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***Interview of Rolf Widmer***



*For the past 40 years, Rolf Widmer has been involved in developing living spaces for children who are unable to grow up in their own family. This interview contains his insight on the provision of care for unaccompanied minors in Switzerland, based on his decade of experience heading the Organization for Asylum of Canton Zurich (AOZ), and his fifteen years of experience heading the Swiss Foundation for the International Social Service (ISS). He is currently president of the ISS and of the Tipiti association.*

*«There are no refugee children, or illegal children. There are just children »*

***30 years ago, Switzerland witnessed the influx of the first unaccompanied minors from Africa. How were they welcomed at the time?***

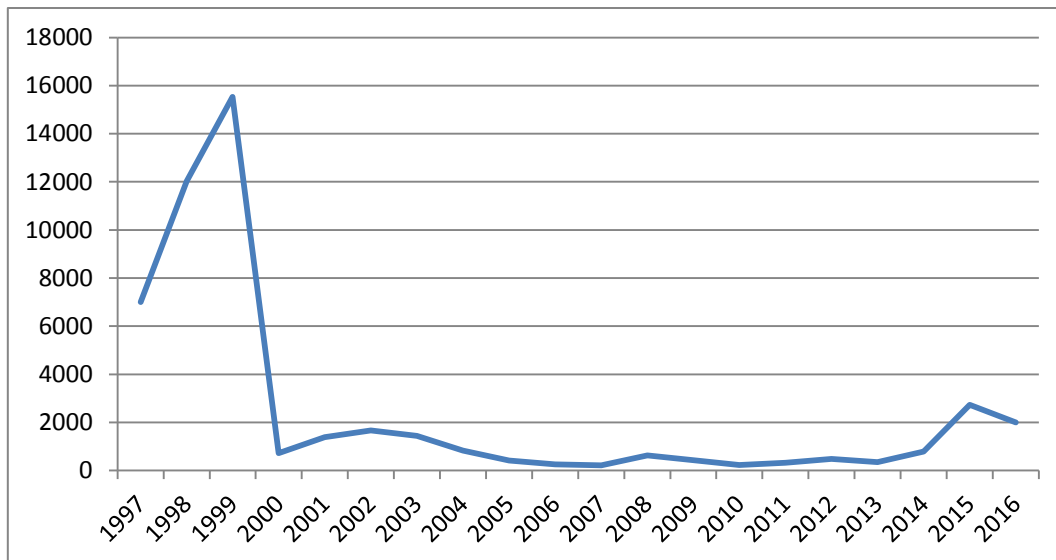
In the '90s, the care of unaccompanied migrant children was not at all on the political agenda. Only the Swiss Cantons of Geneva and Basel possessed legal frameworks which allowed specific intervention. In other Cantons, unaccompanied minors were not considered as children, but first and foremost as asylum seekers. They were housed in centres without adequate oversight or support. No one thought that these young people deserved special care. At the time, no one talked about unaccompanied migrant children. From a procedural perspective, migrant children were treated in the same manner as migrant adults.

***What drew you to this issue?***

Every child needs an individualized form of support. In my view, there was no difference between unaccompanied minors and other children. They should receive the exact same treatment as all other children in Switzerland, including in terms of access to schooling and psychosocial support.

***Can you tell us about your memories related to the arrival of migrant children in Switzerland over the past 20 years?***

The trigger factor for awareness on the issue of unaccompanied child migrants was the beginning of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia in 1992. A large number of children came to Switzerland with their mothers, aided by humanitarian action. In 1993-1994, Switzerland also witnessed the incoming of unaccompanied child migrants fleeing African conflicts. At this time, the first sector specifically created for the care of unaccompanied child migrants emerged in the AOZ in Zurich.



The retrospective of the number of unaccompanied minors in Switzerland these last 20 years shows a high number unaccompanied minors between 1997 and 1999 due to the conflict in Ex-Yougoslavia. The number of unaccompanied minors in Switzerland in 2015 is very high and implies many challenges for their care and support, but it is important to put things into perspective and to keep a global vision concerning the arrival of unaccompanied minors in Switzerland.

