Syrians can stay in Syria.

- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -

“ I dream of security in Afghanistan.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ I dream of having more schools in Afghanistan and having more protection for children.

- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -

“ If I had a magic wand, I would bring peace to the country, light, harmony, love in the hearts of others. That’s it.

- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, DRC -

I would like to give all the children in my country a school and food.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MALI -

“ I would like to build hospitals and give children an education without violence; stop the violence in families and at school.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

“ I would like to stop female genital mutilation because it isn’t good for children.

- 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, GUINEA -

Even if the large majority of children interviewed want to remain in Belgium, some dream of going back home.

“ It’s very difficult here. I don’t like being here. I can’t have a new life. I was in a refugee camp in Greece for a year and a half. I’d like to go back home, to Syria, without the war, but I can’t. There’s too much insecurity.

- 16-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -

“ I don’t only want to be negative. There are nice people here, but we don’t receive what we need. We need other things. I’ll stay here a bit longer, but I’m very tired and if it doesn’t get better, I’ll leave, I’ll even go back to Syria. I talk, I talk, I talk. I’ve told my story at least ten times. It’s Belgium that chose me

[through the relocation programme] and I came, but I have to do everything, prepare everything, be interviewed. I’m starting all over again as well as possible, but that doesn’t change anything, I won’t have the courage to stay.

- 17-YEAR-OLD MOTHER -



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When we ask them what they want to become later, the children also talk about all the jobs they would like to do: doctor, nurse, vet, surgeon, primary school teacher, secondary school teacher, pilot, mechanic, police officer, lawyer. Some dream of starting a family and having children.

- “ I'd like to become a pilot.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -
- “ I dream of returning to my country!
- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, BRAZIL -
- “ I dream of becoming a vet.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -
- “ I dream of becoming a police officer. First, I want to study law. I'm going to university next year.
- 18-YEAR-OLD BOY, BRAZIL -
- “ I dream of becoming a surgeon.
- 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MOROCCO -
- “ I dream of working in the health sector. I would like to become a nurse.
- 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL, PORTUGAL / GUINEA -
- “ My dream is to have a family.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, ROMENIA -
- “ I dream of becoming a doctor in Belgium.
- 15-YEAR-OLD BOY, SYRIA -
- “ I dream of finishing school and becoming a doctor.
- 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -
- “ I want to become a teacher.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I want to become a mechanic. .
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ Later on, I'd like to become a lawyer, I'd like to get married and have children. I would like my family to come to Belgium. I'd also like to buy a train (I'm scared of driving).
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I want to become a police officer.
- 17-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I dream of becoming a primary school teacher.
- 16-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -
- “ I want to become a doctor.
- 19-YEAR-OLD BOY, AFGHANISTAN -





INTERPRETING THE PRIORITIES: CHILDREN ASK FOR MORE PROTECTION

Migrant and refugee children ask to be protected. After having fled the war, discrimination or extreme poverty; after crossing part of the world by taking routes with potentially fatal dangers, they dream of calm and serenity. They would like to make plans for themselves in a reassuring future. This demand for protection also concerns children who have been exploited during their journey or those who have been the victims of all sorts of abuse. Note that the Belgian authorities are no exception; the children would like this protection to also cover their reception in Belgium, through care that is better adapted to their age.

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The first protection system is the family. The first protection system is the family. The children feel safe with their family. They spoke about it a lot, especially the unaccompanied children. Being alone on the road or in Belgium is very difficult and very risky. All the children mention that they would like to be reunited with their family, but that the documents they are asked for are impossible to obtain. The young mothers who arrived alone in Belgium also say how difficult it is to be a mother, a minor, alone, in exile and without a family to count on.

The children feel secure when they are not forced to do things they do not like or they do not understand. Many children stated that they did not have anyone with whom to discuss their difficulties, their worries or their sadness. Even though they are supported by the staff in the reception centres and have friends, and a guardian is supposed to support them, many children feel alone and have difficulty in finding someone to confide in.

The procedure lies at the heart of the children's worries. It is a recurring concern because its length causes a feeling of insecurity that is very difficult for the children questioned to live with. Will they have the right to stay? How long will they have to wait to receive a decision? The young refugees and migrants hear a lot of contradictory things and do not always understand the details of the different procedures concerning them. They consider that they lack suitable information and would like the authorities in charge of asylum and migration to provide them with this as soon as they arrive, and accelerate the process.

