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CHILDREN'S RIGHTS PROMOTION IN SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS

A STUDY ON THE *VACACIONES EN PAZ* PROGRAMME
FROM A CHILD RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract

The *Vacaciones en Paz* programme (VeP) started in 1979 shortly after Morocco illegally occupied Western Sahara, which since 1975 has been a disputed territory pending a referendum for self-determination. The programme consists of Sahrawi children being hosted during summer by Spanish families who try to raise awareness for the Sahrawi cause and temporarily alleviate the children's living conditions. Meanwhile, approximately 170,000 Sahrawi refugees live in camps near Tindouf (Algeria) heavily dependent on humanitarian aid for their survival. This study aimed to determine the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of children's rights based on the perspective of Sahrawi children. Research has shown that it serves as a temporary platform to implement some of those rights. This qualitative study is based on a literature review of the principles of the VeP programme, alongside a thematic analysis of the field data provided by Sahrawi children and teenagers. Analysis of the VeP programme demonstrated that the Convention of the Rights of the Child is not mentioned in its discourse. Notwithstanding, the results indicate an impact on the promotion of Sahrawi children's rights. On this basis, it is recommended to implement a children's rights-based discourse within the principles of the VeP programme, since the theoretical knowledge of their rights may be a key factor for strategic empowerment of Sahrawi children and teenagers in their representation of the Sahrawi cause.

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Thank you for dreaming, walking, running and resting alongside me showing true friendship.

Remember the forgotten

I try to guess how eternal the temporary feels while waiting for an unfulfilled promise which was made 45 years ago. A word given that feels as written on the desert sand of a sunny day, wind storms. Sleepy freedom among the building ruins. Haimas where thousands of teas have been drunk in the dwelling, in the longing. Each number holds a beating heart, and every grain of sand a burning tear. Patiently, the golden sunsets with screaming colours whisper: *Please, don't forget to remember us!* — Nazaret Bonilla Pérez

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on up-to-date official reports by the United Nations over 50,000 Sahrawi children live in a protracted refugee situation with decreasing humanitarian help and under unbearable weather conditions in summer when temperatures reach up to 50 degrees Celsius. Access to health care is very limited, the medicines available scarce, and basic health issues are the norm among the Sahrawi people, for instance 50% of the children between 6 and 59 months suffer anaemia (Grijalva-Eternod, 2019, p.72). Over 170,000 Sahrawi have lived in these conditions since 1975, amid decolonization and nation-building processes, which translates to forty-five years of waiting for the referendum for self-determination, which was promised to them to finally take place, while the Sahrawi remain heavily dependent on humanitarian aid and Western Sahara remains illegally occupied by Morocco. To date 'the political solution to the conflict and subsequent repatriation of the refugees does not seem imminent' (WFP & UNHCR 2013, p.7), even though it is considered a protracted emergency.

As a temporary solution to this 'temporary problem', a solidarity cooperation project was established in 1979 by the camp-based government, Frente Polisario, in collaboration with the Spanish solidarity movement. Fittingly named 'Vacaciones en Paz' (VeP), which means 'Holidays in Peace', the main goals of this programme were to remove children from the war between the Sahrawi and Moroccan governments. As well as to remind Spain – former colonial power and official administrator of the territory – of its debt toward the Sahrawi people, and to raise awareness of their cause by presenting Sahrawi children as a political symbol. Nowadays the VeP programme consists in Spanish families hosting Sahrawi children during two months each summer and focuses on granting Sahrawi children a temporary opportunity to experience a different culture of freedom and having their basic needs covered. During this time the children profit from educational and recreational opportunities, health care and other assets, which equip them to go back to the refugee camps in Algeria. Due to the complex, dynamic and context-specific nature of the situation in Western Sahara, and given the unusual status of the Sahrawi nation as a 'state in waiting' (Shelley, 2004 as cited in Davies, 2020, p.1), the impact of the VeP programme in the promotion of Sahrawi children's rights is difficult to measure. On the one hand, the protracted situation of the Sahrawi refugees causes many of their human rights to be neglected, which obviously hampers the implementation of children's rights, and makes it difficult to find and implement an efficient strategy towards achieving these rights. On the other hand, the VeP programme serves as a temporary platform for the Sahrawi children to experience some of their rights, even though the degree to which they are empowered by this knowledge and understanding widely differs from one host family to another. Consequently, the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of Sahrawi children's rights remains ambiguous.

Most studies on Western Sahara and the 'forgotten Sahrawi refugees' tend to focus on 'the unique nature of their situation as an exiled nation and Africa's last colony denied its longstanding right to self-determination' (Chamberlain, 2005; Mundy, 2007 as cited in Davies, 2020, p.1). With the exception of a few social studies, little has been written about the VeP programme and its impact on Sahrawi childhood. For this study, a handful of key documents served as guidelines and supported some of the findings presented herein. 'The transnationalisation of care: Sahrawi refugee children in a Spanish host programme' by Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty (2005) provided interesting data from Sahrawi children, teenagers and host families interviewed during their time in Spain on diverse aspects in relation to the VeP programme. The same authors have several case studies on the Sahrawi refugees situation in the camps that were also relevant and often referred to in this document. Additionally, a second study published in 2008, 'Holidays in Peace: analysis and evaluation of the Sahrawi children hosting programme' by Cirugeda and

Thieux provided relevant information on an external evaluation led by the Institute of Conflict and Humanitarian Action (IECAH) which measures the effects that the VeP programme has on the improvement of the psychological and physical conditions of both the Sahrawi children participants and the Sahrawi community as a whole. While the aforementioned evaluation covered 'the promotion and defense of civil, political and territorial rights' (2008, p.7) of the Sahrawi people, it contains no explicit mention of children's rights and does not present the children's and teenagers' views on the subject. Finally, the latest research on the topic, 'Holidays in Peace: Sahrawi refugees between political activism and Spanish solidarity' by Rita Reis (2020) was published as this thesis was being written and, in addition to discussions with the author herself, provided deep and relevant insights on the characteristics of the VeP programme, which proved complementary to the findings presented herein.

The fashion of this study was ignited by the 'benefits that accrue to the child through the experience of being listened to, valued and respected' (Lansdown, 2016, p.33) and intended therefore, to add to this growing body of evidence. Hence, for this research, it was key to get an in-depth understanding of the Sahrawi children's own views on the impact that the VeP programme has on the promotion of their rights. According to Lansdown (2016, p.33), 'this is not only a fundamental right for the children but also a principle that must be applied in the realization of all others.' Furthermore, through creating a space where children can express their views concerning matters affecting them as individuals, adults in positions of power will be enabled to arrive at decisions directed to the children's best interests (Lansdown, 2016, p.33). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) children have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously in all matters affecting them' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 12). Since no studies had yet focused specifically on the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of Sahrawi children's rights, nor included their views on this matter, it was particularly important to involve the children and teenagers, in shaping this relevant subject in which they are, after all, central figures. The qualitative case study presented herein seeks to answer the following main research question: What is the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of children's rights? This was achieved through a conceptual framework involving a thematic, child rights-based analysis of the experiences related by Sahrawi children and teenagers interviewed during a field trip to the refugee camps in Algeria, alongside an in-depth research into the principles of the VeP programme and a literature review of prior studies related to this subject. Furthermore, according to the principles of the VeP programme one of its main goals is to raise awareness of the Sahrawi cause presenting the Sahrawi children as 'Little ambassadors' of their cause, which raises the subsidiary questions: Are the children active or passive participants in this process? In addition, how could the inclusion of the Children Rights Convention in the principles of the VeP programme empower Sahrawi children and teenagers to become active actors in displaying their cause?

The following thesis starts with a brief introduction into the historical background of the Sahrawi people and the Western Sahara conflict alongside an up-to-date overview on the situation of the refugee camps in Algeria, concluding with a summary of the principles and basic structure of the VeP programme. The second part includes an overview of the results of the thematic analysis of the narratives provided by Sahrawi children and teenagers interviewed in the refugee camps in Algeria, followed by a discussion of these results in light of the main research questions. The conclusion offers suggestions for further research and recommendations for the VeP programme to implement a child rights-based approach in its discourse in order to promote children's rights more strategically as well as to empower Sahrawi children with the knowledge of their rights and as active actors in raising awareness of the Sahrawi cause.

2. A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE SAHRAWI HISTORY

Western Sahara (Al-Ṣaḥrāʾ al-Gharbiyyah in Arabic) is a territory 'similar in size to France and is rich in phosphates, fish, and possibly oil' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.2). It is composed of Río de Oro, which covers the southern two-thirds of the region, and Saguia el-Hamra, which covers the northern third. It is located in northwest Africa and has an extensive desert coastal area, bordered by Morocco in the north, Algeria in the northeast, Mauritania in the east and south, and by the Atlantic Ocean in the west and northwest. As historical records show, this area was originally inhabited by the 'Ahel es-Sahel' – a group of tribes from the Atlantic Sahara, the so-called Sahrawi people who are descendants of the Berber, Arabs from Yemen and sub-Saharan Africans, and who traditionally lived as nomads (Zeidan, 2019, p.1). The Sahrawi resisted Spanish, French and Portuguese attempts to occupy their territory from 1500 to 1934, and they have always seen themselves as a distinct and separate nation from the neighbouring peoples in what is now North-Western Africa, and 'these layers of identity have taken shape over time' (Suárez, 2016, p.194). Their original language is a spoken dialect of Arabic called Hassaniya, which remains their mother tongue today, and 'many educated Sahrawi today speak Spanish, which is directly tied to the influence of Spanish colonization (Suárez, 2016, p.209).

2.1. Spanish colonization and inconclusive decolonization

Spain first proclaimed a protectorate over Río de Oro in 1884. This was done within the framework of the colonization of the African Continent by the European powers, through the Berlin Conference, which granted them total control over the Saharan territory (Fuente & Mariño, 2006, p.13). In 1955, Spain's formal entry into the United Nations (UN) caused its incorporation into the decolonization project which was then being carried out at an international level (A/RES/995(X)1955). Consequently, in 1963 Western Sahara became part of the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories subject to decolonization. In 1965, the General Assembly of the UN adopted its first resolution reaffirming the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination alongside the obligations of the Spanish State as an administrative power of the territory, which remain in place to this date (Suárez, 2016, p.26). In 1966, the General Assembly mentioned for the first time the need to hold a referendum in order to decide the status of Western Sahara, and a year later a request was made for its planning. These resolutions were submitted almost annually until 1973, and 'always recognizing the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people, insisting on the need to hold a referendum of the population and advocating a visit of a United Nations mission to the territory' (Kapur, 2019, p.22).

However, in 1974 the General Assembly requested to postpone the pending referendum due to the claims made by Morocco and Mauritania to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over parts of the territory of Western Sahara, each of the two countries claiming the respective parts which had historically belonged to them. Moreover, such claims would imply that the decolonization by the Spanish State should lead to the "reintegration" of their territories. The Advisory Opinion of the ICJ (1975, paragraphs 1-13) on the legal status of the disputed territory concluded that 'the materials and information presented did not establish or prove any legal ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity, that could nullify the implementation of the resolution for the decolonization of the land.' In 1975, 'the ICJ published its advisory opinion maintaining the right of the Sahrawi people to self-

determination' (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello, 2010, p.40). Spain left the former colony and in 1976, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was born, proclaimed by Frente Polisario.

2.2. Morocco, Frente Polisario and a ceasefire by the UN

Immediately after the final decision was communicated and without previous communication about his intentions, King Hassan II of Morocco prepared and launched a strategic mass demonstration, "The Green March"¹, which involved over 300,000 civilians invading the land and claiming Spanish Sahara as their own (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello, 2010, p.40). This act ended with a secret 'tripartite agreement concluded in Madrid in 1975 by which Spain transferred to Morocco and Mauritania the responsibilities and powers the former Spanish colony had regarding Western Sahara' (Martínez, 2007, p.383) the legality of this action was not challenged by the UN, where Spain rejected 'its pledge to ensure a peaceful transfer of power' (Leite et al., 2006, p.13).

