

## Establishing The Role of NGOs: Framing NGOs within migratory social protection ecosystems, and characterising the needs of adolescent minors in active irregular transit (AMTs)

### Introduction

Within humanitarian contexts, there often exists a chasm between the abstract entitlements and lived realities of affected populations, materialising most plainly in the development of acute need and vulnerability. NGO activities work to mediate this chasm, through translating abstract entitlements into material, social, and protective interventions. NGOs therefore operate as contingent and adaptive institutions, deriving their programmatic mandates, social significance and legitimacy from the need they respond to - rather than existing as self-justified and defined entities. The extent, function and nature of the roles they assume for distinct populations are subsequently contingent, fluid, and subjectively experienced - varying in accordance with the ways in which rights translate into needs for these populations and the extent to which other actors within the migratory social protection ecosystem meet these needs.

The roles taken on by NGOs for AMTs can therefore be largely understood through assessing the efficacy of the actors within the migratory social protection ecosystem responsible for maintaining alignment between AMTs theorised and realised rights. The prevailing norms of international humanitarian and human rights law dictate which states meet the needs of AMTs is crucial to identifying gaps between their abstract entitlements and actual lived experience, revealing the contexts in and extent to which states bear the primary responsibility for meeting the humanitarian assistance and protection needs of all individuals within their territories. Consequently, assessing the extent to which NGOs are left to address unrealised rights - and thus the nature of their role. On a localised level, informal and interpersonal networks can similarly assume protective functions - influencing the extent of right realisation. Therefore such networks' capacity to meet needs similarly impacts the role of NGOs.

Owing to the distinct profile of AMT populations, the way in which their rights are realised through need provision is particularly nuanced. Accordingly, the nature of the roles assumed by NGOs to mediate the unmet rights of AMTs are distinctly unique. Examination of the specific needs and characteristics of AMTs can therefore offer further insight into the nature of the roles held by NGOs.

Therefore, through assessing the efficacy of migratory social protection ecosystems, and the distinct needs of AMTs mediating their right fulfilment, an understanding can be built of the roles assumed by NGOs for AMTs, and their subsequent relationship.

## **Context: France as a Migratory Transit Country**

France occupies a central position at the intersection of UK-bound irregular migration corridors, functioning as a key transit country for migrants who aim to cross the English Channel. Converging in France's northern coastal regions, most notably Calais and Dunkirk, there exist significant migratory bottlenecks under extreme pressure from aggressive externalised border controls and bilateral enforcement mechanisms between France and the UK.

Since the demolition of the 'Jungle' in 2016, France has pursued a policy of 'zéro point de fixation' (direct translation: zero points of fixation) to prevent the re-development of semi-permanent camps. Highly criticised by numerous humanitarian actors<sup>1</sup>, the policy's main feature consists of regular mass evictions of living sites, where belongings and shelters are vandalised, confiscated or destroyed<sup>2</sup>. This is pursued in tandem with the making areas inhabitable, through practises including the removal of cover (i.e. the stripping of an abandoned warehouse's roof in Calais, removal of forest cover), the placing of large rocks in areas of potential shelter or tent erection (i.e. under bridges, in open spaces), and the restriction of food and water access.

Near continuous site clearance, in tandem with policies of inhospitality produces the high and volatile spatial and temporal fragmentation of migrant communities - complicating outreach, network formation and longitudinal support strategies<sup>3</sup>. The duration of stay in France varies tremendously, largely dependent on factors such as cash to cross. The systemic favouring of forced mobility over settlement, however, ensures those in transit throughout France remain mobile and unable to establish long-term resembling settlements or communities as seen in transit countries such as Greece.

## **AMT Experiences of France's Social Protection Ecosystem**

A signatory to multiple international human rights instruments, France's commitment to safeguarding the rights of both migrants and minors, irrespective of legal status, is embedded not only within its formal legal frameworks but also within the more normative and ideological underpinnings of its welfare state.

France maintains an expansive social protection ecosystem, which both explicitly through child and migrant welfare constituencies and implicitly through border public welfare systems, extends protection and support to AMTs. Though their entitlement to child protection measures in theory fulfils the state's declared obligations towards AMTs, welfare provision expands beyond this. Containing services ranging from public healthcare to food assistance and emergency shelter provision, tenants across France's social protection ecosystem collectively function to, in principle, safeguard the material, social and protective rights of AMTs, therefore meeting their basic needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Zero Point de Fixation: The French Equivalent of the UK's Hostile Environment." *Collective Aid*, Collective Aid, 11 Sept. 2023, [www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2023/9/5/zro-point-de-fixation-how-denying-water-to-refugees-is-a-french-govern-ment-policy](http://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2023/9/5/zro-point-de-fixation-how-denying-water-to-refugees-is-a-french-govern-ment-policy).

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2021, *Enforced Misery: The Degrading Treatment of Migrant Children and Adults in Northern France*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/07/enforced-misery/degrading-treatment-migrant-children-and-adults-norther-n-france>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## State Child Protection Frameworks

France's policy of non-discrimination based on a child's nationality, status or origin is embedded across their child protection framework, entitling underage migrants to child protection services. Within this framework, there exist a number of additional protections specifically for underage migrants:

- **Code de l'Action Sociale et des Familles (CASF):** Article L.221-1 mandates the protection of all children at risk, entitling underage unaccompanied migrants and underage minors at risk of or experiencing exploitation, to register with child welfare services (ASE), where housing, education, healthcare and legal support can be subsequently accessed.
- **31 May 2013 Circular (Ministerial Instruction):** The circular mandates the state's provision of temporary shelter and care for unaccompanied minors (UAMs) without requiring their submission of an asylum application. Whilst there is moderate variance in regional execution, this policy largely manifests in the provision of shelters offering accommodation, healthcare and legal advice for up to 2 weeks, after which UAMs must decide to apply for asylum, register with ASE or leave<sup>4</sup>.
- **Conseil d'État 7 July 2005, req. no. 279522:** This ruling established foreign minors can not be subjected to deportation. Later rulings have reiterated this.

Whilst theoretically available, perpetual overcrowding often renders such provisions inaccessible for minors - regardless of migratory background - seeking protection<sup>5</sup>. The utility of these protections for underage migrants, however, is uniquely limited:

- **Systemic exclusion:** A vast repository of anecdotal<sup>6</sup> and quantitative<sup>7</sup> evidence reveals the extensive case<sup>8</sup> and statute<sup>9</sup> law mandating state actors to adopt presumption of minority, to be systematically disregarded. A practice most demonstrably prevailing during the consideration of applications from migrant adolescents, AMTs are routinely excluded from the vast majority of state protections available to them. Whilst appeals are possible - and often successful<sup>10</sup>, the arduous process appears futile to AMTs

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<sup>4</sup> This is the policy of the Saint-Omer shelter in the prefecture Pas-de-Calais

<sup>5</sup> Courtois, Maia. "France: Sheltering Isolated Minors in Calais a Daily Struggle for Aid Workers." *InfoMigrants*, Infomigrants, 26 Jan. 2022,

[www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38120/france-sheltering-isolated-minors-in-calais-a-daily-struggle-for-aid-workers#:~:text=According%20to%20figures%20from%20the.at%20France%20terre%20d%27asile](https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38120/france-sheltering-isolated-minors-in-calais-a-daily-struggle-for-aid-workers#:~:text=According%20to%20figures%20from%20the.at%20France%20terre%20d%27asile).