The children underlined the fact that the uncertainty of their stay in Belgium led to an increase in stress and anxiety, an extra burden that sometimes prevents them from concentrating on the present and envisaging the future. When they went to the interviews for their asylum application, many of the children said that they were not well-prepared or not always properly supported by their guardian or their lawyer. Some of them were completely alone.

The children spoke of very different experiences with their guardians. Almost half the children said that they had a good relationship with their guardians. The other half hardly ever saw them. The guardians didn't inform them of the procedure.

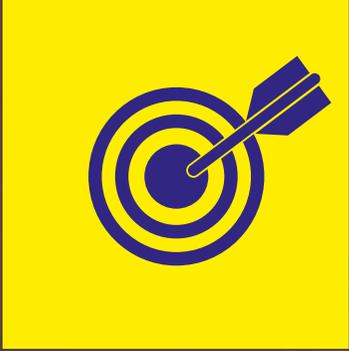
Many of the children have stayed in several reception centres in Belgium or abroad. They have had to adapt to new structures, new rules, new schools, make new friends, and sometimes learn a new language. According to the vast majority of the children interviewed, these repeated changes and the large reception centres do not meet their needs in terms of protection.

The children stressed that life in a large reception centre was particularly difficult and stressful. They spoke a lot about the lack of privacy, the crowding, the constant violence, the lack of support as well as the noise making it difficult to study and rest. The children who had arrived alone and the teenage mothers recommend tailor-made support in a small structure or with a host family. For children accompanied by their family, the ideal situation would be to live outside a large centre.

In the reception centres, the children say they received very patchy support from the educators and social workers. Half of the children received all the support and accompaniment they needed. However, this was not the case for the others. Some unaccompanied children had the impression of being completely left to fend for themselves. This feeling is often shared by the young mothers.

The children also emphasised that the lack of information is an extra source of anxiety. They have many questions and do not always know how to ask them. On the other hand, when they do ask questions, they do not always get answers. They hear a lot of contradictory things, and the decisions that are taken sometimes leave them thinking that a person who behaves 'badly' will receive more support and better accompaniment.

Education, leisure activities, friends and support workers play a fundamental role in reinforcing resilience among migrant and refugee children. The children like school. They also want to do sport and play, become children again. Those who haven't been to school for a long time and the young mothers would like more support. All the children also want to practice a sport or an activity outside the reception centres.



CONCLUSION



Migrant and refugee children are survivors. Their stories, which we have collected and which UNICEF Belgium is presenting to you in this report, show to what extent it is painful for children to leave their country, sometimes without their parents, in order to escape war or poverty.

All these children had to take to the road. And the road is dangerous. Even more than you can imagine. It is interspersed with violence and traps, which a child is not ready to face.

Some children tell of the dangers they were exposed to. Others were detained or mistreated. Sometimes they were exploited by human traffickers on the road to exile.

Many young people had to work in the countries they passed through, sometimes remaining for many months, while waiting for the next departure. These abuses, of which they were the victims, have affected them and still affect them today. They arrived traumatised in Belgium, and 'resilience' will sometimes take a long time to achieve.

Some children will suffer all their lives from these hardships which are engraved in their minds and in their flesh. Some have only just escaped death. Others have seen their parents die on the way or in wars. Children who have arrived alone in Belgium were separated from their parents during their journey.

Of course, what these children dream of today is seeing their family again, feeling the presence of a mother and a father who protects them once again. Because, very often, these children exiled in Belgium feel alone and not well-supported.

Children should never have to experience such things. Many children have fled the war in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan. All children's rights are disregarded during a conflict. It is the most devastating situation possible for a child, because war kills all traces of a carefree existence. War kills childhood.

The violence of war is not the only type of violence these children talk about. The latter mention domestic violence, community divisions, insecurity at school. This reality cannot be ignored. It underlines the responsibility of states to protect children in their country of origin, in transit countries or in destination countries, such as Belgium. **It is the children's best interest that must guide all the decisions that are taken for them, regardless of their migratory status or their age, whether they are alone or accompanied by their family.**



Countries should stop hiding behind each other, looking at us without doing anything. They shouldn't pretend they can't see, don't hear, and keep silent. They must do something so that everything returns to how it was before. We have rights too.