The drastic and immediate invasion by Moroccan forces involved the displacement of tens of thousands of Sahrawi to western Algeria's Tindouf province, claiming Western Sahara as its own (southern provinces), exploiting the territory's resources, and offering autonomy but not independence according to the Fourth Committee in 2019 (GA/SPD/697) as of today. There are testimonies by 'many survivors that recounted how they witnessed the capture of different family groups, which is the way how nomads move or settle in the desert, and their subsequent transfer, either to cities where they would be confined, or to clandestine detention centers' (Beristain & González-Hidalgo, 2012, p.486). Due to the mass relocations that took place, multitude of Sahrawi family were tore apart, and consequently the nomadic lifestyle belonging to their tradition was destroyed (Lee, 2013, p.1).

2.2.1 The referendum on self-determination: MINURSO

As a response to Morocco's oppression, the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro" called Frente Polisario, which is the Sahrawi rebel national liberation movement, fought against the illegal Moroccan presence from 1975 to 1991, thereby constantly endangering the local population. During this period, Algeria backed the Polisario Front with 'considerable military and diplomatic support and provided a crucial territorial sanctuary² in Southwest Algeria' (Damis, 1983, p.169). According to Damis, the country of Libya also showed support to the Sahrawi cause through 'giving important military and financial backing to the Polisario Front'. Mauritania joined the war in 1975 but withdrew from the conflict by signing a peace treaty with Frente Polisario.

Eventually, almost seventeen years later and by the intervention of the United Nations, a settlement plan was proposed and approved, which foresaw a referendum for the people of Western Sahara offering a straight choice between independence and integration' (Shelley, 2003, p.1). Both countries agreed on a ceasefire, and the UN established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) with the purpose of monitoring compliance with the 1991 ceasefire agreements. Despite several attempts, the aforementioned referendum on self-determination, has not taken place thus far. Moreover 'MINURSO staff members asserted that Morocco

¹ On the same day, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 380 declaring 'Deplorable the realization of the Green March' (UN-General Assembly, Human Rights Council 37th session 26 February- 23 March 2018).

² Note from the author John Damis, as referring to the area that encompasses the refugee camps to this day.

regularly engaged in a conduct that obstructed and compromised the fairness of the referendum process' (HRW, 1995, p.9). As of today, 'UN attempts to broker a peace agreement have been unsuccessful, with Morocco generally rejecting any plan that might end its sovereignty over the area' (Besenyó, 2010, p.68).

Figure 1. Updated map Western Sahara³



³ Map No. 3691 Rev. 88 UNITED NATIONS September 2019. Office of information and Communication Technology Geospatial Information Section.

2.2.2. Western Sahara: Occupied and liberated territories

The Western Sahara Wall – known as the Sand Wall, defensive wall and Berm – has a length of 2720 km and divides Western Sahara, starting in the north and extending to the southern regions. The Berm consists of six sand walls, which were successively built between 1981 and 1987, completed in 1987 and protected by military fortifications every 5 km. 100,000 to 150,000 Moroccan soldiers and approximately 7 million anti-personnel mines, mainly spread/buried all over the eastern side of the country under the Polisario Front control (Saddiki, 2017, p.97-121). Moreover, the wall is 'supported at regular intervals by observation points, support points, artillery support, underground shelters for soldiers and radar and electronic sensors systems to detect adversary vehicles' (Saddiki 2017, p.98).

It was the construction of the wall marked a change in the violent armed conflict, with direct consequences for the civilian population (Berstein & Hidalgo, 2012, p.75). The Sahrawi people living in the liberated territories of Western Sahara in the desert (Bādiya), face a constant threat due to their nomadic, pastoral lifestyle (Volpato and Howard 2014, p.2). Some Sahrawi people living in the occupied territories have been unable to keep in contact with their families [...] as 'they suffer discrimination, harassment, beatings, and detention by police and other agents of the Moroccan state, restricting their freedom of expression, violating basic human rights' (Berstein & Hidalgo, 2012, p.522).

2.3. Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf Algeria

Since 1975, as a result of a long unresolved political conflict, more than 170,000 Sahrawi "forgotten refugees"⁴ live in camps located 10 to 180 km from Tindouf, in the south-western part of Algeria, as they wait for the referendum for self-determination promised by the UN to take place. Their identity as a nation is recognized as such by eighty countries and is member of the African Union, however 'the Sahrawi population had a narrow set of choices: whether to remain Spaniards or became stateless people which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵ bans' (Sáez Herrera, 2012, p.52).

According to Loescher & Milner (2008) most of today's refugees who remain trapped in protracted refugee situations (PRS) are usually in the poorest, most inhospitable and unstable regions of the world' (as cited in Davies, 2020, p.4). This is applicable to the Sahrawi 'forgotten refugees', who have lived among boulders and exposed bedrock for over four decades in the harsh hammad,⁶ where the Algerian government 'has been hosting them in five camps, enabling access to public services, and providing infrastructure such as roads and electricity' (UNHCR, 2018, p.4). They 'find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social, and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile' (Betts et al, 2006, p.106).

The population is organised in five camps (wilayas) are subdivided into quarters (barrios) with a total of 116 camps-barrios (Grijalva-Eternod et al., 2019, p.12), where the tents provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) serve as main household for the families or as a secondary shelter additional to sand-brick buildings (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.3). According to Martín (2017), during the time of waiting the international community has been enabled to gain time to find solutions to this protracted conflict, and the camps have been

⁴ Based on the findings of the UNHCR expert Mission Team, the new population figure stands at 173,600 Sahrawi refugees residing in camps in Tindouf, Algeria as of 31 December 2017.

⁵ Article 15: No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality.

⁶ A desert terrain which consists of a flat and rocky area mainly devoid of sand (Collins dictionary 2020).

transformed into 'state-like structure with their own political and administrative institutions' where 'Rabouni is the governmental and administrative centre of the camps that also houses the visitor's hotel and museum' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.3) and the Frente Polisario, the government of SADR, is in charge of the administration of the camps, with 'emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-administration but within a tightly knit structure' (Davies, 2020, p.10). The options for prosperous government or income-generating activities are very limited since the location of the camps is remote and the environmental conditions harsh (WFP, 2013, p.7), which force the Sahrawis to remain 'wholly dependent on humanitarian aid for survival. The most basic resources, from water to wheat, are brought in on trucks, with primary donors including the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), the Algerian government, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.87).

Figure 2. Map of the five Sahrawi refugee camps⁷



Notwithstanding, the Sahrawi refugee camps remain an example of resistance and perseverance, making the most of the support from NGOs and other organisations, mainly Spanish and Italian (Seisdedos & Grande Gascón, 2016, p.279). In addition, the European Union provide firstly for the organization of the camps and secondly attempt to develop economic initiatives (Seisdedos & Grande Gascón, 2016, p.279). Meanwhile, educational cooperation programmes, such as VeP and similar ones taking place in Italy, France, Germany, Cuba and Algeria, empower the Sahrawi youth 'to advance the national cause, as they build cultural and political bridges of solidarity between the Sahrawi and other peoples' (Abba, 2016, p.1). As stated by Agaila Abba: 'The refugee camps themselves have become a melting pot of indigenous and international cultures (...) and education abroad has offered the chance to build a better future not only for themselves but also for their Saharawi community'.

⁷ Source: European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (Algeria, Last updated 12/2019)

3. VACACIONES EN PAZ PROGRAMME – HOLIDAYS IN PEACE

With its child-centred focus, the Vacaciones en Paz (VeP) programme hosts 'children between the ages of 8 and 13 by Spanish families in their homes for a two month period each summer' (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello, 2010, p.48). Moreover, 'the Vacaciones en Paz hosting programme has grown into a transnational network which allows Sahrawi youth to partially offset the hardships of their daily lives as refugees' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.59) where mobilizing the support provided by the Spanish host families is often in charge of the children, who play a key role (Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010). Therefore, the programme is one element of a broader solidarity network which Sahrawi refugees depend upon. It is also one of many projects coordinated by Spanish solidarity associations, who campaign through the year in support of Sahrawi interests (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.88). Consequently, the VeP programme has evolved over the last four decades into a priority project with and for the Sahrawi people, understood by the Sahrawi community as a right that every child living in the camps should have access to at least three times during the camps-primary-schools educational curriculum.

3.1. Promotion of the Sahrawi cause

The origin of the VeP programme goes back to the summer of 1976 and was formally established in 1980. The first 100 Saharawi children, which arrived in Spain in the summer of 1979, were divided among three communities: Madrid, Valencia and Catalonia. The programme followed the model of a similar initiative located on the Algerian coast, where Sahrawi children could stay in colonies in order to escape the Sahrawi-Moroccan armed conflict (Muñoz, 2019 & Chatty, 2010). As the refugee camps lacked security, shelter, food, education, and health, while experiencing the violence and turmoil of the ongoing war, the name given to this programme in 1992 was 'Holidays in Peace'. It was organised by the Frente Polisario in collaboration with the PCE (Partido Comunista Español – the Communist Party of Spain), implemented by the former politician Marcos Ana, who is considered the official founder of the VeP programme in Spain. They also counted with the additional support of hundreds of Sahrawi solidarity-movement federations and NGOs present in every Spanish community, 'supporting the Sahrawi people as a pressure group against the Spanish Government, claiming a more active role in the resolution of the conflict and more determined support for the Polisario Front' (Seisedos & Grande Gascón, 2012, p.285). The militants of the PCE and the civilians involved understood and clearly expressed the need to raise awareness about the complex situation the Sahrawi people were going through. Giving special relevance to the political component of the VeP programme through the public statement: 'This initiative is not merely humanitarian but we value it in its political aspect, [...] it is not just a question of these 100 children getting to know our landscapes and resting with our children. It is about them being a living, emotional witness to the struggle of a people for their freedom. They are more than simply guests are. They are a political symbol'. As Marcos Ana concluded during his speech during the reception of the 100 Sahrawi children in Madrid back in 1979: 'We have chosen the Saharawi children and not others because we owe a debt to their people'. Moreover, they did so during the proclamation of the UN of the International Year of the

Child⁸ in order to 'lay bare the Sahrawi problem in Spain' (Mundo Obrero, 1979 as cited by Muñoz, 2019, p.2), bringing political and social awareness through the Sahrawi children as 'ambassadors' of their cause. In addition, the long-lasting establishment of solidarity ties between Spanish host families and Sahrawi families started, which strengthened the cooperation movement at the state level (see CEAS-Sahara, 2020).

3.2. Spanish host families and Sahrawi children

Due to the complex context of Western Sahara, and the fact that the VeP programme involves Sahrawi minors travelling from Algeria to Spain, the bureaucratic process and requirements are strictly thought through and carefully carried out. Besides the logistics, there are two key components in this cooperation project: children and host families, whereby 'the number of Spanish households, which foster Saharawi children during the summer, averages 9,000 per year, which means that an estimated number of 35,000 – 40,000 Spanish live together for two months every year with a Sahrawi child' (San Martín, P. 2010, p.251). In 2019, only 4,000 Sahrawi children went to Spain, due to the decrease of Spanish families willing to participate. The main reason for this problem is 'the ongoing financial crisis in Spain', as stated by the SADR Minister of Youth and Sports (UJSARIO) Musa Selma in an interview for this study.⁹

In order to become a host family, it is compulsory to fulfil diverse requirements, including the screening of all the members of the Spanish household.¹⁰ This includes an evaluative interview with a social worker and the submission of a criminal record proving that there are no past sex crimes committed. As part of the VeP programme, it is expected that the host families will be committed to collaborating in events and activities of sensitization, and the compulsory attendance of an introductory training where they receive information packs provided by the Sahrawi federations. These typically include 'information on the basic tenets of Islam, the history of the territorial conflict over Western Sahara, the organization of the refugee camps and Sahrawi family relations' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.88) in an effort to facilitate the communication between the host family and the Sahrawi children. The selection of the VeP participants is different from the way it was done in the past. The participation is aimed at every child in the camps, and 'it is no longer based on the level of need, family history -parents killed in conflict for instance- or academic achievement, but applicable for all'¹¹ as Musa Selma explained in an interview. How to prepare the Sahrawi children for the integration into the Spanish host family and the environment where they will spend at least two months are key factors and the schools in the camps facilitate information and orientation activities. There are formative days for the biological families of the minors to transmit the cultural, economic and social reality as well. Training families in the proper use of technology and how to prepare the child for integration into the foster family and the environment are fundamental points for the proper functioning of the programme.

