

Unaccompanied Foreign Minors: Life projects of young Africans in the Canary Islands

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The intensification of irregular African immigration in the Canary Islands resulted in the arrival of thousands of unaccompanied foreign minors (MENA in Spanish: Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados), reaching a peak of maximum intensity in 2006 during the so-called "cayuco crisis". This population of immigrants under the age of 18 is under the tutelage of the government of the Canary Islands and is placed in specific reception centers for foreign minors (CAME in Spanish: Centro de Acogida para Menores Extranjeros). The paper presents the methodology and main results of a research project, implemented by the author for the Observatory of Immigration in Tenerife (OBITen), about what these young Africans experienced when turned into Unaccompanied Foreign Minors by an administrative process whose aim is to protect them as vulnerable persons.

The project fieldwork included in-depth interviews with immigrant minors and experts. Additionally we carried out semi-structured interviews with professionals linked to the development and education of the unaccompanied foreign minors. We also organized focus groups with the resident Canary Islands population.

The results we obtained reveal shortcomings in several areas: in the personal and emotional experience this process supposes for the migrants, in the area of administration and management and, particularly, concerning the transition from the condition of unaccompanied foreign minor to the status of adult immigrant.

Introduction

The arrival of immigrants to the Canary Islands reached its peak in 2006 with the “cayuco crisis” (Godenau & Zapata, 2008). At this time the MENAs (name given in Spain to unaccompanied foreign minors) who arrived on the shores of the archipelago captured the attention of society and the media.

TABLE 1
MENAs arrivals in the Canary Islands through illegal entry points between 1999 and 2010.

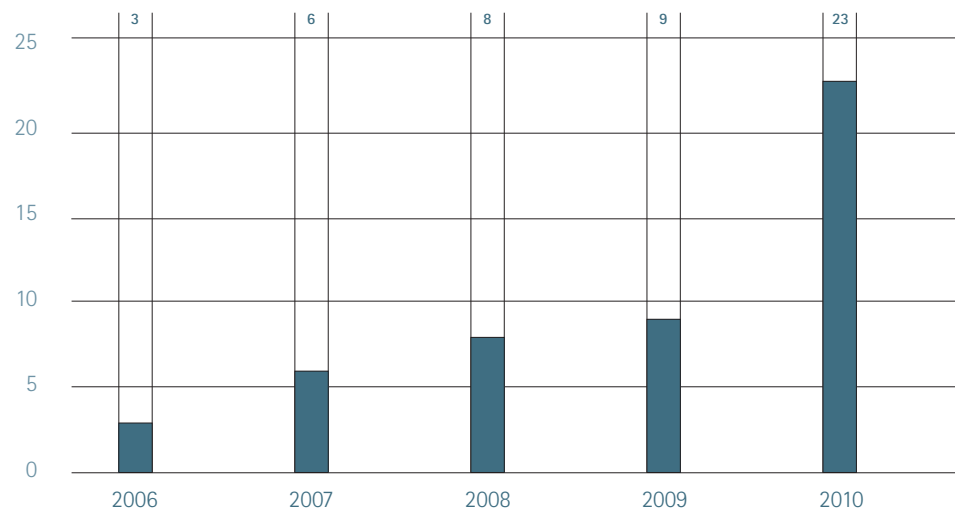
YEAR	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Total	311	273	331	672	565	166	84	928	752	804	245	54
Moroccan	261	185	272	509	477	100	67	267	295	199	45	48
Sub Saharan	50	88	59	163	88	66	17	661	457	605	200	6

Source: Canary Islands Government Department of Social Welfare, Youth and Housing

The vulnerability of this population, together with the scant resources announced by the Regional Government, aimed at providing adequate assistance, in the social emergency declaration (Order 126, dated March 8, 2006, of the Regional Department of Employment and Social Affairs), but which has been repeatedly postponed up to the present date, has placed them at the centre of political and academic debate, particularly prior to 2009, after which time the numbers of arrivals began to decrease. At present, however, while arrival numbers have fallen, the worrying trend is the growing proportion of minors in relation to all irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands; in 2010 this figure reached 23%.