- 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, SYRIA -

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by nearly every country worldwide, including Belgium. The procedure is by far the biggest issue raised by the children questioned. They want a procedure that is adapted to their age, that meets their interests, as well as precise and adjusted information as soon as they arrive.

The accommodation is another major area of concern for these children. Many criticise the lack of humanity in the large reception centres where tensions, fights, noise and erratic support are all elements that add to the stress and anxiety. They would like to benefit from adapted accommodation and tailor-made support, in small structures or host families for unaccompanied children and isolated teenage mothers. For accompanied children, the possibility of living as a family outside a centre would be ideal.

Education, leisure, friends and people who provide support play an essential role in helping these young people to build their lives again and integrate. The children like school and would like to continue or start studying in Belgium. They also dream of making new friends by practising a sport or an activity.

Nearly all the children we met are worried about the uncertainty concerning their stay in Belgium. Will they be able to stay? Will they have to return to their country of origin? **The procedure is experienced as a burden by all the children, whether they are accompanied or not by their parents.** Unaccompanied children who have spent many years in Belgium, and isolated teenage mothers, find this lack of certainty even more difficult to deal with.

The length of the procedure and the stress of waiting affects their overall well-being, including their health and their ability to learn. For these children, the waiting is even worse than rejection. They recommend a procedure limited in time and better support. The insecurity linked to waiting shows a clear need for better protection. Efforts must be made to better inform the children and guide them in the search for a durable solution as soon as they arrive.

Finally, the majority of children would have preferred to remain in their country of origin, if security conditions, protection against abuses and access to basic services (health, education) had been sufficient to do so.



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CHILDREN'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The procedure: have a procedure limited in time and benefit from better support from the guardian and the lawyer. Better information upon arrival.

- Have a procedure limited in time.
- If the procedure is longer, explain the reasons.
- A child who arrived here very young and has spent more time in Belgium than in his or her country of origin, should not be sent back to their country.
- Be better supported by the guardian, especially in preparation for the interview at the CGRS. Be accompanied by the guardian when they have to go somewhere in connection with the procedure. Be regularly informed by their guardian and see him/her more often. Have the chance to change guardian if the latter has no contact with the young person.
- Always be accompanied by the lawyer during the interview. Be informed of changes and reasons for changing lawyer.
- Receive more information upon arrival on the different types of procedure and be regularly informed about the decisions taken.
- Benefit from the help of a qualified social interpreter, during interviews and at the lawyer's.
- Put an end to age tests.
- Provide better support for young people who are about to turn 18, because they often find themselves without a lawyer, a guardian or any protection from one day to the next.



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Family: be reunited with your family and have the possibility of remaining in contact with them. Have trusted people around you.

- Favour family reunification upon arrival without asking us for documents that are impossible to obtain.
- Have the chance to remain in contact with our family (access to Wi-Fi and a computer in all the reception centres, greater means to buy a telephone card).
- Have people of trust around you. Reinforce good practices, such as family reception services, buddy service and mentoring, whereby migrant and refugee children are supported and their needs are met.
- The possibility of living with a host family outside the centre for unaccompanied children.



The reception centre: need for calm, rest, security and support workers who listen. More small structures or host families for children who have arrived by themselves, alternatives for families.

- The referral centre is a good thing for children who arrive alone.
- Avoid repeatedly changing centres, which is detrimental to the integration and well-being of the children. A child who speaks French should not be sent to a centre in Flanders.
- When they arrive in a reception centre, the children should be supported so that they feel comfortable and safe. Inform the children, upon their arrival, how life in the centre is organised, meal times, waking up, going to bed, people they can contact if they have questions or a problem. Inform them of the possibilities concerning education and training. Ask them if they have specific needs (catching up with school work, plans, individual help, etc.).
- A sufficient number of qualified support workers (educators, social workers, psychologists) who are available to listen, and who respect and support the children upon arrival and throughout their stay at the centre.
- Ensure that the children are received in a calm, clean and protective environment which allows them to feel safe, to rest and to study. Do not put four children who do not speak the same language in the same room. Make sure that there is a quiet room for studying and that it is quiet during the night, so that they can rest.
- Ensure that the children are protected against violence from adults living in the centres and that they know where to find help if they need it. Ensure that the children don't argue among themselves and that they learn to get to know each other better, regardless of their mother tongue or country of origin.
- Favour small structures or host families for unaccompanied children. Favour alternatives outside the reception centres with support (in a house, flat) for children who have already spent several years in a centre with their family.
- Provide better support for young people who are about to turn 18, so that they can find accommodation when they leave the reception centre.
- Give children the means to buy clothes, a bit of food, public transport tickets or do some sport. Allow them to have activities outside the centre or during the holidays with 'Belgian' children. Allow youngsters to get a student job.
- Allow children to prepare a meal from their country of origin. Allow families to have the chance to eat together and cook.