⁸ To promote awareness and to encourage states to act towards the protection and the assurance of children's rights' UN General Assembly, International Year of the Child., 18 October 1979, A/RES/34/4.

⁹ Translated from Spanish.

¹⁰ Back in 2005 Crivello and Fiddian – Qasmiyeh recommended a more rigorous background check-up.

¹¹ See Appendix II Musa Selma is the Minister of Youth and Sports SADR (JSARIO) who provided this information during an interview about the VeP programme held in the refugee camps of Tindouf in February 2020 as a support for the study.

3.3. Main actors involved and guiding principles

The main actors who carry out the coordination of the VeP programme are several: In Spain, the federation CEAS-Sahara the state coordinator, and regionally the delegations of the Frente Polisario in close collaboration with the regional associations of Friends of the Sahara manage different tasks and logistics, which in turn are coordinated with dozens of smaller associations and organizations that take part in the VeP programme (San Martín, 2010). In the camps, the driving force behind the programme is the SADR Ministry of Youth and Sport with the Minister, currently Musa Selma, and a General Coordinator of the VeP programme. Moreover, under the guidance of the Sahrawi Youth Union (UJSA-RIO), there are groups of coordinators in the wilayas (districts) and in the different dairas (neighbourhoods) that have a direct relationship with the children and their families. The sector coordinators are four and work with those coordinating in the wilayas. Each sector coordinator is responsible for relations with the entities in specific Spanish communities and with the Saharawi Delegations present in each community, which in turn coordinate with the various entities of the solidarity movement that are responsible for organizing tasks related to the host families (CEAS-Sahara, 2020).

Its framework of solidarity, education for development and political awareness remains with a special focus on providing Sahrawi children access to basic needs, and the possibility for them to know different forms of life. According to the Sahrawi hegemonic discourses, such an immersion into the 'Spanish way of life' is part of the education of the new Saharawi generations (San Martín, 2010, p.160). On one hand, the VeP programme focuses strategically on raising awareness about the Sahrawi struggle and the responsibility that Spain has as administering power – as recognized by the United Nations. On the other hand, a very important component of this programme is to cover some of the basic rights of the Sahrawi children over a determined period through the assistance that Spanish host families provide, such as special medical assistance. In turn, through this experience, the host families get to know the realities of Saharawi children and their families, becoming part of the Spanish solidarity movement, as well as participating in actions in favour of Western Sahara and the promotion of Human Rights. Therefore, the VeP programme is a platform to advocate and to promote restoration through showcasing the historical debt that Spain has as administering power¹² of Western Sahara.

¹² Western Sahara has been on the United Nations list of Non-Self-Governing Territories since 1963 following the transmission of information on Spanish Sahara by Spain under Article 73 e of the Charter of the UN. A/5514, Annex III.

4. METHODS USED IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ETHICS

The theoretical part of this purely qualitative study was developed in Germany and partly in the Netherlands, while the empirical part materialized in February 2020 in South-Western Algeria. The first stage of the research undertook extensive desk research on the status of Western Sahara, and the role that the different non-governmental organizations and international cooperation projects play on the promotion of children's rights for the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria). As the literature analysis progressed, the focus of the research narrowed down exclusively to the Vacaciones en Paz hosting programme which is 'worthy of study in its own right, as it is a multi-faceted source of support' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.26) and based on the studies available, it seems it has not been explored from a child rights-based approach until this moment.

The methods used during the first phase were a literature analysis of the principles and action framework of the aforementioned hosting programme alongside desk research on the subject of previous studies related to the VeP programme and the Sahrawi children and youth living in the camps. The second stage of this study covered a field research trip to Laayoune, one of the five Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria), where qualitative data was gathered for a posterior thematic analysis based on the perspective of the own Sahrawi children and teenagers interviewed. The fieldwork implemented qualitative research methods (observation, field notes, semi-structured interviews-SSIs, focus group discussions-FGDs). Additionally, complementary data was obtained through bilateral conversations and official SSIs with stakeholders of the VeP programme in the camps and in Spain.

Initially, the intention of this study was to compare the child-rights awareness of children of the same age who participated in the VeP programme and children who did not. However, it was not possible to find many children in this last group since apparently almost every child in the schools visited had participated in the VeP programme. Eventually, the field research consisted of a total of twenty-two semi-structured interviews (SSIs) to children and teenagers from 6 to 19 years old (see Appendix 1 for detailed information). The participants were chosen based on age and whether they participated or not in the VeP programme (eight of them were not VeP participants, eight of them were recent VeP participants, and six of them participated in VeP more than five years ago). The length of the semi-structured interviews was diverse and adapted to the nature of each child-teenager; the average duration was fifteen to thirty minutes maximum. Due to cultural preferences, some of the children and teenagers interviewed asked a friend to stay next to them, in order to feel more comfortable. The SSIs took place mostly in the library or the school's tea-room. The questions were open-ended and the thematic presented was focused on the child's personal experiences as participants in the VeP programme, which aspects they considered more relevant (education, family, recreation, cultural exchange), and lessons learnt. For those children who were planning to go to the VeP programme in the near future, the SSIs were adapted to it, and the focus was on their understanding and expectations of the programme.

Additionally, the research included three focus group discussions (FGDs) which were carefully planned on a child-friendly basis that allowed a 'permissive and non-threatening environment' (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p.2). The participants in the FGDs were children and teenagers belonging to three different age gaps, and whether they participated in the VeP programme or they did not. The first group included six primary school children from seven to nine years old who did not participate in the VeP programme, the second group six primary school children from 10 to 11 years old who participated at least once in the VeP programme, and the third group of six

secondary school teenagers from 12 to 14 years old who participated in the VeP programme either twice, more times or during the previous summer¹³. All the FGDs took place in cosy tea-rooms available in the schools visited, and the research entailed the use of a world map, diverse games and art material alongside open-ended questions, that elicited comments, conversations between the children and with the researcher on what the VeP programme means for them, their experiences and expectations.

Due to the complex nature of the Sahrawi situation itself, alongside the cultural differences and time limitations, the sample of the study had to be adjusted to the possibilities in the field. Moreover, the limited freedom of movement based on security concerns forced the research to rely on the schedule and pace of the interpreter-assistant who accompanied the author in various activities that took place, which was arranged through verbal agreement beforehand. The SSIs and FGDs were held mostly in Spanish however one of the FGDs included younger children who spoke only Hassaniya so that it needed to be translated and several of the children interviewed (via SSIs) requested translation as well.

The approach to this research was a thematic analysis of the data, according to Braun & Clarke (2012) the most appropriate and suitable to the nature of this study which included children's views, opinions, experiences, and values. It started with an initial transcription and translation (English) of the interviews. Thereon, after going through familiarization with the data, a close examination from an inductive approach was done, with the following coding process in order to identify common topics, ideas and patterns that were eventually organized into different themes. Once reviewed and restructured, the themes were named and defined, and later on, were linked to the different children's rights they relate to with the final aim of understanding the way the VeP programme promotes Children's Rights.

Participation in this study was made according to the most rigorous standards. They were mostly children and teenagers during school classes who were selected by every director of the different schools and high schools who took part in this study. After carefully informing every child or teenager about the purpose of this study and that their voices would be recorded, a written agreement was signed. The research trip to Algeria was made with the companion of Mohamed Badati, representative of the Polisario Front in Sachsen (Germany). He made it possible to access the Sahrawi refugee camps, facilitated a platform for research, and organized meetings for the researcher with the mayor of the refugee camp, the director of one of the hospitals, the head directors of the primary schools and high schools visited. Additionally, Badati arranged an interview with Musa Selma, the Minister of Youth and Sports of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (UJSARIO-Sahrawi Students Union) who provided a written authorization for the research to take place during the agreed time.¹⁴

¹³ See Annex 1. for detailed information about the participants in FGD and SSIs.

¹⁴ See Annex 1 written authorisation.

5. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The impact of the VeP program is difficult to measure. This study aimed to answer the main research question: “What is the impact of the VeP program on the promotion of the Sahrawi children’s rights?” from a children’s rights-based approach and children’s perspective. In order to reach a clearer understanding an in-depth analysis of the principles of the VeP program and relevant literature was undertaken, and the Sahrawi children’s and adolescents’ own views on the matter were collected and analyzed. While thorough literature research yielded little in terms of academic articles or official documents about the VeP programme on the specific topic of Sahrawi children’s rights, several available academic articles served as research guidelines and helped support some of the findings presented herein.

The first relevant body of literature is written by the authors Dawn Chatty, Gina Crivello and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. Their studies provide enriching data from Sahrawi children, teenagers and host families who were interviewed on diverse aspects related to the VeP programme. But also focuses on the Sahrawi transnational movement, and all the dynamics and implications that being a Sahrawi refugee in a protracted situation involves, alongside the different aspects that may be controversial in humanitarian aid movements. A second study published in 2008, is the most up to date evaluation available and it was a key guideline to understand the effects that the VeP programme has not only on the psychological and physical conditions of the Sahrawi children, but also on the host families and the extended Sahrawi community, underlining benefits as well as limitation of this programme.

5.1. Goals and benefits of the VeP programme

‘Where Sahrawi children survive there are no plants, no pigeons. Thanks to projects like “Holidays in Peace” these children have become carrier pigeons between different cultures.’¹⁵

Some of the objectives of the VeP programme relate to the research question and support, in some cases, the same insights the children and teenagers reported, therefore it serves to complement the data presented. Based on information available on the Spanish website CEAS-Sahara, which is the State Coordinator of Associations in Solidarity with the Sahara, the VeP programme does have an indirect impact on the promotion of children’s rights through the successful implementation of the following specific objectives:

- To offer an alternative of leisure and free time to Sahrawi children
- To claim the right of Saharawi children to live in Western Sahara
- To highlight the situation in which Sahrawi children currently live
- To encourage the learning of Spanish, the second official language of the SADR
- To promote, among the Spanish people, the values of tolerance and solidarity, thus facilitating the coexistence and integration of the Sahrawi people in the community
- To facilitate new knowledge, insights and vision for the future of Sahrawi children
- To develop a socio-cultural exchange that benefits both the host family and the Sahrawi children and immediate environment, if possible in the short and long term

According to CEAS-Sahara, the main goal of the VeP programme consists in showcasing to the citizens and the public authorities the urgency of solving the Western Sahara issue in a fair and

¹⁵ Asociación Amistad Saharaui Alcobendas – Author unknown.

definitive way, thus enabling the Sahrawi people to exercise their legitimate right to self-determination and thereby return to their country. Furthermore, thanks to the humanitarian services offered during the stay in Spain, such as medical assistance and provision through the host families, and the opportunity to experience a different lifestyle the VeP programme is considered by some authors as an educational opportunity. Beyond empowering Sahrawi children, it is also a channel of income for Sahrawi families with Sahrawi children as central figures (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Crivello, 2010). Moreover, the VeP programme is considered by some authors as "one of the largest humanitarian and cooperation programmes in Spain and a central strategy to raise awareness of the Sahrawi cause amongst the Spanish population" (San Martin, P. 2010, p.250).

