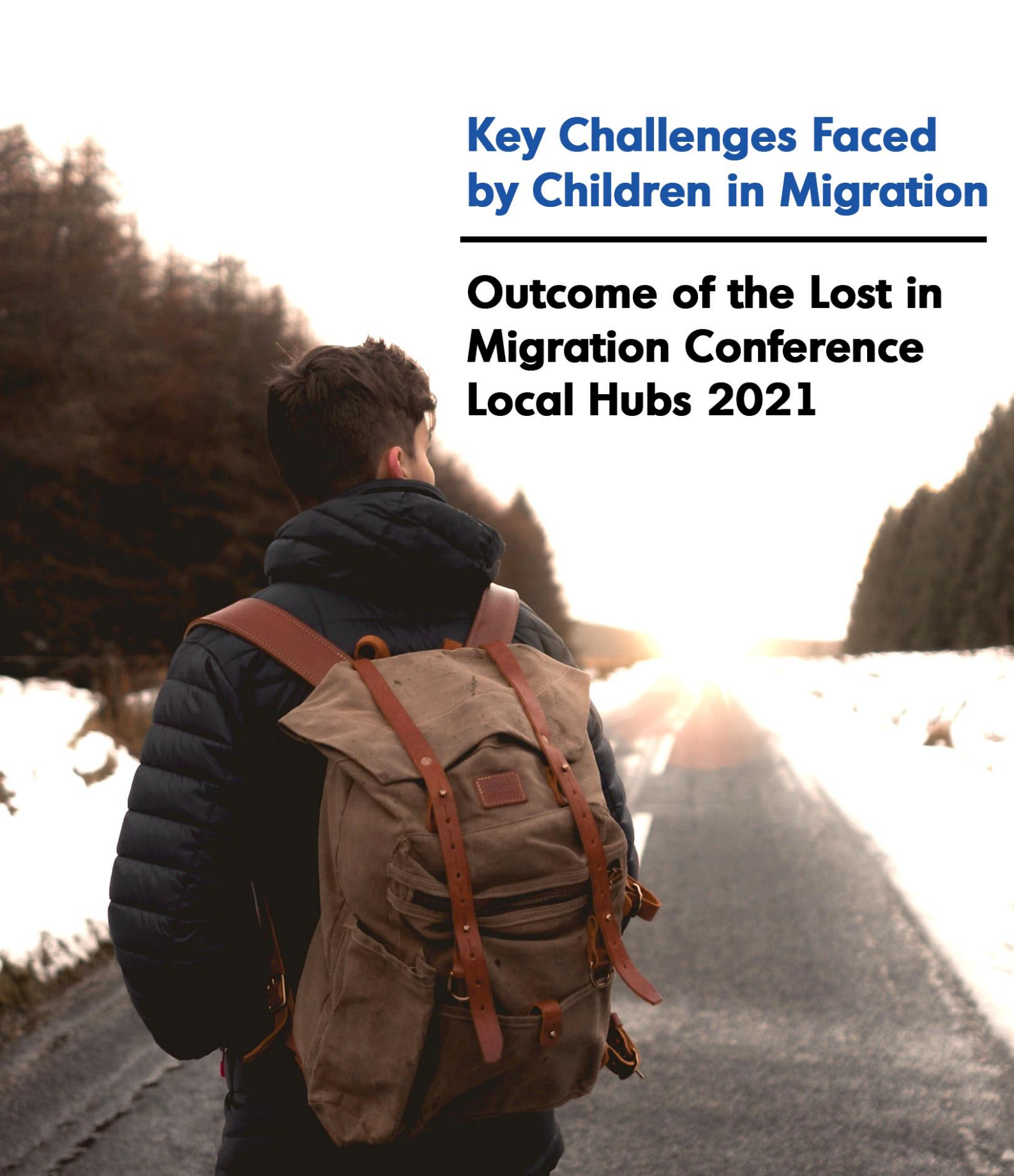


Key Challenges Faced by Children in Migration

Outcome of the Lost in Migration Conference Local Hubs 2021



**Missing
Children
Europe**



*The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society*

Purpose

This paper presents the outcomes of the local hubs organised in the context of the Lost in Migration conference. The conference brings together young newcomers, professionals, and European policy makers to discuss migration-related issues that affect children and young people and lead them to going missing. Based on the idea by young people¹, in preparation for the final conference, seven 'Local hubs' took place across Europe where young people had the opportunity to share their stories and challenges.