School and leisure activities: more support for children who have dropped out of school and those who arrive at the end of the school year. The possibility of doing sport or an activity outside school or the centre.

Access to education:

- Allow all the children to go to school upon arrival and throughout their stay.
- Children who arrive at the end of the school year should benefit from remedial classes, so that they don't spend three months doing nothing.

Quality of the education:

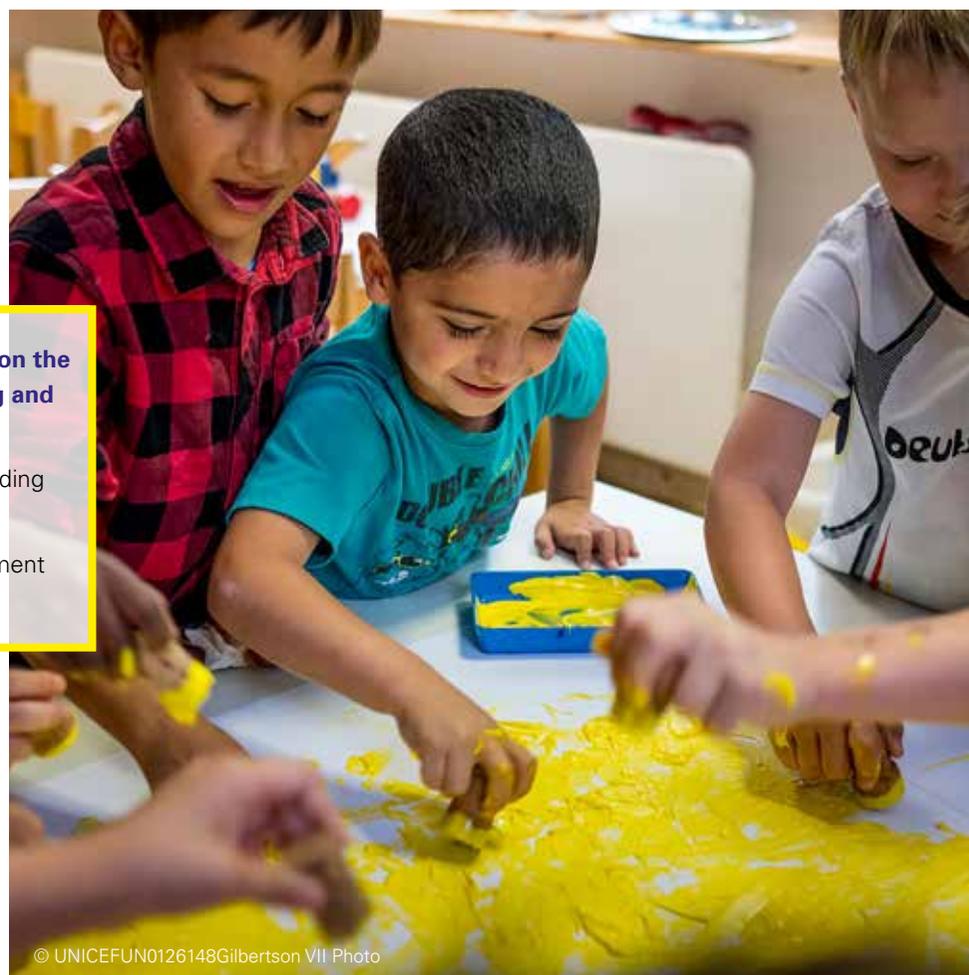
- DASPA/OKAN classes are a good thing for migrant and refugee children. However, more contact with children from other classes should be encouraged.
- Adapt teaching methods and specific support: a 14-year-old child who has never been to school and who does not speak the language, does not have the same needs as a 14-year-old child who just has to learn the language.
- Encourage learning the language outside class as well (through sport or other activities outside school or the centre).
- Limit the number of children per class.
- Provide help for homework and a quiet place to study.
- Give remedial and/or language learning classes after school and during the holidays.