FIGURE 1
Percentage of MENAs in relation to the total number of immigrants entering the Canary Islands through illegal entry points between 2006 and 2010

Source: Canary Islands Government



The operational protocol, enshrined in Spanish legislation, establishes that the minor must be transferred to a protective facility as soon as the protective measure has been determined and the minor has been given a MENA Registration number. In the Canary Islands, the Autonomous Government has transferred responsibility for the provision of specialised services for deterrence and protective measures to the Island Councils; these are, in turn, responsible for the specific protection centres for foreigners, called CAMEs (Reception Centres for Foreign Minors). The participants in this study are directly or indirectly related to these protection centres, where the MENAs are treated in a way that ensures that their rights are upheld.

Existing literature, as well as providing data on the presence of minors, has basically centred on identifying the minors' profile (Human Rights, 2007a; European Migration Network, 2009; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2009, amongst others) or describing the context in their countries of origin (Human Rights, 2007b; Amnesty International, 2008; amongst others). Studies focusing on their development within the reception centres (Barranco et al., 2007) and their living environment are much fewer in number. This project, therefore, drawing on a wider-reaching research project¹, presents results relating to the elements pertaining to the interaction of these individuals with their socio-emotional environment, with particular attention paid to their emotional experience, the development of competences necessary for coping with the integration process in the host society and the transitional period up to the moment when they reach the age of majority and become adult immigrants.

Objectives

The ultimate goal of this project, besides giving a voice to those who, in their varying roles, bear witness to the experiences of the MENAs, is to be a useful tool in the improvement of the lives of these youths. The aims are, specifically:

Identification of the minors' opportunities to interact, particularly with their peers, at community level, paying special attention to the emotional sphere and analyzing the incidence of these opportunities on the process of social integration.

Presentation of the particularities of the personal goals of the unaccompanied foreign minors (and their feasibility), laying particular emphasis on their education and on the repercussions of current legislation and its application once the minors have reached the age of majority.

Analysis of the perception of the population of Tenerife towards the presence of unaccompanied foreign minors.

Methodology

The use of qualitative techniques gives a better understanding of the information describing situations and facts, as well as processes that are internal, vital and closely linked to people's behaviour. In the words of Ortí (1989, p. 185), this is "a form of empirical approach to the social reality that is specifically suited to meaningful understanding and in-depth motivational interpretation of the behaviour of social actors, in terms of internal orientation (beliefs, values, desires)". The aim was to acquire relevant knowledge about the life processes of the minors in Tenerife, for which purpose it was necessary, as well as listening to them, to obtain data from the corresponding actors and institutions which would allow us to attain the complexity required by the study and for which purpose we designed the methodological approach outlined in the following table.

TABLE 2
Data collection techniques and information units.

Source: Own elaboration

SOCIAL RESEARCH TECHNIQUE	INFORMATION UNIT
Semi-structured interview	Qualified participants (14) *
Structured interview	External professionals ² : - Teachers (16) - Monitors of training activities (12) - Monitors of sports (10)
Focus group	- Educators at protection centres (7) - MENAs (8) - Tenerife populace: - Youths (7 male) - Youths (8 female) - Adults (8 men and women)
In-depth interview	MENAs (10 male and 1 female)
Active observation	Sessions ³ with under-18s (20) Sessions ⁴ with over-18s (210)
Document analysis	Educational Projects at the Centre (7) Individual Educational Projects (11) Regulations (5)

*The number in parentheses indicates the number of participants, documents or sessions.

² Professionals who work outside the reception centres in educational centres or in other types of facilities related to education, training or sport.

³ Limited time periods that basically occurred in the centre, on the leisure activities, on public transport or in the street.

⁴ Limited time periods that occurred in the street, near the reception centre, at home, in the offices of the Local Authorities, in different companies and in all those places that the youths frequent.

The minors who participated came from Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, and their official age (obtained through bone tests) ranged from 13 to 17 years and 7 months. They came to the Canary Islands between 2006 and 2008 and were taken into protection centres managed by the Tenerife Island Council (when the participants were selected – January 28, 2010 – Tenerife was host to 63% of the MENAs in the wardship of the Canary Islands Government). The rest of the information units, except the external professionals (teachers and sports or educational monitors) and members of the populace (recruited through a strategy designed by the focus groups), were directly linked to the CAMEs.