Methodology of local hubs

In the course of November 2021, 6 Local Hubs were organised by 7 young people, supported by Missing Children Europe and local partners. One local hub was led by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. The local hubs took place in 7 different cities, across 5 Member States, based in the cities where the organising young people currently live.

City	Country
Valletta	Malta
Berlin	Germany
Bad Homburg	Germany
Naples	Italy
Palermo	Italy
Antwerp	Belgium
Athens	Greece

Young people were provided with support from our partners and had the opportunity to decide the format of the local hub and which participants to invite. This led to different formats. Some of the local hubs were attended only by young people. In this document, the term 'young people' refers to people between the age of approximately 15-25 years old² coming from outside of the EU and with experience of being on the move across Europe. All local hubs were closed events which only the invited participants were able to attend. The hubs were held in the local language and interpretation was provided by the facilitators, if needed. In total, 60 young people participated.

Outcomes of the local hubs

Children in migration might go missing in two main ways. On the one hand, they might disengage themselves from services provided for them. On the other hand, some children in migration are victims of (re)trafficking. Based on the discussions with young people in the local hubs, the following chapter presents the main reasons why they leave the services and their experiences. These are not organised in order of importance.

¹ During the 2020 the youth conference 16 young newcomers from Afghanistan, Iraq, Gambia, Bangladesh, and Venezuela gave ideas about the next edition of Lost in Migration. Find out more here: <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/lost-in-migration-conference/>

² All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet about Lost in Migration and the local hubs, as well as a confidentiality form and a consent form that was mandatory to sign for involvement in the hub. During the local hub sessions, participants were reminded of the rules of confidentiality and anonymity, and that their participation was voluntary and open to withdrawal at any given time. A reference person from Missing Children Europe was always present, in every local hub. Partner organisations recruiting the participants were provided with Missing Children Europe's Child Protection Policy. All data included in this report is anonymized.



Key challenge 1. Access to quality reception services

Across the local hubs, young people described the reception services as inadequate. This includes issues about the type and quality of accommodation, living conditions (e.g., food, lack of privacy), available services (e.g., mental health support), communication between reception authorities and social workers, and widespread violence. It is also important to highlight that young people also emphasised that there is a general lack of trust in authorities, including police officers.

For example, in the Italian hubs, one issue identified was that unaccompanied minors are first accommodated in reception centres, before being transferred to the child protection system. In Naples, they shared that the level of support received differs according to the accommodation provided: some centres for minors only provide a bed and food, while others provide financial support and education. Regarding housing opportunities, young people are often accommodated in centres located in a scarcely populated area far from the city centre. This makes it difficult for them to integrate, find work and meet other people. Often, they decide to leave the centre, live alone on the streets until they are found and re-accommodated. One of the young people was accommodated in a family home which met all his basic needs, but he did not feel empowered to learn how to navigate the Italian system and learn how to request official documents such as a passport, tax code, etc. He felt that the community in which he lived had little experience with migration.

Participants recommended that young newcomers should receive the psychological, legal, and social support that they are entitled to. In addition, social workers in reception centres should be trained properly to address the characteristics and needs of foreign minors. In Malta, young people explained that they are first being accommodated in detention centres, then closed reception centres and then, finally, in open reception centres. Another young person from the Bad Homburg hub testified about living in containers with many other people. They also indicated the issue of the accommodation being outside the city centre, which makes it more difficult for them to find work, meet other people and integrate in general. Young people also reported that they witnessed violence in the reception centres. In addition, young women from Greece recalled the lack of support after being sexually abused or harassed. In the Berlin hub, one participant explained that forced deportations cause children to leave reception centres.