Access to leisure activities:

- Enable access to leisure activities outside the reception centres or school.
- Encourage activities with other 'Belgian' children.
- Authorise the children to attend football training and play matches.
- Give the children greater means to do sport and activities outside the centres; and pay for public transport (bus, metro, train tickets).
- Give the children more information on the possibilities of doing activities in the municipality (scouts, activities organised by the commune, etc.).
- Have the chance to take part in courses during the holidays.
- Be able to take part in school trips.

Give more information on the possibilities of studying and training:

- Provide guidance regarding academic orientation.
- Help children to implement their plans.



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Teenage mothers: tailor-made support for young girls who are particularly vulnerable because they are mothers, teenagers, alone, with no family and in exile.

- Favour alternative reception structures outside the large centres (in small adapted structures, with a host family, in a flat).
- Ensure that the young mothers are received in a calm and protective environment both day and night, allowing them to feel safe, rest, build up their confidence and study while looking after their baby.
- Inform the mothers upon arrival about how life inside and outside the centre is organised (at school, in the commune) and inform them about the people they can contact if they have questions or a problem. Inform them of the possibilities concerning education and training.
- As well as visits to the Office of Birth and Childhood (ONE), ensure regular support for the mothers during pregnancy, birth and after the birth, including information on care for the mother and child after the birth, how to dress the child in winter, taking care of small ailments, washing and feeding the child, as well as information on sleep and development in young children.
- Ensure that the mothers have sufficient privacy and can have a key to the toilets and bathrooms, so that they have access day and night. Allow the mothers to call a doctor in case of a problem during the night.
- Ensure that the mothers receive support which is adapted to their academic level (remedial support, help with homework in the evening, during the holidays). Provide advice and support regarding study programmes. See that the nursery closes at 6.00 p.m. so that the mothers have time to comfortably fetch their child after school.
- Provide young mothers with greater means, so that they can buy clothing or food for the baby and water for the bottle.
- Provide milk adapted to the babies (a baby who drinks normal milk shouldn't be given hypoallergenic milk).
- Allow young mothers to prepare their babies' food with adapted products and materials.



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UNICEF BELGIUM'S RECOMMENDATIONS

UNICEF is calling upon political decision-makers to elaborate a multidimensional strategy to deal with the interaction of factors that threaten migrant and refugee children, and to contribute to their protection.

- **Listen to the voices of migrant and refugee children:** facilitate the participation of migrant and refugee children in the elaboration and implementation of policies that concern them, including in the areas of asylum and migration, social integration, health, education and leisure activities. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, migrant and refugee children have the right to be heard in all asylum and migration procedures.

As soon as they arrive, they should also receive all the relevant information, in their own language and in an adapted language, regarding their rights, the available services, the different procedures and be informed of the complaint systems and psychosocial services available. In the countries of origin, participation of children is essential to tackle the root causes of migration. Civil society organisations, including children's associations, should be heard during discussions or processes that aim to respond to the migration crisis.

- **Protecting migrant and refugee children, especially unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence**

Introducing measures to reinforce child protection systems, including training social workers and children; and working with non-governmental organisations (NGO) and professional groups. Counteracting child trafficking by improving the application of the law, but also providing better support for children through the systematic appointment of qualified guardians upon arrival; better access to information with regard to their own situation and management of their particular case; as well as real access to legal assistance. Governments should also develop clearer guidelines for the officers responsible for determining the migratory status of children- to prevent returning children and families to persecution, or dangerous situations or putting their lives in danger- and ensure that it is the 'children's best interest' that guides all the decisions concerning them.

- **Putting an end to detaining children who are seeking to obtain the status of refugee or to migrate, by setting up various practical alternatives.**

Introduce practical alternatives to detention where children and their families are involved, considering the negative impact of detention on their development. Children are particularly vulnerable to the physical and psychological violence of detention. Alternative examples to detention include: handing in their passport and presenting themselves regularly at the police station, a bail guarantee that can be requested from the family or the community, supervision in private accommodation or the obligation to register with the authorities.