Sauthier, Pauline. "Immigration : 'Notre Capacité d'hébergement Est à Saturation.' Le Département Du Vaucluse Suspend l'accueil Des Mineurs Isolés Étrangers." *France Info*, 23 Dec. 2023,

[france3-regions.franceinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/vaucluse/immigration-notre-capacite-d-hebergement-e-st-a-saturation-le-departement-du-vaucluse-suspend-l-accueil-des-mineurs-isoles-et-rangers-2895344.html](https://france3-regions.franceinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/vaucluse/immigration-notre-capacite-d-hebergement-e-st-a-saturation-le-departement-du-vaucluse-suspend-l-accueil-des-mineurs-isoles-et-rangers-2895344.html).

<sup>6</sup> Refugee Rights Europe, 2020, *The Failure of French Authorities to Respect, Protect and Guarantee the Rights of at-Risk Unaccompanied Children (UAC)*,

<https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Failure-Of-French-Authorities-To-Respect-Protect-Guarantee-Rights-Of-At-Risk-UAC.pdf>.

Bonhomme, Gregoire. "France: With the Calais 'Jungle' about to Be Dismantled, What Will Become of Unaccompanied Minors? | Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) International." *Authorities Failing to Ensure Care and Protection for Unaccompanied Minors from Calais 'Jungle'*, MSF, 27 Oct. 2016,

[www.msf.org/france-calais-jungle-about-be-dismantled-what-will-become-unaccompanied-minors](https://www.msf.org/france-calais-jungle-about-be-dismantled-what-will-become-unaccompanied-minors).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2024, "Not the France I Imagined" Housing, Health, and Education for Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Marseille,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/30/not-france-i-imagined/housing-health-and-education-unaccompanied-migrant-children>.

<sup>8</sup> CE, 19 July 2019, n° 428478,

<sup>9</sup> CASF, Circular of 25 January 2016 (NOR: JUSD1602101C)

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2024, "Not the France I Imagined" Housing, Health, and Education for Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Marseille,

who do not anticipate a long term stay in the country. Moreover, degrading experiences of exclusion have the secondary consequence of decreasing trust in institutions and thus deterring future attempts to seek protections for which they are eligible<sup>11</sup>. Compounding barriers to their inclusion, this increases isolation from formalised protection frameworks.

- **Lack of trust:** Traumatic country of origin and migratory journey experiences render many AMTs untrusting of authority figures and carers, impacting their willingness to access protection systems. Though invariably impacting all relationships, this fear is felt acutely towards actors representing French (state) authorities<sup>12</sup>. This lack of trust is reinforced by malignant actors within the migration ecosystem (i.e. smugglers) who hold vested interests in AMT's rejection of official protective channels.
- **Information Failure:** Reports consistently criticise the complexity of the ASE system<sup>13</sup> and failure of state actors to present options to underage migrants in a child-friendly manner<sup>14</sup>, hindering their leveraging of protection frameworks. However, a series of interviews conducted by UNICEF exposed the depth of information failure within and around state services to be far greater, revealing that the majority of minors were unaware of the existence of state services<sup>15</sup>.

The efficacy of child protection frameworks in serving underage migrants is further compromised when situated in the context of migratory transience, due to the perceived and real barriers to an AMT's continued migration that the child protection system presents.

- **Spatial displacement from migratory resources:** Proximity to the border and integration with other migrants constitute critical resources for the gathering of knowledge on and seizing opportunities to cross. Placement in state housing facilities, however, dislocates AMTs from these migratory contexts and border locations, therefore inhibiting their onward mobility. Field observations of NGO-administered referrals to 'local' temporary shelter highlighted a pronounced unwillingness to leave border-adjacent living sites as a frequently driving rejections of state support.
- **Constraints on mobility:** Requirements to seek authorisation to leave state facilities introduces both actual and anticipated restrictions on movement, further deterring AMTs from seeking state support. Challenges similarly arise from the conflict between the learnt independence of AMTs and structured procedures within ASE<sup>16</sup>.

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<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/30/not-france-i-imagined/housing-health-and-education-unaccompanied-migrant-children>.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2018, "Like a Lottery" Arbitrary Treatment of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Paris, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/04/lottery/arbitrary-treatment-unaccompanied-migrant-children-paris>.

<sup>12</sup> United States, Congress, Select Committee on European Union. *Children in Crisis: Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the EU. Chapter 3: Four Underlying Problems*, Parliament.UK, 2016. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldeucom/34/3406.htm#:~:text=the%20culture%20of%20disbelief%20and,experienced%20by%20unaccompanied%20migrant%20children>.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2024, "Not the France I Imagined" Housing, Health, and Education for Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Marseille, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/30/not-france-i-imagined/housing-health-and-education-unaccompanied-migrant-children>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF, 2016, *NEITHER SAFE NOR SOUND: Unaccompanied Children on the Coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea*, [https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Unicef\\_NeitherSafeNorSound.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Unicef_NeitherSafeNorSound.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> French National Contact Point . European Migration Network , 2018, *Approaches in France to Unaccompanied Minors Following Status Determination*, [https://www.infomie.net/IMG/pdf/etude-mna\\_version-finale\\_en.pdf](https://www.infomie.net/IMG/pdf/etude-mna_version-finale_en.pdf).



- **Perceived implications on UK-asylum applications:** Assumptions that entering the French system compromises migrant's future eligibility to apply for asylum in the UK<sup>17</sup> abound. Fieldnotes record a specific misconception conflating the application for state protection with application for asylum to be widespread, reinforcing reluctance to access state-services amongst those who remain in transit, anticipating further migration.

Similarly excluded from this system, are accompanied underage migrants, whose soliciting of state care would necessitate - at best - informal family separation.

## Public Healthcare

Healthcare Access Centers (PASS) are located in public hospitals across France to provide healthcare to individuals lacking health insurance, irrespective of documentation status. Though initially designed to serve adults, the following ministerial directive mandated the elective development of specialist units within PASS sites in response to local need.

- **INSTRUCTION of April 12 2022 (DGOS/R4/2022/101) relating to the specifications for permanent access to hospital health care (PASS):** potential specialist units outlined include dedicated paediatric units.

Systemic challenges in meeting both healthcare and language demands<sup>18</sup> significantly impede access to treatment across the migrant community. Moreover, a study on information access conducted by a coalition of French NGOs<sup>19</sup> found newly arrived migrants frequently received little to no guidance regarding health services. Only 18% of respondents reported obtaining such information within their first week in Paris - a figure including recognised refugees and asylum seekers who would have engaged with formal state reception platforms. Situated within bureaucratic and procedural frameworks of French asylum application, the platforms through which state actors publish and attempt to disseminate information resources are of limited relevance for those in continued transit. This structures opportunities to learn of and thus engage with state services around pathways not navigated by migrants in continued transit, hindering their engagement with these systems. Recognition of and attempts to correct this information failure can be observed in NGO's inclusion of state services within localised and far more accessible city or area guides<sup>20</sup>.