Results

The search for opportunity has, for many years, led a great number of people to abandon their countries in Africa, countries which suffer great privations, especially in health, education, and basic living standards, which are brought to light every year in the Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Human mobility is not new, but what is new is the growing number of migrants under the age of 18 crossing borders of the European Union at illegal entry points; moreover, they are afforded special treatment in line with international legislation which privileges the interests of the minor over their administrative status as irregular migrant. These migrants are opening up a breach in the firm policies of restriction, established by European Union directives, with regards to irregular immigration. In response to this situation, the institutions have created the term MENA (used in Spain) and the procedures for protecting these migrants while they are still minors, and which are automatically deactivated when they reach majority of age. To express it in more graphic terms, it is the equivalent of labelling them “on hold”, and when they turn 18, the label disappears and they become just another irregular immigrant.

The most significant finding with regard to the participants’ profile, besides obvious motivations such as economic aspirations, the search for a better life or the assurance that they will not be repatriated, relates to the voluntary nature of the decision to migrate and, especially, to their growing up in a culture of migration (Schoorl et al., 2000; Pensátez, 2000) which considers mobility to be a very important resource. They saw how their grandparents, or those of their friends and neighbours, returned from other countries every summer and sent money or gifts to support the family and possibly to improve their social standing in their community. In fact, in all the cases studied, the youths had one or more members of their family who had previously undertaken a migratory journey themselves.

From the data obtained it was concluded that the implementation of the operational protocol for MENA arrivals (Spanish Ministry of Work and Social Affairs, 2005) has flaws, notably the absence of interpreters who provide, on the one hand, an adequate explanation of the process they are being subjected to and, on the other hand, the guarantee that they understand their rights, particularly the request for asylum, a right the participants claimed they were unaware of when interviewed.

As soon as the migrant is determined to be a minor and has been assigned a MENA Registration number, the Canary Islands Government becomes their ward, although it is the Tenerife Island Council that is responsible for executing the protective measure through its Child and Family Unit, the body which administrates the CAMEs. The specific protection facility for foreigners is normally a house or apartment, normally located in the suburbs, sleeping a maximum of 12 and whose objectives are (Instituto de Atención Socio Sanitaria, 2007, p. 107):

Execute the protective measure.

Provide a safe environment, meeting their basic and integral development needs, promoting their independence.

Encourage personal adaptation and integration in the host community, paying special attention to learning the language and culture of the host society as well as raising the awareness of the latter.

Locate their family or, failing this, the child protection services in their country of origin, thus facilitating family reunion.

The most relevant findings are presented below, as they correspond to the aforementioned objectives:

1. Identification of the minors' opportunities to interact, particularly with their peers, at community level, paying special attention to the emotional sphere and analyzing the incidence of these opportunities on the process of social integration.

The brave youths that set off from some place in Africa have now become MENAs (a term which is, incidentally, unfamiliar to the interviewed minors). And there, in their places of origin, it is possible that social concepts such as child and man are seen as such through identifiable rites of initiation that determine the passage from one to the other. Needless to say, these rites are very different, not only in each of the countries of the origin, but also in each of the regions and different geographic areas where living standards are as much the result of cultural conception as they are of socioeconomic situation. In fact, in some cases they introduce the concept of "extended family" explaining that people, after marrying and having children, continue to live a long time with their family and that they feel protected by them. Whatever the case may be, these minors spend those years of their life here and the space-time dimension, together with the historical and sociocultural context, marks their self-perception as adolescents, a psychosocial construction that their peers share and which will undoubtedly be a platform for initiating and consolidating relationships with them. This affirmation is backed up by the great major-