5.2. Field research: A thematic analysis on the Sahrawi children's perspective

This section presents the final results of the thematic analysis using specific excerpts of the interviews (selected and categorised based on the information they contain), which are relevant to the Sahrawi children's and teenagers' own views and relate to some extent to the promotion of a certain number of their rights. The themes have been distributed according to the following categories: children who were VeP participants (VP) and children who were not (NVP). The SSIs are shown as (I) alongside the number given to the interviewee (1,2,3...), for the FGDs which are shown as (F) alongside the group number. For instance: Child (age) VP I-3 means that the excerpt belongs to the third SSI carried out with a child who was a VeP participant (VP). Each theme referred to one or several of the articles from the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that the VeP programme promotes, even though due to the complex nature of the context, its impact is indirect and limited in time.

5.2.1. The VeP programme explained by Sahrawi children and teenagers

'You go see things, you see the world. You get out of the Sahara, you do not stay in the camps. You have to go to places you do not know... you need to learn other things.' — Hamoudi¹⁶

This section presents information provided by children and teenagers in relation to their understanding of what the VeP programme entails, and why it has to take place. Even if the data presented do not directly answer the research question – What is the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of children's rights? – it is presented in this study in order to provide a deeper understanding of the children and teenagers' perception of the VeP programme, independent from its official definition.

For most participants in both FGDs and SSIs, it was difficult to articulate a standard definition of the VeP programme as a concept. Most of the time their efforts to explain it included narratives about their time in Spain, host families, and favourite highlights.

Interviewer: What is the VeP programme?

Child: Clothes, cars, candies, games...

Sahrawi teenager (age: 10), NVP I-5

Interviewer: Why do children go to Spain in summer?

Child: Because it is very hot here – in the camps

¹⁶ Fictitious name. Sahrawi teenager (age:13), VP F-3. Answering to the question: How does the VeP programme work?

Sahrawi teenager (age: 13), VP I-5

In general, it seemed easy for children and teenagers to share information and experiences. They mostly did it with openness at all times, some of them being a bit shyer than others. When the children and teenagers interviewed were asked about “Vacaciones en Paz” not all of them responded instantly to this question, looking confused. It was necessary to follow with the sentence “children go to Spain in summer” for them to rapidly affirm and explain:

Interviewer: Could you tell me what VeP is about?

Interviewer: Sahrawi children going to Spain...

Child: Madrid! To go to Spain and meet new families
Saharawi boy (age: 11), NVP I-7

Interviewer: Why do Sahrawi children go to Spain?

Child: Because there are no good things here – in the camps
Sahrawi teenager (age: 13), VP I-5

Children who had never participated in the VeP programme before were still familiar with it and most of them commented about knowing friends or relatives who had gone to Spain:

Interviewer: How do you know about the VeP?

Child: my siblings went to Spain, told me about it and showed me pictures
Saharawi boy (age: 11), NVP I-7

When children who were not VeP participants tried to explain about the programme,¹⁷ the focus was often on the stories they had heard from other children who went to Spain. They shared their plan to go to Spain, as a natural part of their lives:

Interviewer: Why do your friends and siblings go to VeP?

Child: They say it is very beautiful there, and there is a swimming pool, markets, beaches and the swimming pool is very beautiful! They eat hamburgers, pizza, nice food, chocolate, nougat, candies
Sahrawi girl (age: 7), NVP F-1

Interviewer: What will you do in Spain?

Child: When I go there, I will play with the kids of the family if my (host) family has kids, learn Spanish, go to the doctor

Interviewer: What will you bring with you to Spain?

Child: I will bring necklaces and gifts for the Spanish family

Interviewer: What will you bring back to the camps?

Child: Clothes, gifts for my family, money
Sahrawi boy (age: 9), NVP I-2

Older children who were not VeP participants but had close friends, siblings or parents, who had gone when they were younger, could articulate in detail most of the relevant aspects and events that usually take place during the stay of Sahrawi children in Spain.

Interviewer: What will you do there?

Child: Play, go to the doctor, swimming pool
Sahrawi boy (age:10), NVP I-5

Interviewer: And who did tell you about VeP?

Child: my friends who went to Spain and also my mum

Interviewer: What do they tell you about Spain?

Child: my mum says it is very beautiful, my friends that it is very cool

Interviewer: And what do you want to do in Spain?

¹⁷ It was difficult for the children to articulate a definition of the VeP programme as such, therefore, after some questions, the most comfortable way for them to start a narrative was, in most cases, by telling about what others say about it

Child: Going to the beach, to the swimming pool – smiling
Sahrawi girl (age: 10), NVP I-6

Often the children would also explain things they planned to do when “it will be their turn to go to Spain”. Some of the children pointed at work in Spain, as well as receiving medical care and learning the language. However, none of these children expressed much about the political struggle of the Sahrawi nation as a reason for the VeP programme to take place, often pointing to the unbearable hot weather in the camps as one of the reasons instead.

Child I: I can speak a bit of Spanish because I learnt from my sister who goes to VeP

Child II: I would like to work in Spain because there you can work longer than here

Interviewer: Who did tell you so?

Child II: My mother

Sahrawi girls (age: 7), NVP F-1

Interviewer: Could you explain to me what the VeP programme is about?

Teenager: Here it is very hot, and I can go to Spain for some months

Sahrawi teenager boy (age: 14), VP I-7

Those children who were not VeP participants could not explain exactly how the selection process for participating in the VeP programme works. However, their answers showed a clear awareness of specific timing and length of their participation.

Interviewer: Are you going to VeP?

Child: No. Because it is not my turn yet

Saharawi girl (age: 9), NVP I-2

The children did not openly complain about the rules and explained them with acceptance. Likewise, those children who had been VeP participants showed awareness of the fact that their participation is limited and explained that it is based on their age and the number of times they had been to Spain, expressing this with sadness, yet without apparent extreme disappointment.

Interviewer: Are you going to VeP?

Child: Not in 2020. I will go when I turn 11 years old

Interviewer: Are you looking forward to going there?

Child: yes – smiling

Saharawi boy (age: 10), NVP I-4

Interviewer: Are you going to Spain this year?

Teenager: No, I've been there three times already

Saharawi teenager boy (age: 13), VP I-5

The teenagers – young adults who had participated in the VeP programme more than five years ago – provided more details about the rules than the younger children did. They also remarked on the differences in structure when they participated in the VeP programme:

Interviewer: How does the Polisario organise for all the children to go to Spain?

Teenager: The children are sent based on their birth year. It is like that now because there are way fewer families who would like to host them than before.

Saharawi teenager girl (age: 18), VP I-3

Interviewer: How come you went to Spain for six years in a row?

Teenager: Yes, I got extra years to go because the Spanish family requested it, they get ready the paperwork or something like that, and then you get called and go there

Saharawi teenager girl (age: 18), VP I-5

Older teenagers explained that the Frente Polisario organises the VeP programme for the Sahrawi children as a favour and that it is based on voluntary participation:

Interviewer: Are all the Sahrawi children going to the VeP programme?

Teenager: yes, that is a favour that they do us, the Frente Polisario

Interviewer: Why do you think there is a VeP programme?

Teenager: Rabuni¹⁸ does it, for the children to learn things

Interviewer: And how did you know about the VeP programme?

Teenager: Rabuni told me "you have to go" and I have to do little about it

Interviewer: Is it possible to communicate to Rabuni that you would not like to participate?

Teenager: Yes, then you do not go and you will never go again

Saharawi teenager girl (age: 18), VP I-5

None of the teenage/young adult girls interviewed shared information about the VeP programme on the basis of advocacy nor raising awareness of the Sahrawi cause in Spain. For the majority of them, it seemed clear that the refugee camps are not Sahrawi territory but Algerian, and that Western Sahara is occupied by Morocco even though it belongs to the Sahrawi people. However, the fact that Spain as a former colonial power did not fulfil their duties in the process of decolonization, and that this was the reason for the VeP programme to take place, was not known.

5.2.2. The impact of the VeP programme based on the Sahrawi children's views

'Camels among reconstructed cars, strange structures, haimas. Girls and boys are not from here, are not from there either, they have no homeland, rights or future.' — Alberto Pla¹⁹

In order to understand the impact that the VeP programme has on the promotion of the rights of Sahrawi children, this study aimed to first identify which specific rights are promoted, and based on what is relevant for the Sahrawi children and teenagers themselves. The emerging themes were similar among the different groups and ages, some of these themes having a higher recurrence based on the age of the interviewees, and being explained in detail in those instances when the interviewees were VeP participants. As a result, the next section is based on the recurrent topics obtained through a thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered in the field. The themes are defined in a descriptive fashion, using as a support transcript excerpts which are representative of the themes,²⁰ and making reference to the articles in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that are being promoted, ordered from the highest to the lowest impact as based on the Sahrawi children's own views.

A. Leisure and play (Article 31 UNCRC)

'When I saw the swimming pool I liked it very much, the water was salty. I woke up the next morning and thought: Where am I? ...in Vacaciones en Paz! I said to myself.' — Salem²¹

The answers of children who were VeP participants highlighted the relevance of leisure, playing, food; having access to activities they do not have access to in the camps. Even the children who

¹⁸ The government centre of the Algerian refugee camps.

¹⁹ 2019, www.ecsaharai.com

²⁰ Sometimes overlapping themes might be present in the answer given by the children and teenagers.

²¹ Fictitious name. Sahrawi teenager (age: 13), VP F-3 telling about his experience in the VeP programme

had not gone to the VeP programme yet, but would go soon, expressed the expectation to be able to enjoy, relax and experience summer activities and new food:

Interviewer: How was a normal day for you in Spain?

Teenager: we did not go to class, but to the swimming pool or the beach. I played dolls with the daughters of my family, they played in the playground, playing with the skipping rope.

Saharawi teenager girl (age: 13), VP I-6

Interviewer: Are you looking forward to going there?

Child: Yes, because it is beautiful and there is everything there

Sahrawi boy (age: 10), NVP I-5

Interviewer: And what do you want to do in Spain?

Child: Go to the beach, to the swimming pool...

Interviewer: Are you going to eat new types of food in Spain?

Child: Yes! Pizza and hamburger!

Sahrawi boy (age: 10), NVP I-6

Some of the VeP participants articulated in detail and with excitement memories about their time in Spain, and explained that the VeP programme is primarily aimed at avoiding the unbearable Saharan summer and being able to have fun and enjoy things with their host families. Most of what children who were not VeP participants shared was similar to the VeP participants' highlights,²² likely based on what they had heard from their peers at their return to the refugee camps. The focus was mostly on leisure, fun and new experiences:

Interviewer: What do you do in Spain?

Child: Play and speak Spanish

Interviewer: What do you like about Spain?

Child: I like the swimming pool, the beach, the bike. I like my family

Saharawi boy (age: 12), VP I-3

Interviewer: What was the first thing you thought when you first left for Spain?

Children: Swimming pool! Gifts! Beach!

Saharawi boy (age: 12), VP F-2

Throughout every interaction with the children and teenagers, playing, having fun and resting was always mentioned with joy and excitement. Some children would make reference to the fact that during summer in the camps it is not possible "to have fun" or that there is 'nothing in the camp' besides staying inside the haimas to protect themselves from the heat. Cultural events such as fairs, cinema and traditional Spanish lifestyle were often mentioned

²² See excerpts above. About the VeP programme or for further information read transcripts in Appendix C

B. Social development (Article 29 UNCRC)

'My father is Moroccan – host family – and at first, my parents were very worried and I was afraid, but he was very good to me and cooked nice food for me, couscous. Eventually, I loved him even more than I loved my Spanish mother'. – Jamila²³

In order to gather information related to their social relations during their participation in the VeP programme, the children were asked whether they kept in touch with their host families and how they did so. In some cases, the children already referred to the host families as “my parents, my siblings” quite naturally, even before being asked specifically about them:

Interviewer: What do you like about Spain?