Sources :

Tdh (2007). Les mineurs non accompagnés en Suisse. Exposé du cadre légal et analyse de la situation sur le terrain.

[http://www.childsrights.org/documents/sensibilisation/adem/tdh\\_rapport-MNA.pdf](http://www.childsrights.org/documents/sensibilisation/adem/tdh_rapport-MNA.pdf)

Statistiques du SEM de 2002 à 2016 :

[https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/fr/home/publiservice/statistik/asylstatistik/statistik\\_uma.html](https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/fr/home/publiservice/statistik/asylstatistik/statistik_uma.html)

ODM (2010). La population kosovare en Suisse.

<https://www.sem.admin.ch/dam/data/sem/publiservice/publikationen/diaspora/diasporastudie-kosovo-f.pdf>

In the 2000s, children's rights were put to the test when the Bosnians left. A large number of people were required to return to their county. This event especially affected the young people who possessed an F permit, and were therefore excluded from vocational training programs despite their extended schooling in Switzerland. This state of affairs brought to light the highly precarious status of these young people in Switzerland. Possible solutions were focused on short-term intervention, and failed to uphold the right to education and training, and failed to provide the tools to facilitate integration into the host of home society.

***This year we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the ratification of the Convention on the rights of the child (CRC) by Switzerland. Would you say that children are given a more central focus than was the case 20 years ago?***

In my opinion, this is still not sufficiently the case. Young people continue to be categorized according to their status, instead of being considered first and foremost as children. The administrative status should be relegated as a secondary concern.

Over the course of the asylum procedure, the truthfulness of the unaccompanied child migrant's story is often called into question. Furthermore, the asylum decision is taken by an individual who is unknown to the youth. If the child or the youth needs to leave Switzerland, there is no attempt to find a solution that takes the child's individual situation into account. The child's personal life has

never been sufficiently taken into account by authorities making asylum decisions. The provision of care to the migrant child is still perceived as a predominately logistic problem. The needs of the family-less child and of the persons who can provide support are insufficiently discussed.

Unfortunately, the rights of children and the Convention have not tangibly improved the way in which this issue is tackled. While the creation of the Convention on the rights of the child can be credited with reminding the international community that States are responsible for the care of child migrants, the implementation of this responsibility largely varies.

***Where do you expect to see the biggest change?***

There is great progress still to be made in regards to the participation of children in the asylum seeking procedure. It is very important to listen to the child/youth, in order to work together to devise solutions that are in his-her best interest and in line with his-her aspirations. Nevertheless, in too many cases there is no participation for children in the asylum procedure. They are not *really* being listened to.

It is also important to alter our perceptions of children and to apply the principle of reciprocity. Children are not only victims. We need to involve them in their own life and their social life. It is necessary to base intervention on the principle of inclusion rather than separation. Today, children are subject to placement based on their status, but these children and youth need to be integrated into the community. How can a child be expected to develop if he-she is not considered an integral part of society? How is one expected to integrate and develop if one is separated?

Finally, it is very important to attend to the continuity of the link between youth and the people that support him-her. Continuity and stability of links are essential for youth to develop a relationship of trust with the person that supports him-her during the asylum procedure and beyond, also continuing into adulthood.

***What improvements must be made in order to ensure heightened respect for the CRC?***

I would like to see a total respect for the rights of unaccompanied child migrants. Our societies must develop their sense of welcoming, guided by the idea that every child has the right to be cared for and adequately supported in his-her development. It is our responsibility to work with the child in order to identify the best solution for the immediate and long-term future. In the framework of the asylum procedure, the personal situation of the child should be evaluated and taken into consideration while the asylum granting decision is made. It should also guide the measures that aim to guarantee the child's rights and to give him-her the consideration he-she deserves.

In the eventuality of a return to the country of origin, it is essential to implement measures through means of personal accompaniment and support. This will ensure continuity for the youth's education and social and professional reintegration. In the case of integration in Switzerland, integration is often considered as an effort to be made by the asylum seeker. On the contrary, I believe that integration is a two way street: It is currently essential to think about the educational needs of these young people, and make timely investments