Despite constituting a notable proportion of those treated<sup>21</sup>, AMTs remain particularly vulnerable due to the inconsistent and infrequent availability of specialised provisions, which are only authorised where there exists acute need and a lack of alternative actors (i.e. NGOs) attempting to meet said need. Even where suitable care can be secured, UAMs face further barriers deriving from legal requirements for adult consent<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Courtois, Maia. "Fears over Biometric System in France for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors." *Info Migrants*, Info Migrants, 23 June 2021,

[www.infomigrants.net/en/post/33126/fears-over-biometric-system-in-france-for-unaccompanied-foreign-minors](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/33126/fears-over-biometric-system-in-france-for-unaccompanied-foreign-minors).

<sup>18</sup> Boitiaux, Charlotte. "Pass: Medical Centers to Treat the 'Invisible.'" *InfoMigrants*, Infomigrants, 16 Aug. 2018, [www.infomigrants.net/en/post/11053/pass-medical-centers-to-treat-the-invisible](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/11053/pass-medical-centers-to-treat-the-invisible).

<sup>19</sup> France Terre D'asile, 2022, *L'ACCÈS À L'INFORMATION DES PERSONNES EXILÉES À PARIS*, Courtois, Maia. "Fears over Biometric System in France for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors." *Info Migrants*, Info Migrants, 23 June 2021,

[www.infomigrants.net/en/post/33126/fears-over-biometric-system-in-france-for-unaccompanied-foreign-minors](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/33126/fears-over-biometric-system-in-france-for-unaccompanied-foreign-minors).

<sup>20</sup> Examples include Channel Information Project's New Arrival Guide, and Watizat's Guides

<sup>21</sup> France. Ministère de la Santé et de la Prévention. Direction Générale de l'Offre de Soins. *Instruction N° DGOS/R4/2022/101 du 12 avril 2022 relative au cahier des charges des permanences d'accès aux soins de santé hospitalières (PASS)*. 12 Apr. 2022, [sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/l\\_instruction\\_du\\_12\\_avril\\_2022\\_pass.pdf](http://sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/l_instruction_du_12_avril_2022_pass.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> "Article L1111-4." *Code de la santé publique*, modified by Décret n°2021-684 du 28 mai 2021, Légifrance, [www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article\\_lc/LEGIARTI000043588175](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000043588175).

## State Shelter and Humanitarian Aid Distribution

All undocumented migrants are nominally entitled to one night of emergency state shelter. Devolved government authorities occasionally contract public sector partners to provide temporary or specialised provisions. One such example can be found in 2022, when Le Vie Active, contracted by the Prefecture du Pas-de-Calais, provided (remarkably limited) emergency shelter for underage girls.

The provision of food and NFI is similarly decentralised, governed through a patchwork of private-public partnerships, whose scope varies in extent - though remains consistently insufficient<sup>23</sup> - across France. Exemplifying again the practice within Pas de Calais, Le Vie Active is mandated to provide one to two meals per day at sites located on the city's periphery. The insufficiency of this is both intuitively apparent and empirically observable: NGOs routinely intervene to supplant need at these same sites, while also operating at 6 additional sites omitted from the state's distribution schedule. Whilst AMTs may access these services, NGO monitoring has underscored that oftentimes 'no association mandated by the State has any specific activity targeting UACs [UAMs]',<sup>24</sup>.

In the absence of a coherent and consistent service oriented toward AMTs, they are left deprived of access to specialised and age-appropriate services. This further undermines the state's capacity to realise its child protection mandate: services, being non-specialist in nature, are neither designed nor resourced to identify children at risk<sup>25</sup>. Instead they operate on generalist need-based models - enacting a form of categorical erasure, obscuring AMTs as a distinct group. Moreover, indiscriminate services compel AMTs to compete with adults for scarce resources, placing them at a greater disadvantage still.

The above structural barriers to accessing state-based aid or protection are reinforced by the high degree of mobility characterising AMT's migratory trajectories; the lack of standardised provision nationwide necessitates the repeated navigation of aforementioned information asymmetries and procedural opacity in order to access aid.

## Summary

Whilst statutory social protections are ostensibly accessible to AMTs, their provision is narrow, ill-adapted to transient contexts, and characterised by systemic exclusion. Notwithstanding, the procedural opacity and limited availability of information within and around state services imposes significant hindrances on the

realisation of entitlement to the limited provision that does exist. This renders the state's role in meeting material, social and protective needs markedly limited.

Exclusion from child protection frameworks have consequences extending far beyond the loss of material aid. Administratively recategorising AMTs as adults, this exclusion renders AMTs structurally invisible, and absolves state actors of child protection duties towards them. This is reflected in the absence of identification

<sup>23</sup> "Zero Point de Fixation: The French Equivalent of the UK's Hostile Environment." *Collective Aid*, Collective Aid, 11 Sept. 2023, [www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2023/9/5/zro-point-de-fixation-how-denying-water-to-refugees-is-a-french-govern-ment-policy](http://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2023/9/5/zro-point-de-fixation-how-denying-water-to-refugees-is-a-french-govern-ment-policy).

<sup>24</sup> Watkins, Meg, and Anna Cookson. Kaleidoscope, 2023, *Kaleidoscope—Project Proposal*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64a53080d7b36156d71eba80/t/657b258942773966b4d2bc38/1702569354331/Kaleidoscope+Proposal++2nd+ver+updated++copy.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

mechanisms and monitoring procedures within state-mandated outreach services<sup>26</sup> - capacities which could otherwise facilitate protection - conceived as 'unnecessary' due to AMT's legal non-existence outside of child protection frameworks. The state consequently fail to appropriately meet their protective obligations towards AMTs.

AMT experiences navigating social protection frameworks may impact their willingness to trust or engage with age-contingent services, prompting a form of cognitive reorientation in regards to what modalities of support they perceive themselves to be deserving of, or introducing skepticism over the likelihood of belief in themselves. This exacerbates the chasm between their material, social and protective rights, and lived realities.

## **Informal and Interpersonal Protection Networks**

Beyond the formal support and protection offered by dedicated humanitarian actors, often the most visible form of humanitarian intervention, AMTs exist within complex migratory landscapes in which they are not merely passive recipients of aid, but active agents navigating and constructing parallel protective and material ecosystems. These ecosystems are neither uniform nor formally codified, constituted instead by intersecting and variegated moral economies, ethical imperatives and transient interpersonal networks: some actively cultivated and leveraged, others incidentally experienced through the voluntary engagement of others. Fulfilling a diverse range of functions, these networks support AMTs in meeting their social, material and protective needs.

While such networks are frequently described as emergent substitutes for formal support, it would be both reductive and inaccurate to characterise them as solely responses to formal support deficits. Beyond an obligatory response to critical, immediate needs, the construction of these ecosystems are evidently shaped by moral economies, ethical ideologies, and aspirations for improved personal and community well-being. However, this limits the extent to which their existence can be taken as indicative of gaps in formal provision. Moreover, within contexts of dynamic and acute crisis and severe resource deprivation, not least in the context of active migration, support is inexorably required across all areas of need. It therefore becomes exchanged wherever available on an evolving, situationally responsive basis - rather than strategically structured or bounded. This is best evidenced in the (soon discussed) dominance of informal networks' informational function: the prominence of information dissemination in these networks reflects less a failure of formal systems to circulate information than the constraints imposed by limited resource capacity, which elevates the value of information and positions the role of these networks as more reliably facilitative.

Therefore, whilst challenges present in deploying informal and interpersonal networks as a means for assessing formal provision, these networks nonetheless influence and offer insight into the configuration and intensity of need.