Key challenge 2: Documentation and regularisation

According to young people, documentation plays an important role in their decision to select the country and city of destination. Arriving in the first EU country, young people are often concerned about the lengthy procedures (see key challenge 3) to obtain documentation to live there legally. In some cases, the shelter staff are not well informed about the appropriate legal procedures for the regularization of young persons. One young person in the Naples' hub commented: **'When I arrived in Italy, I was 14 years old. I was accommodated in a shelter with Italian minors, I was the only foreign minor living in the shelter. The services provided were very good and I could also play football, but the staff didn't know how to help me with the documentation. Once I tried to escape after school and took the train to go to France. Before arriving at the border, I was stopped by the police and brought back to the shelter'**. Another young person mentioned that shelter staff didn't collaborate to help him obtain a passport from his embassy and so he travelled alone to Rome to collect the passport. The fear of reaching the majority (see also Key Challenge 7) and not being



regularized is a factor that pushes young people to run away and go to another city or sometimes to another country where they believe there may be better opportunities to obtain the documents before turning 18.

Key challenge 3. Asylum and family reunification procedures

Across the hubs, the length and complexity of the asylum procedure were declared as key challenges. One of the participants of the Antwerp Local hub, who has been living in Belgium for 6 years, shared that he was a minor when he arrived. The first time he asked for asylum, he had to wait for 3 years and 7 months. He got rejected and left Belgium because he was disappointed.

Another challenging aspect of the asylum procedure is the age assessment. In the Malta hub, a young person noted that age assessments are carried out through an interview and not by using any scientific means. He mentioned that a friend of his was not believed to be 17 and the reason he was provided with was that **"he had big hair"**. Another participant stated that sometimes children are asked to change their age by the authorities. In other cases, their age is changed on their documents without advising or consulting them. And in other cases, children lie about their age so that they can apply for asylum and get documentation that allows them to work.

Another procedure which plays an important role is family reunification. Often these procedures take very long. If a request for reunification is denied, young people often leave for another country. In the Naples hub, one person testified about waiting to be reunited with his family in Greece. He was often thinking of leaving by himself to find his family because the procedure was lengthy. The duration of procedures is also important in relation to age: when certain documents need to be received by the age of 18, time matters.

Key challenge 4. Access to information

The information children have at their disposal, plays an important role both in the decision-making process to leave the reception services and in deciding which country to move to. The main sources of information are smugglers, peers, parents and family members, and sometimes the internet or social media. In the Antwerp hub, one participant stated that minors receive information from peers who are already settled and have protection in their host country which can make things look much easier. Peers then encourage those who just arrived to move to their city or country. However, there are no big policy differences for minors across Europe: **"It's just how minors see it"**. This shows that misinformation, or a lack of reliable sources could convince minors to undertake re-migratory trajectories without notifying the authorities. Similar stories were shared across the local hubs on how a lack of (accurate) information can lead minors to move from one place to another. The participants emphasised the need to provide adequate, timely and reliable information on education, their rights, etc., by social workers and authorities that are trained properly to address the characteristics and needs of foreign minors.

Key challenge 5: Guardianship

In some of the hubs, issues around guardianship were discussed. In Palermo, participants explained that guardians are essential to ensure that young people's voices are heard, but that unfortunately trainings for guardians were delayed due to COVID-19.



In the Antwerp hub, issues between the legal guardian and minors were discussed at length. The problems could be due to several reasons, including cultural differences, expectations from each other, as well as some guardians looking after too many minors, and not having enough time to adequately care for all of them. One youngster mentioned that his guardian used to look after 35 minors and they met only once, just to sign some papers. He quoted his guardian as saying: **“you are a nice kid and you don’t make trouble often, that’s why I do not meet you often. Other kids create more problems and I have to see them often”**. Several participants complained about the high number of young people one guardian was responsible for and usually not having enough time with their guardian to have a real conversation and connect. The language barrier between the legal guardian and the youngsters is also an issue. Most of the time, minors cannot share everything with their legal guardian as they do not speak the local language fluently.

Young people recommended that guardians provide more information and empower the minor rather than doing things themselves. They should teach the minors how to manage their administrative tasks and how to organise themselves in Europe. For example, getting a bus card can seem very complicated when you have never done it before. Also, because, as mentioned above, most guardians are responsible for too many minors to be able to meet all of them regularly, young people recommended that one guardian should look after no more than a handful of minors.