Teenager: I like my family

Sahrawi teenage girl (age: 12), VP I-3

Interviewer: What do you like the most in Spain?

Teenager: Going to a little village in Segovia with my family and play football there with friends

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-8

Teenager: My host mother, she is a very nice woman, she had two older sons, but I was the only girl in the house, so she felt very happy about it, and even though I was a very active girl and I would misbehave, she was always nice to me

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-4

Most of the children and teenagers affirmed keeping in touch with their host families mainly through the phone app WhatsApp. Others explained that due to the high cost of mobile phones and Internet data in the camps, it was not possible for some to keep in contact. Some older teenagers also affirmed keeping in touch with their host families in Spain, but the majority did not, due to diverse reasons, such as not having had the same facilities to keep in contact back in the day, keeping in mind that access to the Internet in the camps is very limited:

Interviewer: Do your host family keep in contact with you?

Teenager: Yes, I talk to them through WhatsApp, they video-call me and so on

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-8

Interviewer: Are you still in contact with your host family?

Teenager: No, they want to talk to me but I do not have WhatsApp

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-7

Interviewer: Do you keep in touch with your host family?

Teenager: Yes, but not anymore because I lost their phone number

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-2

Interviewer: Did the Spanish family visit you in the camps?

Teenager: yes, the granny from mother's side came to visit

Saharawi teenage girl (age: 13), VP I-6

Several children and teenagers also shared their experiences of having their host families and friends as guests in their 'haimas in the camps'. For some of them, it seemed a common tradition to receive a visit of the host families at least once, if not more often.

²³ Fictitious name. Sahrawi teenage girl (age: 13), VP F-3 telling about her experience in the VeP programme

C. Transnational provision (Articles 4 and 27 UNCRC)

'My family is very beautiful. When I want a mobile phone, they buy it for me'. — Mahmud²⁴

This theme was mostly linked to the host families who are in charge of carrying out such means of help for the Sahrawi families. It is usually through the emotional ties that remain over time that this sort of support takes place, and may become steady:

Interviewer: What do your siblings tell you about Spain?

Child: That it is pretty, and when they go there, the family (host family) give them things, nice presents and nice food

Saharawi boy (age: 9), NVP I-2

During one of the interviews, a young woman shared that after more than a decade, she still receives care packages once a year from her Spanish host family with clothes, food, and medicines. Some children expressed awareness of the fact that this is a way to help their families, and others acknowledged that they wanted to join for the gifts and for the educational benefits and possible opportunities to travel to Spain in the future:

Interviewer: Why do children go to the VeP programme?

Child: to help the families, I help my family who have nothing, help for everyone

Sahrawi girl (age: 12), VP F-2

Interviewer: Why do children go to the VeP programme?

Teenager: We like it. We saw it with the older children, who come back from Spain, they bring back balls and so on, then, we also want to go there, to Vacaciones en Paz.

Sahrawi teenager (age: 13), VP F-3

The younger children, in particular, shared with joy about the goodies they brought back in their luggage after the two summer months, usually including that they shared them with their family:

Interviewer: What did you bring back from Spain to the camps?

Child: A lot of things, clothes and toys, for my sisters and for me

Sahrawi girl (age: 12), VP I-4

Interviewer: What did you bring back to the camps with you?

Teenager: Clothes, candies, muesli, cookies, chocolate, tuna fish, turkey salami, gifts for my parents... a lot of things for all of us

Saharawi teenage girl (age:13), VP I-6

Interviewer: What things did you bring from Spain with you?

Teenager: A lot of clothes, socks, food, Nocilla (chocolate spread)

Interviewer: Were all the things for you?

Teenager: Yes. They (host family) gave them to me, for me and my family

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-7

During informal conversations over tea in the haimas, paternal figures, as well as some young Sahrawis, made mention of the great value that transnational help has in a context like the one in the refugee camps. The Spanish host families become 'friends for life', establishing emotional ties not only with the Sahrawi children they host but also with the whole family.

The financial and relational support carried out by host families, sometimes over decades, becomes an essential asset for the children, enabling them to develop to their full potential and access higher education in Europe, sometimes hosted by the same Spanish family for years. The

²⁴ Fictitious name. Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 13), VP F-3 telling about his host family

programme has been criticized due to the fact that children participating are being exposed temporarily to a 'better life style', which may affect them negatively in their return to the harsh living conditions in the camps. However, the reality is that, 'in fact few youths seemed bothered but most of them described their experiences positively without denigrating their family at home' (Chatty, 2010, p.53) also based on the results of this study.

D. Educational opportunities (Article 28 UNCRC)

'Through the VeP programme I've learnt a different world, and I can talk in another language. I've learnt a lot of things that now I do not have, but I know them'. — Nasira²⁵

Learning new things, especially learning the Spanish language, seeing new places and other ways of living were some of the things mentioned whilst explaining the VeP programme.

Interviewer: What will you do in Spain?

Child: play and learn Spanish,
Saharawi boy (age: 9), NVP I-2

Interviewer: What did you do in Spain?

Child: Play and speak Spanish
Sahrawi boy (age: 12), VP I-1

Some interviewees reported going to classes as part of their stay in Spain, others attended summer schools and activities organised by the different NGOs supporting the Sahrawi people. However, the activities and daily structures vary between federal states and host families:

Interviewer: How did you learn Spanish?

Teenager: During my time in Spain with the family

Interviewer: What did you learn in Spain?

Teenager: Many things, like writing in Spanish and plenty of things
Sahrawi teenage girl (age: 16), VP I-1

Interviewer: Did you go to school or only to the beach?

Child: I went to a summer camp
Sahrawi boy (age: 12), VP I-1

Interviewer: Do you think that going to the VeP programme helped you at school?

Teenager: Yes, because the family that hosted helped me a lot, taught me how to write, so when I came back to the camps from holidays in Spain I already knew how to write, and how to read also. They taught at home, and in the class.

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-4

All of the children and teenagers interviewed affirmed the educational benefits of the VeP programme when asked directly about them. During a separate interview, a director at one of the high schools visited agreed that the children and teenagers show an improved school performance upon their return to class from the programme (see Appendix II).

²⁵ Fictitious name. Sahrawi young adult (age: 19), VP I-7. A student in the same class as the 18-year-old ladies, and an exception to age due to her eagerness to share about seven years of experience in the VeP programme.

E. Medical assistance (Articles 23, 24 and 25 UNCRC)

I got surgery in my ear because I had it perforated. I stayed in Spain longer. But in winter I told them I wanted to go back to my family because I missed them'. — Smara²⁶

The topic of medical care did not come up as spontaneously and recurrently in the narrative of most of the children, even though it is one of the main objectives of the VeP programme due to the precarious health care available in the camps, even when it comes to basic medical care.

Interviewer: Did you go to the doctor last year in Spain?

Teenager: Yes! Yes! I got a pick (vaccination) it hurt a little bit
Sahrawi boy (age: 12), VP I-3

Interviewer: How do you think medical care is in the camps?

Teenager: Well, sometimes you can find medication, and sometimes you do not find anything, no pills, nothing at all...
Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-3

Children and teenagers who went through specific medical interventions did mention this fact as something meaningful, explaining their experience, and how the procedure went:

Interviewer: Did you go to school or only to the beach?

Child: I went to a summer camp and to the doctor (shows his arm)

Interviewer: Oh, I see... Did you get surgery in Spain?

Child: yes, I could not move my arm but now I can!

Sahrawi boy (age: 12), VP I-1

Interviewer: Did you go to the doctor in Spain?

Teenager: Yes. He only got my blood

Interviewer: Your teeth look great. Do you brush them often?

Teenager: Yes. In Spain, they took one of my teeth out!

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-7

The director of one of the camp hospitals reported during an informal interview that children return to the camps with clear health improvements due to the balanced and rich nutrition in Spain, and the basic treatments that most children get during the VeP programme. The VeP programme also provides the opportunity for children with disabilities to live with a host family or in specialised summer camps, alongside additional NGOs specialized on this.

To conclude, the children and teenagers interviewed affirmed that the VeP programme enabled them to enjoy playing, have access to educational and recreational activities, and participate in cultural activities they normally cannot access. Overall, the experience of living in Spain has benefited their education and equipped them with assets such as learning a new language. Moreover, many of them establish emotional ties with Spanish families that provide benefits through transnational support, as well as the opportunity to travel to Spain in the future. Over time, the memories that children and teenagers shared about their experience in Spain evolve, acquiring new meanings, as perceived through informal conversations with many adults who shared their insights about the impact the programme had had on them decades ago. While some teenagers reported not having had such a good experience in Spain, when asked whether they think this programme should be taking place their immediate answer was positive, saying it was 'window to a new world'.

²⁶ Fictitious name. Sahrawi teenager girl (age: 13), VP I-6 telling about medical care as a VeP participant.

5.2.3. Sahrawi children as ‘Pequeños Embajadores’ – little ambassadors

‘The Sahrawi children are Ambassadors of Peace for their cause. Since it is a silenced conflict, we would hardly be aware of their struggle without these children’. — M. Rubia²⁷

As recognised by many adults in the refugee camps, ‘Sahrawi children are like young ambassadors of their people’ (Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.85). The Sahrawi children are also considered by the Spanish solidarity movement as ‘The Sahrawi Ambassadors of Peace’ or ‘Little Ambassadors’ who every year, through the VeP programme advocacy events, remind the Spanish government and the international community about the ongoing conflict waiting to be solved. In the words of Abidin Buchraya²⁸, representative of the Frente Polisario in Barcelona, the VeP programme keeps ‘building a bridge between the Spanish and the Sahrawi people’ (SPSRASD, 2019) whilst providing a platform for raising awareness of the Sahrawi cause, in which the children, alongside the host families, are the main actors. Consequently, a secondary aim of this research was to answer the question: Are Sahrawi children active or passive participants in raising awareness of the Sahrawi struggle through their participation in the VeP programme from the Sahrawi children and teenagers’ perspective. The thematic analysis of the data obtained referring to the political awareness component of the children and teenagers interviewed provided insights as to how to present the identity of ‘Little ambassadors’ is in the mindset of VeP participants, and whether this role takes place as a mere representation of the Western Sahara struggle with the very presence of the Sahrawi children or their active participation. Moreover, this section presents additional insights on how the participation of Sahrawi children and teenagers in the VeP programme might influence their outlook in the future.

A. Political awareness

‘We have known this since the day we are born. Even the songs we sing in kindergarten tell stories of our land, Western Sahara, and then we realize this is not our country. We realize the Moroccans occupy our country. We are not Algerians. We are Sahrawis’. — Mariam

According to Chatty, ‘the school curriculum in the camps includes a political education’ (2010, p.57). However, the political component was not common in the narratives of younger children and teenagers, besides some of the teenagers, who showed stronger political awareness and brought up the subject in some cases. Especially during the focus groups discussions where a map of the world was shown, the teenagers proactively pointed at Western Sahara, showing a clear knowledge of the difference between the camps and ‘the real Sahara’ as they called it:

Interviewer: What do you think about the Western Sahara?

Teenager: We need to be free now, we need to leave this place -the camps, we are sick of it already, I am sick of it already. I always talk with my cousins there.

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-2

Also during some activities that included drawing, some teenagers drew Western Sahara flags, the map of the land, tanks or people holding weapons without being asked to do so, and started narratives about Morocco wanting the land, and the Sahrawis being killed by the Moroccans:

Interviewer: Why do you have to go to the VeP programme?

Teenagers: Because Morocco took our land from us, they want our land because it has many good things, and they have a lot of guns and money. They killed many people.