- **Keeping families together – the best way to protect children and given them a legal status.**

Draw up clear guidelines to prevent children from being separated from their parents during border controls and all the migration processes. Countries should accelerate family reunification procedures and ensure that it is easier for children to be reunited with their family. The children of migrant parents need a legal identity for their future well-being. Governments should provide a birth certificate or other identity document to allow children to access services and avoid statelessness.

- **Continuing the education of all migrant and refugee children and giving them access to health services and other quality services.**

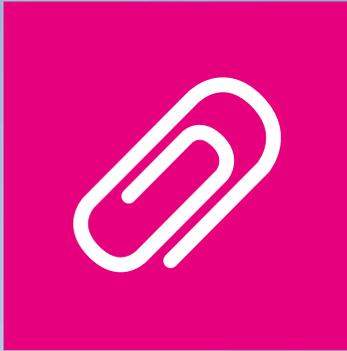
Governments, communities and the private sector must make an increased effort to provide an education, healthcare, shelter, food and water, as well as legal and psychosocial support to migrant and refugee children. The migratory status of a child should never prevent him or her from accessing basic services.

- **Demanding measures to counteract the root causes of the widescale movements of refugees and migrants.**

Tackling the root causes of conflicts, violence and extreme poverty in the countries of origin. This should include an increase in access to education and social protection; an increase in the opportunities regarding income for families and jobs for young people; and favouring more responsible and transparent governance. Governments should facilitate community dialogue and commit to the peaceful resolution of conflicts, tolerance and more inclusive societies; measures to counteract gang violence should be taken.

- **Promoting measures to counteract xenophobia, discrimination and marginalisation in transit and destination countries.**

Coalitions between NGO, communities, the private sector, religious groups and political decision-makers should take responsibility for influencing public opinion to prevent the rise in xenophobia and discrimination towards migrants and refugees.



ANNEX

PROJECT

PARTNERS

UNICEF Belgium would not have been able to conduct this project without the help and co-operation of numerous partners. UNICEF Belgium obtained FEDASIL's authorisation to contact all the reception centres. Six reception centres accepted to co-operate on 'What Do You Think?'. UNICEF Belgium organised an information meeting with the children's support workers at its headquarters and in several centres.

The support workers agreed to inform the children and invite them to participate in the project. They often carried out the consultations themselves. When it was not possible owing to resources or capacity, it was UNICEF Belgium who took responsibility for it.

UNICEF Belgium would not have been able to conduct its project without the DASPA/OKAN classes, which these children attend at school every day. Four DASPA/OKAN classes participated in the 'What Do You Think?' project.

UNICEF Belgium also joined forces with several frontline organisations that receive and support these children every day.

Finally, UNICEF Belgium could not have conducted this project without the help of a group of experts on participation and migration. This guidance group was able to help us define the methodologies and adapt them.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the partners with whom we conducted the consultations with the children and young people:

- **CEMO/ DASPA Class non-profit organisation at the Institut Filles De Marie in St Gilles**
- **El Paso Centre in Gembloux**
- **FEDASIL Centre Kapellen**
- **FEDASIL Centre in Bevingen**
- **FEDASIL Centre in Poelkappellen**
- **FEDASIL Centre in Ponderôme**
- **FEDASIL Centre in Rixensart**
- **Mentor-Escale**
- **OKAN class Diest**
- **Vluchtenlingenwerk Vlaanderen**

We would also like to warmly thank the partners of the guidance group that helped us explore certain themes and sent us accounts:

- **Ambrassade**
- **National Commission on the Rights of the Child**
- **NGO Coordinating Commission on the Rights of the Child**
- **Defence for Children International - Belgium**
- **ECPAT Belgium**
- **Exil non-profit organisation**
- **FEDASIL Lubbeek**
- **Jesuit Refugee Service**
- **Kinderrechtencoalitie Vlaanderen**
- **Kinderrechtencommissariaat**
- **KIYO**
- **Minor Ndako**
- **Child, Youth and Youth Care Observatory**
- **Plate-Forme Mineurs en Exil**
- **Rode Kruis Vlaanderen**
- **Service of the Delegate General for the Rights of the Child**
- **Service Droits des Jeunes**
- **Universiteit Gent (Ilse Derluyn)**
- **Vrij Universiteit Brussel (Minne Huysmans)**

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