rity of participants, who recognize the complexity of the occasionally difficult process that the youths have to undergo. In fact, from the very first day that they arrive at the protection centre a transition begins, a hard journey, during which they soon become aware that what they know is of very little value, and what's more, of little use for daily life. They have to begin to ask themselves many questions about their identity, their capacities, their skills, and they have to do so in a critical moment, when they are also evolving as individuals. They undertake this personal journey, at such a delicate time in their lives, without the support of a family figure, without the emotional ties which give them the confidence to deal with it, and usually with a deep-rooted anxiety that they do not manifest and do not, of course, share with their family, with whom they maintain contact over the telephone. Nor do they, regrettably, open up to the professionals at the protection centres, with whom they all emphatically claim that they have no emotional ties. As for the professionals themselves, while there is disagreement between those who claim these ties exist and those who do not, they point to the mistrust shown by these minors, making them responsible for this deficiency. In any case, it can be objectively noted that the key figure of the guardian does not exist for any of the wards. Fortunately, in their favour, and in addition to the solid emotional education given to them by their families (in the majority of cases), they have a dynamic personality – both in their psychological development and construction of identity – which will help them to carry out the tasks (always in rudimentary conditions) orientated towards their continuous adaptation to their environment and the development of skills necessary to reinvent themselves within it.

In terms of strategy, a command of the language, as a basic element of successful interaction, is the first task they must take on, not forgetting that, as well as linguistic competence, they must develop intercultural communicative competence⁵ which, according to Vilá's definition (2005, p. 50) is "the set of cognitive and emotional skills for manifesting behaviour which is appropriate and effective in a specific social and cultural context and which favours a sufficiently effective degree of communication." Somehow, these minors, in the midst of constructing their own identities (understanding that an individual is capable of assuming diverse and complementary identities that make it possible to both maintain their cultural heritage and integrate new ways of life, which in turn allows them to still feel part of their group of origin and create, at the same time, a sense of belonging to their host society⁶), must learn to interpret certain non-literal meanings and understand their meaning within their context. The data indicates that they do not receive targeted support in this area. Their development is seriously compromised and compensated only by the effort that they themselves make to interact with their peers: this becomes the source of their knowledge, not only of the language, but also of the keys necessary to decodify cultural meaning. In a basic way, they learn

⁵ The importance of intercultural communicative competence in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language is one of the lines of research and action recognised by ASELE (Association for the teaching of Spanish as a Foreign Language), the Ministry of Education's redELE (Electronic Network for Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language) and the Cervantes Institute, among others.

⁶ At present, thanks to Information and Communication Technologies, this process is even more viable now that they can "live here and live there" in the sense that they can stay informed of the decisions and events that occur in their families and communities.

to make a suitable interpretation and this in turn helps them adapt their behaviour and create positive attitudes of respect, responsibility and interest towards their new context. The space and time that produce these interactions are attendance at the educational centre, sporting activity (mainly football) and participation in social networks.

The data indicates definitively that attendance at an educational centre is a transcendental element in the incorporation of the youths into a social context which, in particular, they see as very positive since they point to it as the place where they initiate their first friendships, feel part of a group and begin to de-codify many of the ways of living and doing. This is closely followed, in terms of opportunities for interaction, by the systematic and organised practice of a sport in which they are often, due to their responsibility, discipline and attitude, singled out as leaders who even mediate in possible group conflicts. At the same time, their presence in school and on the sports field leads to more relationships on the online social networks they subscribe to. As well as using these networks to keep in touch with those they have already met in physical space, they also get in touch with their online friends, thus generating a multiplying effect. This kind of interaction, however, is quite inconsistent, not only between them and Tenerife youths, but also amongst the latter since this is a general trend at this stage of life. In any case, the closest and most complex relationships are always those they have established with the other youths in the reception centres, united by common concerns, difficulties and desires, and these become virtually exclusive when they approach the age of majority. At this moment a paradox arises because, while relationships with their peers has so far been a positive influence on the process of integration, it now has negative repercussions on the decisions they have to take in the next stage of life. The reason for this is the considerable difference in resources between them and those Canarian friends and schoolmates that can rely on the support of their family and do not have to worry about having their legal documents in order or having a roof over their heads. The efforts made to integrate and form intercultural relationships are now abandoned as this is now perceived to be a threat to their futures as adult irregular immigrants.

2. Presentation of the particularities of the personal goals of the unaccompanied foreign minors (and their feasibility), laying particular emphasis on their education and on the repercussions of current legislation and its application once the minors have reached the age of majority.