²⁷ Manuela Rubia, delegate of the association ‘Friends of the Sahrawi Children’ Diario de Córdoba (July 2019 by Elisa Manzano)

²⁸ Farewell of the children in Madrid 2019

Sahrawi teenager boy (age: 13), VP F-3

Teenager: Look, these are rubbish! Rubbish! – showing a picture he drew with the map of Western Sahara and tanks that represents the Moroccan army

Sahrawi teenager boy (age: 14), VP F-3

In none of the FGDs or SSIs was there mention of either the debt that Spain owes as a former colony or the VeP programme aim of advocacy, as so-called 'Sahrawi ambassadors of Peace'. Some of them explained there was no need since their host family already knew about the issue, others pointed to the complexity of the subject being an impediment to talking about it in Spanish:

Interviewer: Why does Spain have the VeP programme?

Teenager: Because Spain has a good relationship with the Sahara

Interviewer: Why is that?

Teenager: I do not know

Interviewer: Why do you speak Spanish in the Sahara?

Teenager: I do not know really

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-2

Most of the children referred to their biological family to explain where they learnt about Western Sahara's struggle, and not much to school or host families or the VeP programme:

Interviewer: What did your family tell you about Western Sahara?

Children: About my grandparents in war, and their parents in war, of war

Interviewer: Did the Spanish families tell you about Western Sahara?

Child: Yes

Interviewer: What did they tell you?

Child: they say it is sad and I forgot the rest

Sahrawi boy (age: 12), FGD VP-1

Interviewer: Did you learn about Western Sahara at school?

Teenager: Yes. My mother and grandparents

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), FGD VP-3

Several children shared the difficulty they encountered trying to explain to their friends in Spain about the situation in Western Sahara due to language limitations but remarked that after a while, they could explain it better. Another child added that during class in a summer school in Spain, she was invited to tell the whole class about the Sahrawi people. When it comes to their right to participation (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 12), it seems that both children and teenagers felt the freedom to decide whether they wanted to participate in highlighting the Sahrawi cause actively or not. It would depend on how much they were interested in an individual level, and whether they wanted to participate in the VeP programme or not.

B. Future outlook

In most cases, children reported being glad about going to Spain only for a few months to later reunite with their Sahrawi families. Both children and teenagers expressed their wish to return to the camps with their families, friends and normal routine while they were in Spain.

Interviewer: Where do you want to live when you grow up?

Child: I would like to live here – in the camps – and go to Spain

Interviewer: Where do you want to study and work then?

Child: I want to become a teacher, to study here and work here as well

Sahrawi girl (age: 12), VP I-4

Some of them also explained they felt their heart divided, missing the other place and family, and wishing to be in two places at the same time. Most of them did not mention not feeling comfortable living in the camps in comparison with Spain, and even when they did so, they added that in any case, they would not like to leave “the Sahara” forever. They would explain that they would like to go to Spain seasonally or work there, and visit their families in the camps during holidays, as many other Sahrawis do:

Interviewer: Where would you like to live in future?

Child: In Spain and I would come to visit my parents on holidays

Sahrawi boy (age: 11), NVP I-7

Interviewer: Do you want to live here or somewhere else?

Teenager: No, I want to live here, because I like it very much – in the camps

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-8

Most of the children and teenagers did not mention Western Sahara as part of their plans for the future, but shared a common pattern of returning to the camps and their families after studying and working in Spain, although several expressed their wish to stay in Spain:

Interviewer: Where would you like to live later?

Teenager: In Spain, because there are a lot of things

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 13), VP I-5

Interviewer: What do you like doing in the camps?

Teenager: Here there is nothing fun to do only being at home with my friends

Interviewer: Would you like to live here in the camps, or in Spain?

Teenager: I would like to live in Spain

Interviewer: Where would you like to study?

Teenager: There... in Spain

Sahrawi teenage boy (age: 14), VP I-7

Only a couple of older teenagers mentioned wishing to live in Western Sahara, and shared stories about their relatives who live in the occupied territories:

Interviewer: Where will you study?

Teenager: In Cuba, almost all the doctors come from there

Interviewer: Where would you like to live?

Teenager: In Western Sahara, I like it very much

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-2

Interviewer: Where would you like to live in future?

Teenager: Of course, my dream is living in my country, Western Sahara

Interviewer: What do your family tell you about Western Sahara?

Teenager: Where my mother was born, her country, in Laayoune (Western Sahara), her house, the house of her parents. That is what I dream about, being there, seeing how they lived in their houses, how they were happy, how they had all things, that is, seeing my country as very different, even though I have never been there in my life, my whole family left from there...

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-4

During the SSIs, every child and teenager was asked whether they knew their rights as children. Only a single older teenager had heard about them:

Interviewer: Have you heard of Children’s rights?

Teenager: Yes, here we have not seen anything, but on TV, we see that there is UNICEF, who work with children and take care of them, but here we do not have any right

Interviewer: Do schools or parents tell you about children’s rights?

Teenager: No, they have never told me about it. I heard it from a woman talking on TV.

Sahrawi young woman (age: 18), VP I-3

As a final activity during the FGDs, children and teenagers were asked whether they have heard about their rights and about the UNCRC by showing them a UNICEF set of cards with drawings made by children depicting their rights and the corresponding rights written at the top. While none of the children or younger teenagers affirmed knowing about the UNCRC or about these rights, they enjoyed learning about the subject by playing with the cards.

6. IMPACT OF THE VEP PROGRAMME ON THE PROMOTION OF SAHRAWI CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

It is necessary to emphasize on the complexity and unique nature of the status of Western Sahara and the Sahrawi people, which find themselves trapped in a protracted refugee situation, an 'intractable state of limbo' (Betts et al., 2009, p.77). While the Sahrawi refugee camps are unique in the fact that they are managed by the refugees themselves through the camp-government Frente Polisario, the unrecognized sovereignty of the Sahrawis over Western Sahara by the UN depicts them as a 'state in exile' (Mundy, 2007, p.278). Consequently the Sahrawi people in the camps are, as stated by Loescher, Betts & Milner (2008, p.21) 'unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance'. According to Chatty, 'while the concept of refugee implies a temporary status, the Sahrawi children and teenagers have lived as refugees for their entire lives, and in some cases, they are the third generation of their families to live like refugees' (2010, p.42). Therefore, the interpretations and findings presented in this study depart from 'the unusual status of the Sahrawi refugees' (Cirugeda & Thieux, 2008, p.13), with a government-in-exile which may see the VeP programme as an acceptable temporary solution to a temporary problem, that ensures partly transnational support.

Taking into consideration that none of the Sahrawi children and teenagers interviewed (except one) knew about their rights or had heard about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the analysis of the results was done by 'translating' their narratives to a child rights-based discourse, by finding the equivalents to the concerning child rights that were being promoted. Furthermore, the impact of the specific rights promoted by the VeP programme was measured and presented according to the perspective of the Sahrawi children and teenagers interviewed, for their voices to be represented on this paper. Since 'in all matters affecting children, they have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 12).

Play and leisure

Most of the research available on the VeP programme focuses on the medical, social, and educational benefits (Cirugeda & Thieux, 2008, p.47) or the role that children and teenagers play in transnational movements. Nevertheless, 'play has been linked to the development of cognitive and social skills, as well as to higher levels of school adjustment, increased social development, as well as to increased literacy skills and academic learning' (Bodrova & Leong, 2005, p.7). Moreover, when Sahrawi children were asked about the aspects they considered more important about the VeP programme, in most cases besides the older teenagers, play and leisure were mentioned first. Therefore, the highest value of the VeP programme based on the children who participate, is firstly the role it plays as a platform for its participants 'to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 31 paragraph 1) in the company of their host families, other VeP participants and new local peer group. In addition to this, the way in which the various activities organised by the VeP programme supporting associations 'encourages the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 31 Paragraph 2) should not be dismissed. Based on the field data and a complete agreement among all of the interviews, in particular, the youngest ones, the greatest impact of the VeP programme is in promoting Article 31 in the UNCRC which is the right to leisure and play. Even though the

majority of children and teenagers interviewed agreed that play and leisure with their peers is part of their life in the refugee camps also, they still they pointed out that the harsh weather conditions hinder outdoor enjoyment, and that they wished to have 'more things' available for leisure in the refugee camps, because 'there is nothing there'. The scarcity of resources and playground areas, as well as the lack of recreational activities in comparison with Spain, was brought up, which highlights the great need to create child-friendly spaces in the camps.

Social development

The VeP programme provides a temporary intercultural exchange for the Sahrawi children to interact with members of a society that is different from their own (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 29), living with a host family that ideally 'respects the child's own cultural identity, language and values' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 29 Paragraph 1c). Moreover, the VeP participants are exposed to a wider social diversity than in the refugee camps, which promotes living even if temporary, a 'responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 29 Paragraph 1d).

In most cases, the Saharawi interviewees reported enjoying a meaningful relationship with their host families and Spanish friends beyond the timeframe of the VeP programme, still keeping in touch through the Internet, and for some, welcoming their host families to the camps. Furthermore, 'many Sahrawi and Spanish families build a strong lasting bond where friendship, cooperation and assistance continues for years' (San Martín, 2010, p.161). This valuable network may provide a platform 'to gain knowledge and practical skills that may assist them in accessing higher education or work opportunities' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasm-iyeh, 2010, p.113) in the future, this being a chance for the Sahrawi children and teenagers to 'realise their full potential' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 29). However, the Sahrawi children and teenagers 'exhibited a strong sense of loyalty to the extended family and kin group'(Chatty, 2010, p.53) as well as a strong attachment to their daily life in the camps.

Transnational provision

Though the primary focus of the VeP programme is on 'enhancing the physical and social well-being of the refugee children who participate, there are underlying economic benefits for the Sahrawi families' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasm-iyeh, 2010, p.101), provided by the numerous host families that 'help the Sahrawi host children by sending money' (San Martín, 2010, p.160). Furthermore, it is a temporary measure that the Frente Polisario in collaboration with the Spanish solidarity movement implements 'to the maximum extent of their available resources and within the framework of international cooperation' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 4), with the aim to 'provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing' (UN General Assembly 1989 Article 27). According to Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty (2005, p.1) 'the VeP programme facilitates a transnational network for care in its economic, social, emotional and political dimensions, of which Sahrawi children are central nodes and actors', since such 'children mediate the flow of humanitarian aid and other expressions of solidarity for their families and the broader Sahrawi community-in-exile' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasm-iyeh, 2010, p.86).

The VeP programme therefore, has an impact on the promotion of Articles 4 and 27 of the UNCRC by helping create, in numerous cases, a transnational network that facilitates the shared care of Sahrawi children (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasm-iyeh, 2010, p.88). Whether the provision given to one child and the family is shared by others will depend on different factors, not having a real measure on how much the whole social network of the child will benefit. Nevertheless, the children

and teenagers interviewed highlighted not only the benefits to themselves but also the need to support their families and community in the camps, presenting themselves as actors who 'actively mediate the flow of material goods' which is a rare but 'great opportunity for them to express their agency as economic providers within their families' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2010, p.103). However, it is important to keep into account the potential inequalities that this kind of help can imply. Considering that 5000 children go to Spain every year and return to the camps with 50 to 100 euros, 'this generates an economy within the families' (Crivello and Fiddian, 2005, p.21) which may create differences in the Sahrawi families economic status.

Educational opportunities

The VeP programme is a form of 'international cooperation in matters relating to education' (UN General Assembly, 1989 Article 28) that offers a friendly and efficient platform for informal learning to take place, even when formal education does not figure in its scope. Furthermore, 'for Sahrawi youth, education is seen as an important individual and national tool to prepare themselves for integration into their homeland once their temporary 'nation-state' is no longer required (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010, p.42). The majority of the children and teenagers interviewed proudly described, speaking in fairly good Spanish, the multitude of educational achievements owed to their participation in the VeP programme. For instance, learning a new language in a new society and 'obtaining practical skills relating to the usage of modern technologies' (Chatty, 2010, p.95). It is remarkable that 'while the children expressed strong attachments to family and home, they also expected to leave the refugee camps temporarily, specifically for their education' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.113) and to eventually return to live near their parents (Crivello and Fiddian, 2005, p.26). Although 'no reliable statistics exist vis-à-vis the number of children/youth who have completed their primary, secondary and tertiary studies in Spain, the number is in the thousands' (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello, 2010, p.4).