## **Benefactor Led: Moral Economies and Community-based Social Protection**

A vast wealth of literature on the topic affirms that transit-country and, particularly, migrant communities often compensate for unmet material and protective needs. However, the manner and extent to which this occurs features little to no consistency: informal protection networks are not conceivable nor fixed structures but rather fluid, lived realities, experienced uniquely by each benefactor and beneficiary. This inconsistency is especially

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

pronounced in contexts of highly mobile transit - such as those of migrants in France - wherein distinct 'social worlds'<sup>27</sup> are continuously shifting and navigated between.

### Moral economy and material support

The moral economies active within migratory ecosystems, are numerous and immensely variant, emerging from the co-presence of diverse local and migrant communities, each operating within their own moral frameworks. This renders the support one may receive subject to a range of factors - a small number of which range from shared norms of obligation, to notions of deservingness, ontologies, and institutional contexts<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, individual buy-in to these economies is highly conditional and situational, further complicating attempts to conceptualise informal protection networks. Buy-in is influenced by a range of intersecting determinants, from one's resource capacity at a given moment, to their interpersonal or institutional trust and even experiential solidarity<sup>29</sup>. Considering the beneficiary, further nuance is added, as personal circumstance will greatly influence the support received. Characteristics inclusive of perceived age, accompaniment, social associations, ethnicity, gender, and individual circumstance - amongst much else - will predispose individuals to inclusion or exclusion within these informal social protection networks. As a consequence, the support available to AMTs varies markedly, often failing to remain consistent within even individual transit experiences.

### Community-based protection

Though AMTs are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by malign actors who oftentimes are embedded<sup>30</sup> and occupy powerful positions within migrant communities, it would be both analytically reductive and ethically problematic to overlook the protective capacities and instincts circulating within these same communities. Despite their marginalisation, migrants remain active agents, capable of moral reasoning and action. ECPAT, an NGO running a programme in Calais who protect adolescent boys at risk or survivors of exploitation, highlights the capacity of communities to 'often act as a protective factor'<sup>31</sup> when drawing best practice recommendations from their work in Calais.

Regardless, numerous challenges are faced in activating and realising these capacities:

- Power relations and situational vulnerability: Protection is invariably situated, contingent on shifting configurations of power, personal situational precarity, and obligation. Individuals assuming exploitative roles oftentimes also command social authority (i.e. community leaders) or gatekeep access to vital resources (i.e. facilitators), discouraging acts of resistance. The recently published 'When Help Hurts' evidences this - detailing frequent meeting of injustice with silence driven by fear of intra-community repercussions and rationalised moral disengagement<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Ciabbarri, Luca, and Anja Simonsen. "Fragments of Solidarity: The social worlds of African migrants moving northwards." *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2 Jan. 2024, pp. 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2024.2349859>.

<sup>28</sup> Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift*, 10 Sept. 2002, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203407448>.

<sup>29</sup> Díaz de León, Alejandra. "'transient communities': How central american transit migrants form solidarity without trust." *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 7 Oct. 2020, pp. 897–914, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2020.1824683>.

<sup>30</sup> McMahon, Simon, et al. MEDMIG, 2016, *Destination Europe? Understanding the Dynamics and Drivers of Mediterranean Migration in 2015*. , [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737\\_Destination\\_Europe\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Dynamics\\_and\\_Drivers\\_of\\_Mediterranean\\_Migration\\_in\\_2015](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737_Destination_Europe_Understanding_the_Dynamics_and_Drivers_of_Mediterranean_Migration_in_2015).

<sup>31</sup> ECPAT International, 2024, *Case Study: ECPAT France in Calais, France*, [https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy\\_Case\\_Study\\_FRANCE\\_2024Sep\\_ENG\\_v4-1.pdf](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy_Case_Study_FRANCE_2024Sep_ENG_v4-1.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Alowais, Abdelaziz Abdalla, and Abubakr Suliman. "When Help Hurts: Moral Disengagement and the Myth of the Supportive Migrant Network." *Social Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2025. 386, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14060386>.



- Cultural diversity: Owing to the institutional and discursive reduction of diverse migratory populations to the monolithic category of ‘migrants’, the cultural diversity of migrant communities is often overlooked. This lends to their facing similar problems to ‘external’ actors when trying to discern abuses<sup>33</sup>.
- Spatial fragmentation: Within contexts of active transit and enforced dispersion (i.e. zero fixation point policy), spatial anchors are removed, diminishing sentiments of solidarity and capacities to identify abuse in the first place.

Perceived and realised capacities aside, experiences of community protection manifest in ways comparable to experiences of moral economies, characterised by striking inconsistency and mediated by diverse sociocultural logics of obligation, privacy, and kinship.<sup>34</sup>

## Beneficiary Led: Interpersonal Networks

In the absence of reliable informal networks, many migrants depend on complex interpersonal networks from which they derive various forms of support<sup>35</sup>. These networks are actively constructed<sup>36</sup> and carefully sustained, built primarily - though not exclusively - between migrants and facilitators, through favour<sup>37</sup>, family ties<sup>38</sup>, commercial relationships<sup>39</sup> and experiential solidarity<sup>40</sup>.

Though varying immensely in composition and function - shaped by factors ranging from individual disposition and ethnocultural identity, to chance encounters, migratory route conditions, and even perceived social standing<sup>41</sup> - such networks often play a significant role across the migratory lifecycle. An interviewee told us this ‘networking played a key role in my life’. Scholarship emphasises their use in securing medium-term shelter, work, and integration opportunities - amongst much else. Yet, during periods of active transit, particularly through Europe, they appear to serve predominantly informational and facilitatory functions<sup>42</sup> - rather than

<sup>33</sup> Ciabbarri, Luca, and Anja Simonsen. “Fragments of Solidarity: The social worlds of African migrants moving northwards.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2 Jan. 2024, pp. 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2024.2349859>.

<sup>34</sup> Schwartz, Mark. “Confronting Cultural Barriers to Preventing Child Abuse.” *Confronting Cultural Barriers to Preventing Child Abuse*, CPGN, 29 Nov. 2025, [cpgn.org/blogposts/break-the-silence-confronting-cultural-barriers-to-child-abuse-2/](https://cpgn.org/blogposts/break-the-silence-confronting-cultural-barriers-to-child-abuse-2/).

<sup>35</sup> McMahon, Simon, et al. MEDMIG, 2016, *Destination Europe? Understanding the Dynamics and Drivers of Mediterranean Migration in 2015*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737\\_Destination\\_Europe\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Dynamics\\_and\\_Drivers\\_of\\_Mediterranean\\_Migration\\_in\\_2015](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737_Destination_Europe_Understanding_the_Dynamics_and_Drivers_of_Mediterranean_Migration_in_2015).

<sup>36</sup> Bakewell, Oliver. “Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 36, no. 10, 29 June 2010, pp. 1689–1708, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2010.489382>.

<sup>37</sup> Agier, Michel, and David Fernbach. *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Polity Press, 2016. p.108.

<sup>38</sup> Poros, Maritsa. “Migrant Social Networks: Vehicles for Migration, Integration, and Development.” *Migrationpolicy.Org*, Migration Policy Institute, 30 Mar. 2011, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migrant-social-networks-vehicles-migration-integration-and-development](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migrant-social-networks-vehicles-migration-integration-and-development).