Their first goal is to find work, although many of them know that they will have to spend an undetermined length of time⁷ in a centre for minors. From the moment that the age testing process begins and they are transferred to a protection facility, they start to be aware of the changes they must make in their personal goals, although they do not know with any certainty how they are going to achieve

⁷ The information they have is imprecise and lacking specific data about rules and regulations that are completely unfamiliar to them. They know that their status as minors will protect them from being returned to their countries and afford them shelter in a centre for minors, but they do not know how long for or the implications of this on their personal goals.

ve them. According to them, this learning process is basically achieved through contact with the other youths who are already veterans at this. Suitable guidance will undoubtedly help the youth to obtain maximum returns from their own efforts and activate their full potential. In this sense, another of the important contributions to this study has been to dispel the belief that it is the feeling of frustration at finding it impossible to find work which makes them reject education and training. It has been made quite clear that they value it highly and understand the importance it holds for their professional future, not only in specific work-oriented skills, but also the basic education received at Secondary School which can give them greater access to a better job and, consequently, an improved quality of life. Sadly, this conception is not shared by a great majority of those who work in the protection facilities and who, regardless of the young immigrants' skills and potential, systematically distance them from academic training, even though they may not have any other training possibilities available to them; they limit them to job seeking, which could in any case be perfectly compatible with any kind of professional training activity. However, these youths are also capable of crossing that boundary and do so on their own terms, enrolling in an adult education centre to obtain the Spanish School Leaving Certificate (ESO) as soon as their situation allows (after they have turned 18).

With regard to the teachers consulted, although their response was favourable, they indicated an absence of specific intercultural education projects in the design and development of the educational programme⁸, they noted the inefficiency of the system and they emphasised the lack of adequate response strategies, thus reinforcing the perception that Secondary Education teachers lack training in their approach to diversity, in general, and to multicultural contexts, in particular (López-Reillo, 2005, 2006). Whilst the Europe 2020 Strategy insists on the importance of well-educated young people, the European Youth Pact focuses on youths with fewer opportunities, and the social need for educated people who actively participate in their communities grows more urgent, it defies belief that human capital is being lost and that decisions are taken according to the individual's origins and not their abilities⁹.

These young people therefore revise their personal goals to include education and training. Up to the age of 16 they are schooled in Secondary Education centres which in some cases send them, regulations permitting, on to different Attention to Diversity Programmes: the Social Guarantee Programme (up to September 2009) or the Initial Professional Qualification Programme (since September 2009). Selection and participation in a school workshop is the highest aspiration they can have in this time frame (16-18 years) since, as well as learning a trade, they also receive remuneration which their guardians deposit in a current account so that they can make use of it when they reach majority of age. However, this is a very limited resource and the majority find themselves actively job seeking or doing other, informal, training activities; this is when

⁸ The Educational Programmes do not consider the intercultural dimension of the curriculum, which, aimed at all pupils, would make development of suitable competences possible.

⁹ This path to compulsory education is not without difficulties but, undoubtedly, it is a commitment to a fair educational system of quality.

they begin to perceive that their time is up, as is their way of life. The message they receive is that they have to remember who they are and what they came for (they have to remember that they are irregular immigrants) and distance themselves from any interaction with their Canarian peers who can afford to lead a life which is now out of their reach. This means that a proper adaptation to the context and culture of their destination country, so highly valued before, is now considered a grave error, blamed, incidentally, on the young migrant; and failure to overcome this will have terrible consequences for their adult lives, which begin the very day after they reach maturity of age. On that day their personal goals shatter into a thousand pieces. They have completed all the objectives, revised their expectations, received an education, been patient, and the same day that they leave the protection centre they find themselves in an irregular situation, without a work permit, with extremely limited possibilities of obtaining one, and with no place to live. Only a few manage to cover their basic needs, some because they are given one of the very few places that exist in residential centres, others because they benefit from the solidarity of other youths who left before them and have managed to find stability, and others because they receive aid from certain people who believe in equal opportunity (anonymous citizens, businessmen, professionals working for certain associations and NGOs, etc.). The transition to a working life is especially difficult for them as they do not know the administrative procedures and legal requirements for securing a contract. The distress and uncertainty they are feeling is compounded by this ignorance which, on occasion, leads them to work in the underground economy, an option now closed to them in the present economic crisis.