Moreover, this experience serves as a 'motivation tool for the children participating that translates into better academic performance, and reinforcement of the learning process' (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello, 2010, p.46), possibly 'affecting their own individual trajectories in life' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.94). Therefore, in a way, the VeP programme 'encourages the development of vocational education' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 28 paragraph b) while, indirectly through the support of the host families, 'making it available and accessible to the child' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 28 paragraph b) in social life in exile which is essential, for 'education is key in order to cultivate a self-sufficient nation' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.92). An example of this was a young Sahrawi man that after accomplishing his studies, now he works as a dentist in one of the camps-hospital 'serving his people and the Sahrawi cause' as he explained in a spontaneous conversation during the fieldwork-data gathering stay in Algeria. According to Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello (2010, p.57), while the SADR promotes the creation of transnational ties between the Sahrawi children and the Spanish families, the settlement abroad is not preferred and the permanent emigration is limited. However, it is becoming more common among the Sahrawi youth 'the desire to emigrate, to find work and send remittances back to their families' (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello 2010, p.57). Especially nowadays that it is easier to stay in touch making use of new technologies through access to Internet in the refugee camps.

Medical assistance

Based on the perspective of the children and teenagers interviewed, the medical aspect of the VeP programme is a remarkable event for those who explained how, thanks to the special medical interventions accessed as VeP participants, their quality of life had clearly improved. For the rest of the participants in this research, the medical check-up played a secondary role, described mostly not even as scary, but simply as a neutral experience. Nevertheless, medical attention is officially the highest priority in the scope of the VeP programme agenda, which encourages international cooperation to ensure the provision of necessary treatment and healthcare to all children. As well as to provide protection or assistance for physical or mental health, and a periodic review of the treatment provided' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 25), this last point being a reason for some children to choose alongside their parents to stay for longer periods with the host families if their medical treatment requires this.

The host families guarantee well-balanced meals and vitamin supplements alongside medical examination for the Sahrawi children who 'usually arrive in Spain with a degree of iron deficiency and signs of malnourishment' (Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, p.97). Moreover, the host families often 'cover the expenses of follow up treatments, such as dental work or prescriptions for glasses' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2006), with financial support of the solidarity associations in some cases. In this way, the VeP programme has an indirect impact on the promotion of article 24 in the UNCRC through 'combating disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 24) even if temporary, and enabling 'the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health' (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 24 Paragraph 2c) for its participants.

Furthermore, the impact of the VeP on the promotion of children's rights reaches beyond the impact of host families on VeP participants alone to that of VeP participants on the Sahrawi community members in the camps, as supported by Crivello & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010). Indeed, on one hand the VeP promotes the rights of the children among its participants, and on the other the Sahrawi children themselves carry this awareness of their rights to the younger Sahrawi children once they are back in the camps, by telling these about their experiences and the possibilities offered by another lifestyle. The impact is therefore, not limited to VeP participants but usually reaches the extended community as well, through the sharing of stories and new knowledge. Future studies should take into account this last phenomenon, which could be considered as a form of child-to-child promotion of children's rights awareness in the camps. In addition, future studies could also look into the dynamics that may involve child-to-parent promotion of these rights and opportunities, and whether the children are taken seriously by the Sahrawi adults when they dream of better conditions for themselves and their families, inspired by the VeP experience.

Los Pequeños Embajadores – the little ambassadors

An additional question that this study tried to answer was whether the Sahrawi children are active or passive participants in raising awareness of the Sahrawi struggle through their participation in the VeP programme. The name given to the VeP participants – los Pequeños Embajadores, the little ambassadors – offers a glimpse of 'the multiple dynamics involved between political activism and humanitarian aid' (Reis, 2020, p.1). Sahrawi children are received by parliaments of the Spanish and European civil society, or take part in solidarity activities that show support to the Western Sahara struggle and human rights activists in the occupied territories. The VeP programme not only facilitates a 'transnational network for care in its medical,

economic, social and emotional dimensions, of which Sahrawi children are central nodes and actors' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty 2010, p.1) but it also involves a political component.

The VeP programme is described by the Official Agency of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as 'an important platform to renew the political and humanitarian support as well as to remind the Spanish government of its historical and legal responsibilities towards the Sahrawi people'. Therefore 'the political visibility of the Western Sahara conflict through Los Pequeños Embajadores is one of the main goals of the camp-based Sahrawi government' (Reis, 2020, p.3). Nevertheless, the VeP participants seem to be considered ambassadors mainly through the emotional bonds created with host families and the awareness about the Sahrawi cause they raise through their presence, rather than through a campaign or a strategy led by the children themselves. In most cases, the children and teenagers interviewed knew about Western Sahara – and not the camps near Tindouf – being their land. However, 'the family's histories of exile were generally difficult for them to articulate' (Crivello, Fiddian & Chatty, 2005, p.1) partly because of the language barrier, and even when some of the older teenagers showed political awareness, it did not seem to correlate with an active participation in raising awareness of the Sahrawi conflict based on afore-planned strategy.

While most of the Spanish families are aware of the Sahrawi conflict before hosting a Sahrawi child, the VeP program includes campaigns which provide information, since 'some host families are exposed to the situation of Western Sahara and learn about this for the first time' (Reis, 2020, p.13). Thus, those children and teenagers whose political narratives were more intentional may have been influenced by host families who are involved in advocacy. When trying to give a definite answer based on the data obtained from the VeP participants interviewees in the camps, there was no clear sign of active training by the adults in the camps to advocate or raise awareness during their stay, but total freedom of individual choice.

Unfortunately, the restricted time available in the camps for carrying out the interviews made deeper research into the aforementioned subject impossible, since the focus and priority was on understanding the impact of the VeP programme on the promotion of Sahrawi children's rights. A definite answer to this secondary question therefore remained beyond the scope of this study, and results cannot confirm fully whether the children's participation in raising awareness for the Sahrawi cause is active or passive. Nevertheless, the interests of the individual children and teenagers may most likely be the determining factor that will decide whether they would invest time and effort in displaying the Sahrawi cause. Further research on the subject of Sahrawi children's rights is strongly recommended. It was already remarkable to witness how the children and teenagers made use of creative materials to express political themes and narratives, which they were incapable of fully articulating due to the complexity of the subject and limited language skills in Spanish. Future studies should take into account not only the aforementioned limitations but also consider establishing additional child-friendly ways to gather data, for instance, focusing more on methods that involve drawing and role playing with a wider time frame and more participants.

It would also be particularly relevant to collaborate with Hassaniya speakers and Sahrawi researchers to facilitate more fluent and natural communication with the children, in order to discern whether the Sahrawi children are aware and understand that they have rights, or they are simply happy to receive these rights only for the limited amount of time they can participate in the VeP programme. Which would arise the subquestions: Does the experience of the VeP make the adults who have participated in it and/or their families want to strive towards achieving these rights on a more permanent basis? Or is there a sense of fatalism that this experience remains limited in time? The results of this study hinted that the notion of their rights seems to be lacking among the Sahrawi children. What about the adults, do they know about their

human rights? Finding answers to the aforementioned questions through future research may bring deeper understanding on impact of the VeP programme on promoting children's rights.

7. A TEMPORARY SOLUTION TO A TEMPORARY CONFLICT

Given the unusual status of the Sahrawi nation, the VeP programme promotes a certain number children's rights by offering a platform where Sahrawi children are able to access and profit from these rights during their stay in Spain in an effort to empower the VeP participants with a knowledge of their rights in their present time that may influence their trajectories in the future. However, there is no clear evidence of any activity carried out as part of the VeP programme that intentionally aims to empower Sahrawi children through the theoretical knowledge of their rights or the mention of the Children's Rights Convention, besides providing temporary access to those.

The participation in the VeP programme is a right for every child in the camps as part of the primary school educational curriculum, thereby promoting the right not to be discriminated against, stated in Article 2 (UN General Assembly 1989). Furthermore, the right to play and leisure (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 31) is highly promoted by all the cultural and recreational activities the VeP programme enfold, as well as by the social life with the host families and the peer groups accessible through them. Additionally, the benefits of spending the summer with a host family not only has an impact on the social development of the VeP participants (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 29), but may also lead to a network of transnational support, promoting as a result Articles 4 and 27 by assisting Sahrawi families in partially covering some of their basic needs. Moreover, the VeP programme has a great impact on the access to education, by empowering the children through learning a second language, which may ultimately enable them to pursue higher education in Europe. Finally, this study has confirmed that the VeP programme undoubtedly promotes the right to health care (UN General Assembly 1989, Articles 24 and 25) since it is compulsory for the host families to provide medical check-ups for the Sahrawi children and facilitate an extension of their stay if further treatment is required and both the Sahrawi families and the children agree with it.

In conclusion, this study has clearly shown that the VeP programme has a definite, though indirect influence on the promotion of some of the Sahrawi children's rights, without making direct mention of them. There was an overall agreement among the children and teenagers interviewed on the positive impact that the VeP programme has on promoting their rights, through translating these rights into real-life experiences they had benefitted from owing to their participation. Furthermore, the VeP programme becomes for its participants 'a window to understanding the world' (San Martín, 2010, p.160), serving as a platform for them to access and profit from some rights on a temporary basis, which may result in empowering them through the experience and awareness of their rights in their future life trajectories.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions of this study, it seems in the best interest of Sahrawi children to continue going to Spain as VeP participants and enable them to learn about their rights through having temporary access to some of them, at least until their 'true best interest' comes to pass. That is, the Sahrawi people being granted a referendum for self-determination as promised by the UN in 1991 and thereby getting their land and their human rights back. It seems clear, however, that there is room for improvement in the manner in which the VeP programme promotes Sahrawi children's rights, by moving from an indirect experiential approach to a more direct children rights-based discourse.

To understand better the implications of this study, future research could address ways to promote children's rights among the Sahrawi children in a more intentional and outspoken manner, but keeping into account and being guided by the Sahrawi culture which takes place in a protracted refugee situation, and the social construction of childhood might differ from 'the Western-based assumptions of child development, which is not universal and children do not automatically progress through the same sequence of developmental states' (Rogoff, 2003 as cited in Chatty, 2010, p.44). Furthermore, children and teenagers participation in the process of developing a strategy to promote their rights among their peers will be essential.

Despite the complex context and time restrictions in which the VeP programme takes place, there still is great potential for it to become more efficient and strategic in the promotion of the Sahrawi children's rights, as well as in showcasing the Sahrawi cause through the implementation of a child rights-based discourse. It is important not only to facilitate the temporary experience of these rights for the Sahrawi children during their short stay in Spain, but to empower these children with the knowledge of their rights in a more strategic and proactive fashion, using the VeP programme as a platform, a catalyst for future human rights lobbying. If children learn their rights as children, they will become adults who are more aware of their rights too, and therefore can be active actors in the political strategy not only in the near future but already in their present time as children and teenagers.

The VeP programme is considered highly efficient already according to Cirugeda and Thieux (2010, p.35), especially in the health and educational components. However, the same study also states that the political awareness component is in need of reinforcement for both the host families and Sahrawi children (2010, p.21). Therefore, the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in the structure of the VeP programme might be 'instrumental in putting children's issues on the global and national agenda as well as mobilizing action for the realization of the rights and well-being of children' (Mekonen & Tiruneh, 2014). This would allow the VeP programme's influence to reach beyond the two summer months in which children participate, by equipping them for their future life trajectories and extending children's rights awareness in the camps.

Consequently, the two main recommendations of this study are the following: first, the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the principles and discourse of the VeP programme, and second to consider innovative ways to keep promoting the rights of Sahrawi children in a manner better suited to the context and culture of the refugee camps as they participate intermittently and for only three years of their childhood in the VeP programme. The camp-based government, Frente Polisario, working alongside the Spanish solidarity associations are therefore key actors in implementing child-rights based strategies to empower Sahrawi children and teenagers' ability to take responsibility for aspects of their own and local community's needs and thereby promote their own and others' best interests.