<sup>39</sup> Quail, Brendan. *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*, Queens University Belfast, Queens University Belfast, 2017, <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-use-and-formation-of-social-networks-among-asylum-seekers-and/>.

<sup>40</sup> Koskimaki, Leah, and Perfect Mazani. “Migrant and Refugee Solidarity in urban South Africa.” *IMISCOE Research Series*, 2025, pp. 57–74, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-95151-0\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-95151-0_4).

<sup>41</sup> Zaman, Tahir, et al. “Beyond rights-based social protection for refugees.” *Global Social Policy*, vol. 23, no. 2, 16 Feb. 2023, pp. 224–246, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181231154709>.

<sup>42</sup> McMahon, Simon, et al. MEDMIG, 2016, *Destination Europe? Understanding the Dynamics and Drivers of Mediterranean Migration in 2015*.

providing substantial material support<sup>43</sup>. This information typically concerns migratory route conditions, asylum prospects, and available humanitarian services. This is reflective of the more transient status of actors inhabiting the social worlds<sup>44</sup> within European migration corridors. Invariably less embedded within local societies, they have access to fewer resources, trading instead primarily in information and occasionally meeting material needs where strong ties exist and sufficient resources permit<sup>45</sup>. The facilitatory function of these networks often manifests within the development of ‘commercial ties’ to smugglers embedded in migrant social networks, who not only facilitate movement but may also provide protection<sup>46</sup>. However, it should be noted that this informational function has been widely problematised across literature on knowledge brokering in migration contexts, characterised as deeply flawed due to its reliance on hearsay, circulation through channels saturated with misinformation<sup>47</sup>, and its co-option by actors seeking to deliberately distort narratives<sup>48</sup>. We were told by an interviewee that ‘someone can refer you to a very good person and some people stop you from being referred... it’s all up to luck’. Reported levels of migrant trust in unverified information derived from such networks reflects these limitations<sup>49</sup>.

While not reported as an enduring or primary function, the development of interpersonal networks can foster belonging, fulfilling more abstract social needs. Fieldwork noted instances of strong bonds forming between individuals with no prior nor familial connection, who had incidentally met and migrated alongside one another. This was especially notable between young boys, who were observed to refer to one another as ‘brothers’ and demonstrated notable loyalty and camaraderie. On two occasions, AMTs were recorded to decline temporary state shelter to avoid the fracturing of mixed age groups. Whilst not a ‘fundamental physiological need’, as material scarcity, social exclusion and acute trauma converge, communal bonds and psychosocial support function as critical survival systems - arguably on par with immediate subsistence requirements such as food, water and medical care<sup>50</sup>. This need is particularly pressing amongst AMTs, who face the dual challenges of navigating the developmental complexities of adolescence and the heightened likelihood of migrating unaccompanied.

Beyond meeting social needs, travelling in larger groups can enhance visibility and empower collective, conferring an additional protective function within these networks. However, this strength has rendered such

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737\\_Destination\\_Europe\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Dynamics\\_and\\_Drivers\\_of\\_Mediterranean\\_Migration\\_in\\_2015](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737_Destination_Europe_Understanding_the_Dynamics_and_Drivers_of_Mediterranean_Migration_in_2015).

<sup>43</sup> Liu, Mao-Mei. “Migrant networks and international migration: Testing weak ties.” *Demography*, vol. 50, no. 4, 24 May 2013, pp. 1243–1277, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0213-5>.

<sup>44</sup> Ciabbari, Luca, and Anja Simonsen. “Fragments of Solidarity: The social worlds of African migrants moving northwards.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2 Jan. 2024, pp. 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2024.2349859>.

<sup>45</sup> Díaz de León, Alejandra. “‘transient communities’: How central american transit migrants form solidarity without trust.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 7 Oct. 2020, pp. 897–914, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2020.1824683>.

<sup>46</sup> McMahon, Simon, et al. MEDMIG, 2016, *Destination Europe? Understanding the Dynamics and Drivers of Mediterranean Migration in 2015*, , [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737\\_Destination\\_Europe\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Dynamics\\_and\\_Drivers\\_of\\_Mediterranean\\_Migration\\_in\\_2015](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315516737_Destination_Europe_Understanding_the_Dynamics_and_Drivers_of_Mediterranean_Migration_in_2015).

<sup>47</sup> Chang, Adam. *Networks in a World Unknown: Public WhatsApp Groups in the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis*, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.05883>.

<sup>48</sup> Carlson, Melissa, et al. “Rumors and refugees: How government-created information vacuums undermine effective crisis management.” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 3, 20 Aug. 2018, pp. 671–685, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy018>.

<sup>49</sup> Siles, Ignacio, et al. “How migrants experience information uncertainty and vulnerability: Lessons for (dis)information studies.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 10, no. 4, Oct. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241292571>.

<sup>50</sup> IASC - Inter Agency Standing Committee, 2007, *IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*, Siles, Ignacio, et al. “How migrants experience information uncertainty and vulnerability: Lessons for (dis)information studies.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 10, no. 4, Oct. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241292571>.

groups subject to attempts to dismantle interpersonal networks, targeted by actors with vested interests in perpetuating precarity and limiting protective capacities<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, Save the Children's 2022 research into the experiences of minors and young adults migrating through the Balkan routes found that, despite frequent acts of solidarity, almost half of all interviewees felt it was 'impossible to get help' and did not trust other children<sup>52</sup>. Even where trust emerged, the subsequent relationship fostered remained bounded in its protective utility: interviewees expressed a strong sense of helplessness and a limiting fear of retaliation when active intervention was required to protect their peers<sup>53</sup>.

As explored in later sections, participation in and efforts to build these networks significantly increases the risk of experience exploitation, especially for AMTs, due to the manner in which they are constructed, and actors which operate within them. This limits the extent to which they can be confidently deployed and their protective potential. Save the Children's aforementioned research expands on such reluctance to engage, revealing the prevailing perception of adults as an inherent threat. However, this wariness should not be taken to confer an absence of adult social influence: locally respected or symbolically authoritative adults within the community exercise significant influence, even when situated on the periphery of AMT's networks or not actively engaged with. Fieldwork observed the role of community leaders, most especially those who had been in Calais for longer periods, in encouraging and rationalising engagement with services such as temporary state shelter for minors.

Ultimately, however, these networks remain highly precarious and volatile<sup>54</sup>, subject to shifting migratory flows, external pressures, and targeted efforts to dismantle them. This damages their consistency and reliability as a source of material support or protection, and further complicates attempts to conceptualise the support or protection they theoretically provide.

## Summary

In terms of impacting need, whilst informal and interpersonal protection networks persist across the migratory journey, contributing significant protective and material value to individuals, they are highly unreliable and inconsistent in form and function. Lacking a coherent output, these networks cannot be conceptualised as discrete, functionally codified mechanisms of protective or material support. They consequently fail to meaningfully mitigate or redefine the collective protective and material needs of AMT populations.

A more consistent function can be identified within the facilitative capacities of interpersonal networks materialising broadly in their circulation of information. However, though indisputable, much of these networks' utility in meeting material and protective need is derivative: the capacity of shared information to alleviate material need is contingent on the prior existence of humanitarian provision to which participants can point. The emergence of and reliance upon these networks in contexts of deficits in formalised support underscores that, rather than precluding or affecting the roles of humanitarian actors, informal and interpersonal networks function as complementary, contingent extensions of the broader humanitarian landscape.