Key challenge 6: Access to education, work and training

Across all the hubs, challenges regarding access to education, work and training were raised, as well as proper and suitable guidance for starting a career. In the Malta hub, participants explained that upon arrival in detention, no education is offered. As one young person states **“we can contribute much more to this country, we need to be taken into consideration, we need to count”**. Another young person told the story about a minor who ran away from her family to move to France. If they had provided her with an education in Malta or supported her, this girl would still be living with her mother and not alone in France. In Athens, young people shared that unaccompanied minors who are currently living in the camps are often refused access to the education system, even though the Greek government receives EU funding for these activities.

In Antwerp, young people shared their frustration with the standard government system to which each youngster is sent, making it challenging to choose a different path. A participant mentioned that as a minor you always hear that **“this is not suitable for you”, “you are not eligible”, “you cannot participate”**, and there is absolutely no information on how they could prepare and qualify for a certain career path.

After arriving in the EU country of first arrival, young people explore the possibilities of earning money, jobs, and improving their economic situation. The minors’ families often borrow money to send their children abroad and once they arrive, it is expected from them to support the family. Often, when minors notice that they are not allowed to work and they must go to school and follow the mandatory education, they go to other countries where they can work. In the Naples hub, a young person indicated that criminal networks may also offer protection in exchange for work, which often means dealing on the streets.



Key challenge 7: Transition to adulthood

The transition to adulthood is also an important challenge for minors. The quality of the transition, the services and support offered, have an impact on the integration pathway. In most cases, when they turn 18, the accommodation and support that they receive ends. This often leads young people into homelessness and trying to make money on the street to survive. In the Antwerp hub, one participant mentioned that when he turned 18 and received a negative decision, he was pushed out of his accommodation. He went to France to ask for asylum, and they sent him back to Belgium, where he is currently waiting for his decision. He also added that if his asylum application is again rejected, he will try another country. The young people recommended that the transition to adulthood be made smoother, to ensure that support and services provided are not cut abruptly and that their integration.

Key challenge 8: Being seen and heard

Across the local hubs, young people emphasised that the opportunities for them to share their experiences and be involved in decisions made by authorities and policymakers about their lives are limited. In Athens, the young people highlighted that they are “invisible” for everyone: for the government, for the camp administration, for the service providers, etc.

They emphasised that they appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences in the local hub and believe it is important to develop this more. The young participants in the Athens hub suggested organising local hubs on a regular basis throughout the year. As a participant in the Naples hub stated, he has **“beg[un] to understand how important it was [for him] to be ‘carriers of [his] story’ by telling it directly with my own voice, and not always that of others who spoke for me”**.

Key challenge 9: Investigations into missing children

In some local hubs, participants explicitly discussed the issue of missing persons. In the Malta hub, one person shared the story of three mothers who had no information on whether their children were still alive or what happened to them. These three mothers reached out to the young person to check whether their children were in the detention centre in Malta. No information or details were found about where these children were located. The young person stated that **“hundreds of people die because the water takes them out and they never arrive here”**. Another participant shared a personal story of how his brother, who was under the age of 18, went missing, and when he reported to the authorities nothing was done. He asked the government, authorities, social workers, to help find him but he never heard anything from them up to this present day. He finally managed to contact his brother after two months. Another participant highlighted that when children arrive alone, they are assigned a social worker or a caretaker. However, when the child goes missing for more than 24 hours, they rarely raise an alert. Many parents try to locate their children once they leave with the hope of receiving news that their children are well and in good health.



BACKGROUND

About children in migration (at risk of) going missing

Across the continent, thousands of children in migration go missing every year. Migrant children are considered missing when they are registered with state authorities and go missing from the reception/accommodation centres provided for them. Data provided by [Lost in Europe](#) estimates that at least 18,292 refugee children have disappeared from asylum seekers' centres in Europe between 2018 and 2020. Unfortunately, the actual figure is probably much higher. Too often, the disappearance of children in migration is overlooked because seen as a voluntary act of the child, with little or no assessment of the reasons why the child decided/was pushed to leave, the possibility that the child was abducted and the risks to which the individual child is exposed.

About Missing Children Europe

Missing Children Europe is the European federation for missing and sexually exploited children, representing 31 organisations from 27 European countries. We provide the link between research, policies and organisations on the ground to protect children from any kind of violence, abuse or neglect that is caused by or results from them going missing.

About the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is a non-governmental organisation located in Malta, focusing on social research, community consultation, and project work. The Foundation was established on 25 June 2014 by HE Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, during her term as the 9th President of Malta.

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