Some of them revise their personal goals and manage to successfully cross that boundary which, metaphorically speaking, once again pitches them into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where, to continue with the comparison, they are buffeted by great waves of loneliness, discrimination, deceit and bureaucracy.

3. Analysis of the perception of the population of Tenerife towards the presence of unaccompanied foreign minors.

In the three discussion groups, the participants made contributions that we consider essential to achieving the goal of identifying relevant elements in understanding how the presence of MENAs on the island of Tenerife, where they all lived, is perceived. The variable of contact with the African youths (one of the criteria for selecting the sample group) was the central theme which focused the discussion in the groups and guaranteed that they concentrated on the specific subject, avoiding digressions on, for example, migration in general. Therefore, the group discussions did not focus on specific experiences or practices with these minors, but rather on perceptions, opinions and evaluations regarding public management of this demographic group. The groups undertook the tasks of, on the one hand, diagnosing the current state of this issue, and on the other hand, noting down strategies and practices “to enact” with these youths. In the three groups they agreed on the importance of interaction and integration in daily life. Their always moderate positions were manifested through construc-

tive and proactive discussions which kept exclusion or alarmism at a distance. At no time did they openly oppose the presence of MENAs on the islands nor did they express rejection or direct discrimination on first impression, although they did ascribe xenophobic language, behaviour and attitudes to other people and social groups.

The people who made up the three discussion groups were not generally aware that the CAMEs existed or where they were located, even if they were in their own towns, but they did perceive the presence of large groups of young Africans in certain areas of the towns and coast at the weekend.

They also demonstrated a clear awareness of the fact that the MENAs migrate to find work. There was general consensus on the idea that employment, on reaching majority of age, was the principal element of integration into society although, at the same time, they identified and evaluated the difficulties, both general (economic crisis, underground economy, etc.) and specific (administrative obstacles to obtaining legal documents), that became serious barriers to that wished-for entry into the job market.

The mixed group (men and women) of adults manifested their concern for the realities that the MENAs have to face up to, expressing a certain protectiveness and a critical attitude towards the dominant social model. The group of young women, for their part, clearly explained the motivations behind immigration and looked into the possible points of view that bear relation to it. They also showed a protective attitude as well being supportive of equality and equal opportunities. And finally, the group of young men focused on the theme of resources, of material considerations and the economy, in contrast to the politics, culture and personal interaction that characterized the discussions of the previous group. The young men constituted the most fragmented and resistant group with respect to the MENAs: their discussions did not arise from an intellectual appreciation of the subject, but they turned to stereotypes and material and physical referents to make their point. In the three cases, aware of their links to international migration, they treated the theme of minors as a specific fact, placing more emphasis on their evolution than on their status as foreigner.

Conclusions

In all the cases studied, beyond evident motivation such as economic aspiration, the search for a better life and the assurance that they will not be repatriated, they also share the common factor of coming from a culture of migration.

The flaws detected in the implementation of the MENA Protocol owe basically to the lack of an interpreter to communicate information to the minors about the process and their rights, in particular their right to asylum.

The CAMEs meet the basic needs of the minors. However, the emotional sphere receives no attention as the presence of a guardian as a reference figure is inexistent. Furthermore, they are not given sufficient education to develop their linguistic competence, and none whatsoever to develop intercultural communicative competence.

The educational centre and sports activities seem, in that order, to be spaces in which the minors interact with the local populace and develop their social competence which often extends to social networks, and which begins to diminish as they approach their 18th birthday as this means that they are about to become an adult irregular immigrant; they are now under constant pressure in the knowledge that their condition is not the same as their Canarian peers.

Education and training, whether basic or professional, is highly valued by the minors and teachers, although this opinion is not shared by the educators and administrators of the CAMEs.

Reaching majority of age leaves the youths without any protection in their transition to a working life, without resources and the knowledge necessary to overcome the administrative hurdles and to obtain a job contract.

The Tenerife populace have a favourable attitude to the presence of the young Africans; young women and adults are more protective and better disposed towards their social integration. The initial impression at their presence, the allocation of resources for them, and the opportunities for interaction form the central theme of their discussions.

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