<sup>51</sup> Mougne, Christine. UNHCR UK, 2010, *Trees Only Move in the Wind: A Study of Unaccompanied Afghan Children in Europe*. , <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/trees-only-move-wind-study-unaccompanied-afghan-children-europe-christine-mougne-june-2010>.

<sup>52</sup> Burgund Isakov, Anita, et al. Save The Children International , 2022, *Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm: Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Jano, Dorian, and Saman Ali Vještica. "The variegated game of border crossing along the Balkan Route." *Critical Criminology*, vol. 33, no. 1, Mar. 2025, pp. 53–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-025-09823-6>.

Though inherently bounded in their capacity to meet protective and material needs, interpersonal networks constitute a unique and vital source of psychosocial support for AMTs, thereby contributing to the realisation of their social rights. However, the exercise of this support is frequently contested and strained by efforts to disrupt the networks through which it is mobilised, subsequently remaining incomplete.

Moreover, while many exchanges are grounded within altruistic moral economies and experiential bonds, the transactional dynamics and contingent trust inherent within others can generate additional vulnerabilities, at times reproducing or exacerbating the protective and material deficits they were leveraged to alleviate.

## **Adolescent Needs Situated in the Context of Active Migration**

AMTs do not uniquely possess material, protective or social and dignity-affirming needs. However, unique challenges facing their population - rooted in the intersection of adolescence and the migratory experience - impart a distinctive configuration to these needs, introducing nuance causing their marked divergence from those of non-migrant adolescents or migrants in pre- or post-adolescent stages. This invariably impacts collective material, social and protective needs.

### **Increased Autonomy and Displaced Sense of Childhood**

While individual autonomy inevitably increases throughout adolescence, forced autonomy, persistent stress, and pre- and peri-migration trauma oftentimes triggers patterns of 'hyper-independence' and 'accelerated maturation'<sup>55</sup>. This phenomenon is particularly acute amongst both adolescent and unaccompanied migrants, distinguishing their needs from those of younger children.

AMTs' capacity for autonomous action, however, should not be conflated with a lack of need for support - as it often is<sup>56</sup> - nor should it be taken to imply that self-reliance is neither appropriate nor desired. Remaining in the midst of critical developmental transitions, adolescents subjected to premature adultification are denied crucial guidance and support in processing traumatic experiences, protecting themselves from exploitation, and making informed, reasoned decisions. Moreover, prolonged self-reliance can heighten vulnerability - intensifying the need for emotional stability, nurturing care, and access to age-appropriate spaces for rest, recreation, and psychosocial support<sup>5758</sup>. Nevertheless, all adolescents remain entitled to childhood affirming care and recreational opportunities - irrespective of need or circumstance.

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<sup>55</sup> Tyborowska, Anna, et al. "Early-life and pubertal stress differentially modulate grey matter development in human adolescents." *Scientific Reports*, vol. 8, no. 1, 15 June 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-27439-5>.

Stress and Development Research Shows That Childhood Trauma Might Accelerate Biological Aging." *Stress & Development Lab*, Harvard University, 4 Aug. 2020, [sdlab.fas.harvard.edu/news/stress-and-development-lab-research-shows-childhood-trauma-might-accelerate-biological](https://sdlab.fas.harvard.edu/news/stress-and-development-lab-research-shows-childhood-trauma-might-accelerate-biological).

<sup>56</sup> Iglesias, Edgar, et al. "The well-being of unaccompanied migrant children: Between dreams and reality." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 157, Feb. 2024, p. 107389, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107389>.

<sup>57</sup> Marley, Charles, and Beatus Mauki. "Resilience and protective factors among refugee children post-migration to high-income countries: A systematic review." *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 29, no. 4, 30 Oct. 2018, pp. 706–713, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cky232>.

<sup>58</sup> Rodriguez, I. M., and V. Dobler. "Survivors of Hell: Resilience Amongst Unaccompanied Minor Refugees and Implications for Treatment- a Narrative Review." *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, vol. 14, 2021, pp. 559-69, doi:10.1007/s40653-021-00385-7.



## Vulnerability to Exploitation

Adolescent vulnerability to exploitation and abuse is heightened in active migration contexts, primarily due to resource deprivation and informational precarity. In conditions of acute resource deprivation, adolescents are often forced to mobilise social capital as a survival strategy - seeking favour, protection, or information through interpersonal networks. These networks are inherently precarious: characterised by exposure to coercive<sup>59</sup>, transactional (often sexual) dynamics<sup>60</sup>, and the incidental and deliberate circulation of misinformation, driven by actors seeking to exploit adolescents' dependency and limited information capital<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, as mentioned, the erosion of spatial anchors between migrant groups and communities via hostile state policies such as the 'zéro point de fixation' exacerbate their fragmentation and isolation, through removing the potential safeguards of the extent of their visibility and communal accountability.

Whilst a risk to all migrants, minors experience distinct vulnerabilities deriving from their age-related perceptions of naivety, propensity to be influenced, and heightened vulnerability to sexual abuse<sup>62</sup>. This renders their exploitation pervasive<sup>63,64</sup>. Notably, differences emerge between the vulnerabilities of adolescent minority-age migrants and young migrant children, largely attributable to the significantly higher probability of unaccompanied<sup>65</sup> among the former. The aforementioned Save The Children report underscores this, highlighting the social perception of UAMs as 'unprotected', a designation which actualises perceptions of their disposition to exploitation, through positioning UAMs as targets of coercion and abuse. However, the report takes care to highlight that accompaniment does not necessarily confer protection, as evidenced by persisting high levels of domestic abuse and exploitation stemming from or experienced through familial neglect<sup>66</sup>.

AMTs' positional precarity is embedded not only in the social realm - where the intersection of age, migratory status, and developmental stage generates layered vulnerabilities - but also manifests in the legal realm, where their minority status is liable to strategic instrumentalisation. Such instrumentalisation can involve adults consolidating exploitative control through the deliberate misrepresentation of themselves as caregivers of family members, thereby circumventing safeguards and constraining the AMT's capacity to resist coercion<sup>67</sup>. Perceptual instrumentalisations further contribute to vulnerability: for example the assumption that age confers immunity from prosecution incentivises the already active<sup>68</sup> recruitment of AMTs for high-risk tasks such as operating

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<sup>59</sup> Jano, Dorian, and Saman Ali Vještica. "The variegated game of border crossing along the Balkan Route." *Critical Criminology*, vol. 33, no. 1, Mar. 2025, pp. 53–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-025-09823-6>.

<sup>60</sup> Burgund Isakov, Anita, et al. Save The Children International, 2022, *Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm: Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>.

<sup>61</sup> ECPAT International, 2024, *Case Study: ECPAT France in Calais, France*, [https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy\\_Case\\_Study\\_FRANCE\\_2024Sep\\_ENG\\_v4-1.pdf](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy_Case_Study_FRANCE_2024Sep_ENG_v4-1.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Burgund Isakov, Anita, et al. Save The Children International, 2022, *Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm: Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid p47

<sup>64</sup> ECPAT International, 2024, *Case Study: ECPAT France in Calais, France*, [https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy\\_Case\\_Study\\_FRANCE\\_2024Sep\\_ENG\\_v4-1.pdf](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy_Case_Study_FRANCE_2024Sep_ENG_v4-1.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> EUAA: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023, *Asylum Report 2023: 5.6.1 Data on Unaccompanied Minors*, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2023/561-data-unaccompanied-minors>.

<sup>66</sup> Burgund Isakov, Anita, et al. Save The Children International, 2022, *Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm: Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid



boats or mobilising for crossings, and leverages to foster false assurances that such participation is without consequence.<sup>69</sup>

## High-risk of Psychological Harm

Despite variance in the conclusions of literature on the long-term psychological effects of irregular migration, it is widely concluded that the majority of young migrants exhibit significant emotional distress during transit and lack mechanisms to process this distress<sup>70</sup>. For AMTs, advancing cognitive and emotional capacities render them acutely aware of the hazards and precarity of migration, despite their incomplete development, amplifying their psychological vulnerability relative to younger children. Exposure to the lived realities of migration is similarly realised through the heightened responsibility placed upon adolescents to navigate transit, assume care-giving roles<sup>71</sup> and make critical migration decisions - a burden most pronounced in the prevalent contexts of unaccompanied migration. In such circumstances, AMTs do not only assume sole responsibility for these processes, but do so in the absence of adequate support. Moreover, the isolation inherent to unaccompaniment, compounded by an elevated susceptibility to coercive and traumatic encounters, produces a distinctive and intensified psychological strain. It is therefore unsurprising, that investigation into psychological risk and resilience in unaccompanied adolescents highlights the importance of high-level support and nurturing care in safeguarding from long term harms deriving from this<sup>72</sup>. Interviewees with lived experience and who work with lived experience all stressed the essential deeply impactful nature of NGO support which offered recreational relief and emphasised the importance of the community it provided.

## Intra-group Heterogeneity

Mediated by vulnerabilities to exploitation, fragmented migration routes and volatile border regimes, there is no singular migratory context. Intersecting with individual biographies - personal dispositions, precipitating migration triggers, socio-political and cultural contexts of origin - a spectrum of needs is produced within the AMT population, not only heterogeneous<sup>73</sup>, but dynamically contingent. Moreover, whilst UAMs certainly form a significant contingent within AMT populations, there remain a number of accompanied AMTs. Analysis of European migration data from 2015, whilst significantly limited by data-gaps, reveals trends of accompaniment to commonly characterise the experiences of AMT of certain national groups, such as Syrian adolescents<sup>74</sup>. This complexity unsettles attempts to standardise or essentialise the category needs of AMTs, underlining the need for situated, context-responsive interventions.

## Summary

AMTs constitute a high-risk population, whose needs and vulnerabilities are profoundly shaped by their heightened subjection to exploitation, forced autonomy, emotional developmental capacities, and migratory

<sup>69</sup> ECPAT International, 2024, *Case Study: ECPAT France in Calais, France*, [https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy\\_Case\\_Study\\_FRANCE\\_2024Sep\\_ENG\\_v4-1.pdf](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy_Case_Study_FRANCE_2024Sep_ENG_v4-1.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> [Link now unavailable](#)

<sup>71</sup> Burgund Isakov, Anita, et al. Save The Children International, 2022, *Wherever We Go, Someone Does Us Harm: Violence against Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe through the Balkans*, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>.

<sup>72</sup> Hodes, Matthew, et al. "Risk and resilience for psychological distress amongst unaccompanied asylum seeking adolescents." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 49, no. 7, 28 June 2008, pp. 723–732, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.01912.x>.

<sup>73</sup> Valtolina, Giovanni Giulio, and Marina D'Odorico. "Crossing alone the Mediterranean Sea. some critical issues about unaccompanied minors in Europe." *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar Da Mobilidade Humana*, vol. 25, no. 51, Dec. 2017, pp. 77–94, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880005106>.

<sup>74</sup> Humpris, R, and N Sigona. "Child Mobility in the EU's Refugee Crisis: What Are the Data." *Oxford Law Blogs*, Oxford University Faculty of Law, 23 Jan. 2017, [blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/01/child-mobility-eu](https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/01/child-mobility-eu).

burdens. Beyond their cumulative contribution to overall risk of psychological harm, these factors also operate individually, as formative forces in the configuration of AMTs' category need profile, rendering their understanding essential to especially protective and social, but also material need response.

Forced autonomy, in particular, both deprives adolescents of childhood-affirming care and cultivates patterns of hyper independence. This produces nuanced psychosocial needs and fosters a degree of self-reliance and advanced maturity necessitating support approaches which are affirmational of their child-status, though attuned to both their agency and developmental sophistication. More broadly, this shifts the dynamic between AMTs and institutional or social authorities, enhancing AMTs' relative autonomy while diminishing the extent of authority typically exercised over adolescents in non-migratory contexts.

Vulnerabilities to exploitation emerge acutely across interwoven social, legal and developmental domains, heightening protective imperatives and underscoring the importance of deliberate, holistic interventions addressing the structural and psychosocial drivers of exploitation, ranging from perceived lack of protection, to limited access to information, and material deprivation. This intensifies the protective needs AMT derive from their entitlement to protection.

However, despite these shared challenges, pronounced heterogeneity within the AMT population renders monolithic approaches to AMT-responsive intervention delivery untenable and produces differentiated perceptions of stakeholders' roles between AMTs.

## **Conclusion: The Roles of NGOs**

The intensifying migratory humanitarian caseload in France has compelled NGO intervention to meet acute material, social, and protective needs, in an effort to mediate the disjuncture between migrant populations' abstract entitlements, and lived realities. As an inherently situated phenomenon, the specific scope and extent of the roles assumed by NGOs *for AMTs* are shaped by the unique ways in which AMT's rights translate to need, and, crucially, by the efficacy of existing protective frameworks' in meeting those needs.

Excluding the nonexistence of AMT-specific aid - insufficient resource allocation, psychological and systemic barriers severely limit the de facto extent to which the French state meets AMTs' material and protective needs. The incoherence, limited resources, and susceptibility to corruption of informal protection and interpersonal networks underpin their similar failing to constitute reliable sources of material or protective support. This invariably designates and profoundly shapes the role NGOs take on for AMTs:

### **Positioning NGOs as the primary material aid provider:**

The extent of the state's failure to meet material needs means rather than assuming a complimentary role to state protection frameworks, NGOs have become positioned as primary humanitarian actors, adopting de facto responsibility for the provision of aid. Informal and interpersonal networks similarly offer bounded support, with the capacity of especially interpersonal networks to meet material needs often contingent on referral towards NGO provision.

### Positioning NGOs as the primary protective agent:

Notwithstanding the state's inadequate response to, and frequent rejection of, protective burdens towards AMTs, their limited efforts to meet the needs of migrant populations profoundly diminishes their protective presence within humanitarian contexts. In this environment, NGOs often serve as many AMT's primary - or even sole - institutional point of actionable 'external' contact possessing the capacity to navigate migratory contexts with relative objectivity, identify exploitative practices, and intervene to remove individuals from compromising situations. Furthermore, the state erosion of spatial anchors within migratory ecosystems isolates AMTs, limiting too the presence of informal and 'internal' actors from whom they could receive protection. This limits the extent to which NGOs could affect their work through building reliable protective capacities within communities, through actions such as providing accessible and discrete mechanisms to combat abuses, thereby maintaining a facilitatory function but shifting their role from predominantly facilitative to necessarily frontline. Moreover, many of the harms from which AMTs require protection derived from attempts to activate or malign actors operating within such interpersonal networks and informal communities.

AMTs operate in informational ecosystems characterised by information failure, saturated with misinformation and co-opted by those with coercive agendas. This hinders awareness and election to access support, alongside producing vulnerabilities which exacerbate protective needs - this positions the provision of information as a function crucial to realising rights. Whilst state efforts are incredibly empirically and conceptually limited - inapplicable in design to AMT populations -, interpersonal networks are crucial in the dissemination of information. This has the following impact on the role of NGOs:

### Positioning NGOs as anchors of informational authority:

Interpersonal networks serve as critical conduits of information, circulating information across intricate channels to which NGOs may have limited access and where greater influence may lie<sup>75</sup>. However, in the absence of effective or significant state efforts, it is largely NGOs who seed such information. Furthermore, given the acute vulnerability of these networks to corruption and misinformation, NGOs perform a central verificational role crucial in combating destabilising and obstructive misinformation<sup>76</sup>. This role is especially pronounced in relation to AMTs, whose limited trust in and the high stakes involved with leveraging interpersonal networks often drives reliance on NGOs for information. Consequently, while NGOs are neither the sole source nor primary knowledge brokers within transient migratory contexts, they function as anchors of informational authority, primarily seeding, verifying, and - to a more relatively limited extent - disseminating knowledge.

A number of social-rights-conferred needs inevitably remain unmet within contexts of active transit, a reality that humanitarian and community actors may seek to mitigate but ultimately must contend with as endemic to migratory conditions. However, the state's both deliberate and systemic denial of AMTs' child-based social rights profoundly deepens this rupture between abstract social entitlements and lived realities. Whilst interpersonal networks can in part meet these conferred needs, their capacity remains constrained and subject to multiple stressors. This has the following impact on the role of NGOs:

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<sup>75</sup> ECPAT International, 2024, *Case Study: ECPAT France in Calais, France*, [https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy\\_Case\\_Study\\_FRANCE\\_2024Sep\\_ENG\\_v4-1.pdf](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Boy_Case_Study_FRANCE_2024Sep_ENG_v4-1.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Carlson, Melissa, et al. "Rumors and refugees: How government-created information vacuums undermine effective crisis management." *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 3, 20 Aug. 2018, pp. 671–685, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy018>.

### **Positioning NGOs as facilitators of social need realisation:**

Interpersonal networks have the capacity to provide AMTs with a profound sense of belonging and community - forms of affective and cultural support that NGOs, for a range of structural, situational and experiential reasons, cannot fully replicate. This is particularly true in contexts of active transit wherein engagements are oftentimes short-term, compounding challenges facing efforts to apprehend the complex and individualised configurations of an AMT's needs. However, such networks are fragile, shaped by fluctuating levels of trust, resource scarcity, and the absence of protected spaces wherein they can fulfil more ordinary social functions - namely play, leisure and relaxed companionship - rather than being subsumed by the logics of survival and onward migration. Informal networks largely lack the professional expertise and intention of NGOs working to build, catalyse and amplify their capacities more comprehensively. NGOs therefore do not displace or replace these networks in contexts of social need-meeting but instead act as crucial facilitators, enabling more organic forms of social need fulfilment due to their creation of protected spaces, employing of social work practices and resource provision.

### **Positioning NGOs as the primary mechanism for child-status realisation:**

Migratory contexts displace AMTs from the carrying-out-of normative child status and associated rights, both necessitating and precipitating adultification through exposure to trauma, the imposition of excessive responsibility, and the deprivation of safe and play-enabling environments, amongst much else. The state frequently acts to institutionalise such adultification - both actively through the formal denial of child status and passively through their omission of AMTs from child protection frameworks, therefore refusing and failing to facilitate any reconfiguration of childhood and administratively recategorising AMTs as adults, which is reinforced in all further interactions which are from then on carried out outside of child protection frameworks. Informal and interpersonal networks, by virtue of their precarity and susceptibility to corruption, often further expose AMTs to coercive dynamics, intensifying accelerated maturation and demands for hyper-independence. Moreover, the relational burdens inherent in sustaining and activating these networks impose further responsibilities on AMTs. The failure of informal and state mechanisms to realise - or even affirm - the child-status of AMTs, renders NGOs the sole socio-institution structurally capable of intervention without further compromising child-status rights. However, this does not confer a primary *role* in assuring child-status rights, but rather the positioning of NGOs as the primary *mechanism*. Whether NGOs assume this role is contingent on how actively they deliberate and seek to mediate the realisation of AMT's rights specifically.

The demonstrated consistent embedding of NGOs as indispensable and central actors across all domains of need fulfilment and ancillary services introduces the following nuance into their relationship with AMTs:

### **Anchoring NGOs in AMTs' migration experience:**

Informal protection networks fail to manifest with consistency and often fall short of wholly addressing AMT needs, whilst AMTs' state-manufactured reliance on third parties for institutional material, social and protective support further necessitates engagement with NGOs. Even when not at the forefront of a given intervention, NGOs remain deeply intertwined as facilitative actors and intermediaries within these broader support ecologies, serving as crucial partners in the realization of other actors' interventions. For instance, the absence of state-disseminated information renders AMTs' navigation of social protection heavily contingent upon NGO mediation, positioning them present and influential even within ostensibly direct state-AMT interactions. Similarly, the systemic exclusion of AMTs from ASE services, necessitates engagement with NGO legal services

to contest their rejection and secure state protection. Consequently, NGOs are anchored as central actors within the shared migratory experiences of AMTs.

The increased autonomy, heightened vulnerability to exploitation, and internal heterogeneity of AMT populations invariably introduces the following nuance into the reception and execution of NGO, shaping both the role's enactment and the relational dynamics between NGOs and AMTs:

**Reflexive roles:** The categorical heterogeneity of AMT populations - in terms of migratory circumstance, sociocultural and experiential backgrounds - compounded by individual variation in the embodiment of 'AMT characteristics' such as vulnerability and hyper-independence, fundamentally shapes their presentation and introduces further nuance still into their corresponding needs. NGO interventions are therefore not universally apprehended by AMTs, mediated by AMT's situated perspectives and the invariable calibration of interactions by NGOs in accordance with perceived need and circumstance. Consequently, the exact roles NGOs take on are highly reflexive, varying in form, intensity and utility.

**Negotiated and limited authority:** Most notably in the provision of 'non-essential' or more advisory services, such as legal guidance or social support, the relative autonomy observed amongst AMTs constrains the extent to which NGOs can enact directive or protective authority. This positions NGOs in a far more consultative and facilitative role for AMTs, distinct from the more prescriptive or supervisory roles often associated with adolescent protection in non-migratory contexts. Consequently their influence is both limited and negotiated, contingent on AMT willingness and predisposition to engage, rather than institutionally assumed.

To conclude, NGOs assume a number of roles in both fulfilling and facilitating the fulfillment of needs and associated rights for AMTs, anchoring them as a structuring presence throughout the AMT migratory experience. The specific configuration of these roles is uniquely situated in the circumstance and experience of individual AMTs and enacted through relationally negotiated authority. The second section of this research series will examine whether NGOs' assumption of these roles is a product of deliberate efforts to realize the abstract entitlements of AMTs, or instead more incidentally assumed, shaped by the broader ecosystemic circumstances and the AMT-population's characteristics.

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