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APPENDIX I : INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS GUIDES

A. *Participants on semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews No VeP

- 1 boy (6 y/old)
- 2 boys (9 y/old)
- 1 boy (10 y/old)
- 2 girls (10 y/old)
- 2 boys (11 y/old)

Semi-structured interviews VeP

- 2 boys (12 y/old)
- 2 girls (12 y/old)
- 1 boy (13 y/old)
- 1 girl (13 y/old)
- 2 boys (14 y/old)

Semi-structured interviews VeP

- 1 teenager girl (16 y/old)
- 4 young women (18 y/old)
- 1 woman (19 y/old)

B. *Participants on focus group discussions*

Focus group discussion no VeP

- 6 children (7 y/old approx.)
- Focus group discussion VeP x2
- 6 children (11 y/old approx.)
- 6 children (13 y/old approx.)

A. *Semi-structured interview guide*

Children who did not participate in VeP

About the VeP programme: Have you heard about the VeP programme? Do you have friends or siblings who participate in it? What things do they tell you about the VeP programme? What things do you know about the VeP programme that you like? Why is the VeP programme done for the Sahrawi children? Who can go to the VeP programme? How did you hear about the VeP programme? About Spain: Do you know any Spanish family? Do you know things about Spain? What do you know? Where do you learn Spanish? Would you like to go to Spain? Why? Why not then?

About their family: How many brothers and sisters are you? Do they all live here? Where do your parents work? What do your parents tell you about Western Sahara? What is your favourite food?

About education: What is your dream? What would you like to study or work in when you grow up? Where would you like to live in the future? What do you know about Western Sahara? Who did tell you about it? What do you like the most in the camps? Do you like school? Why? Why not?

Children who participated in VeP

About the VeP programme: When did you first go to Spain? How many times have you gone? Are you going this summer? Are your brothers and sisters going? Why is this program being done?

The preparations: Did you want to go from the beginning? How did you feel the first time you were told you were going to Spain? What did you bring in your suitcase? Do you like the plane?

About the Spanish family: When did you go to Spain and to which city? How many times? With the same family? Your brothers and sisters went? Why? What was the family like in Spain? How many children did they have? Do you still keep in touch with them? How? When do they come to Tindouf?

About the time in Spain: What is the first thing that you remember about Spain when you arrived?

What caught your attention? Did you have to visit the doctor? What was the visit like? What activities did you enjoy most during your time in Spain? And what did you learn the least?

About their family: How many brothers and sisters do you have? Did they go the VeP programme? Where? What do your parents tell you about Western Sahara? Where do your parents work?

About returning: How was your farewell to your friends and family from Spain? Who brought you to the airport? What were the things you brought in your suitcase back to Tindouf?

About education: What is your dream? What would you like to study or work in when you grow up? Where would you like to live in the future? What do you know about Western Sahara? Who did tell you about it? What do you like the most in the camps? Do you like school? Why? Why not?

B. Focus group discussion guide

Setting: school tea room, art material (colour pencils, papers), set of four games, world map, toys.

Children who participated in VeP

VeP	Game: Use a map, talk about Spain and ask who has gone there, how and why.
Preparatives	Activity: Using painting material, we will draw our bags and the things we took to Spain for the VEP program. Combine with conversation during this one.
The trip	Theatre: I am the flight attendant, and we will represent the flight to Spain, the passengers will tell me how they felt, etc.
In Spain	Conversation: we already know each other a little better, so we sit in a circle and one by one, in turns at the beginning and then letting it flow, tell their VEP experience
Return to the camps	Activity: we take the drawings from the suitcases and now we add the new things they brought, they can write the objects. In one round they explain each thing, they comment...
Biological family	Conversation: we talk about our biological family, I tell them about my family and show them pictures from when I was their age.
Host family	Activity: if you feel like it, we draw all the family members together, the Saharan family on one side and the Spanish family on the other side, and we talk about the differences/similarity

Teenagers who participated in VeP

VeP	Game: Use a map, talk about Spain and ask who has gone there, how and why.
Preparatives	Activity: Using painting material, we will draw our bags and the things we took to Spain for the VEP program. Combine with conversation during this one.
The trip	Conversation: ¿Qué medio de transporte es tu preferido? ¿Cuántos medios de transporte conoces? ¿Cuáles has usado? ¿Cuándo?
In Spain	Activity: on a piece of paper, each participant writes three words and an emoji of how they felt in Spain, and then in turns, each one shares a little more using the words.
Return to the camps	Activity: we take the drawings from the suitcases and now we add the new things they brought, they can write the objects. In one round they explain each thing, they comment...
Host family	Who remembers the Spanish family? Did they visit them in Tindouf? How did they feel?

APPENDIX II : INTERVIEWS TRANSCRIPTS EXCERPTS

A. *Semi-structured interviews:*

1. Children who have not participated in the VeP programme (6 – 11 y/old)
2. Children who have participated in the VeP programme (12 – 14 y/old)
3. Teenagers who have participated in the VeP programme (16 – 19 y/old)

B. *Focus group discussions:*

1. Children group aged 7 who have not participated in the VeP programme (6)
2. Children group aged 12 who have participated in the VeP programme (6)
3. Teenager group aged 13-15 who have participated in the VeP programme (6)

C. *Interviews excerpts with adults:*

1. Director of the camp high-school visited for field research
2. Minister of Youth and Sports (UJSARIO) Musa Selma

A. *Semi-structured interviews*

A1. *Children who have not participated in the VeP programme / 6 – 11 years old*

In situ: Hassaniya Arabic simultaneous translation to Spanish

Interviewer: What do your friends tell you about Spain?

Child: The swimming pool, there are horses and the beach

I: Would you like to go to Spain when it is your turn?

C: I will dive and swim in the swimming pool, and I will go to the beach to catch fish

(Saharawi boy, aged 6. NVP I-1)

Interviewer: Are you going to Spain?

Child: No

I: Why?

C: Because it is not my turn yet

I: What do your siblings tell you about Spain?

C: That it is pretty, and when they go there, the family give them things, food -referring to the Spanish host family

I: What will you do in Spain?

C: When I will go there, I will play with the kids of the family if my (host) family has kids, learn Spanish, go to the doctor

I: What will you bring with you to Spain?

C: I will bring necklaces and gifts for the Spanish family

I: What will you bring back to the camps?

C: Clothes, gifts for my family, money

(Saharawi boy, aged 9. NVP I-2)

Interviewer: Why do you want to go to Spain?

Child: Because swimming pool, the beach and the ball

I: How do you know all these things?

C: my friends, perfume, candies, school.

I: Do you have siblings who went to Spain?

C: I have younger sisters

(Saharawi boy, aged 9. NVP I-3)

Interviewer: Do you want to go to Spain? Why?

C: Yes, I like the swimming pool and the beach

I: Are you going to Spain?

C: Not in 2020. I will go when I will turn 11 year old

I: Are you looking forward to going to Spain?

C: yes

(Saharawi girl, aged 10. NVP I-4)

Interviewer: What do your friends tell you about the VeP programme?

Child: Clothes, cars, candies, games...

I: Do your siblings go to Spain?

C: Yes. He is 15 year old.

I: Are you also going to Spain?

C: Next year

I: What will you do there?

C: Play, go to the doctor, swimming pool

I: Are you looking forward to going there?

C: Yes, because it is beautiful and there is everything there

(Saharawi boy, aged 10. NVP I-5)

Interviewer: When are you going to Spain?

Child: They took a picture of me last year and I will go this year

I: And who did tell you about the VeP programme?

C: my friends who went to Spain and also my mum.

I: What do they tell you about Spain?

C: my mum says it is very beautiful, my friends that it is very cool

I: And what do you want to do in Spain?

C: Going to the beach, to the swimming pool...

I: Are you going to eat new types of food in Spain?

C: Yes! Pizza and hamburger!
(Saharawi girl, aged 10. NVP I-6)

Interviewer: Could you tell me what the VeP programme is about?

Child: Madrid. To go to Spain and meet new families

I: Why do you want to participate in VeP?

C: Because it is very beautiful, I will go this summer!

I: How do you know this?

C: Because my friends and my siblings have always gone to Spain and I saw pictures

I: Where would you like to live in the future?

C: in Spain

I: What if you would not see your parents again?

C: I would come to the camps to visit them on holidays

(Sahrawi boy, aged 11. NVP I-7)

Interviewer: Do you know what the VeP programme is about?

Child: Next year I will go to Spain

I: Do you rather live in Spain or in the camp?

C: here, in the camp

(Sahrawi boy, aged 11. NVP I-8)

A2. *Children who have participated in the VeP programme 12 – 14 years old*

In situ: basic spoken Spanish with help of a translator

Interviewer: What do you do in Spain?

Child: Play and speak Spanish

I: What do you like to do in Spain?

C: Go to the beach, and play with my friends

I: Did you go to school or only to the beach?

C: I went to a summer camp and to the doctor (shows his arm)

I: Oh, did you get surgery in Spain?

C: yes, I could not move my arm but now I can

(Sahrawi boy, aged 12. VP I-1)

I: Why do you think that the VeP programme is good?

C: Because I like the swimming pool

I: Do you want to live in the camps or in Spain?

C: In the camps because there is the family – his family

(Sahrawi boy, aged 12. VP I-2)

I: Where do you want to live when you grow up?

C: I would like to live here – in the camps, and go to Spain I: Where do you want to study and work then?

C: I want to become a teacher, to study here and work here as well

I: Do your parents tell you about Western Sahara?

C: My mum lives here, but my father died. My mum tells me all the things about Western Sahara

I: What did you bring back from Spain to the camps?

C: A lot of things, clothes and toys, for my sisters and for me

(Sahrawi girl, aged 12. VP I-4)

I: Are you going to Spain this year?

C: No, I've been there three times already

I: How was the first time you went to Spain?

C: I could not speak Spanish and I was afraid

I: How was your host family?

C: Good, they have a son my age

I: Are you still in contact with your Spanish family?

C: yes, we talk through WhatsApp

I: Where would you like to live in?

C: In Spain, because there are a lot of things

I: Why do Sahrawi children go to Spain?

C: Because there are no good things here -in the camps

I: Is it good to go to Spain in summer?

C: Yes, because it is very hot here in the camps

(Sahrawi boy, aged 13. VP I-5)

I: Did you go to the doctor?

C: Yes, I got surgery in my ear, because I had it perforated, I stayed in Spain longer, but in winter I told them I wanted to go back with my family, because I missed them.

I: How was your family?

C: my father is Moroccan (host family) and at first my parents were worried and I was afraid, but he is very good to me and cooked nice food for me. Eventually I loved him even more than I loved my Spanish mother (laughs)

I: How was a normal day for you in Spain?

C: we did not go to class, but to the swimming pool or the beach. Also to the fair, and I played dolls with the daughters of my family (host family)

I: How did you feel when you came back from Spain?

C: Happy

I: Did you feel the camps look different when you returned?

C: Everything was the same as always

I: Will you go to Spain this summer?

No, I won't because I am thirteen, it is sad.

I: Did the Spanish family visit you in the camps?

C: yes, the granny from mother's side came to visit

I: But can Moroccans come here to the camps?

C: yes, they can come when their passport in Spanish
(Saharawi girl, aged 13. VP I-6)

I: Could you explain to me what is the VeP programme about?

C: Here it is very hot, and I can go to Spain for some months

I: And where did you stay during these months?

C: With a family that is very cool!

I: What do you like doing in Spain?

C: Swimming pool often, and play football with friends

I: Would you like to live here in the camps, or in Spain?

C: I would like to live in Spain

I: Where would you like to study?

C: There... in Spain

I: Did you go to the doctor in Spain?

C: Yes. He only got my blood

I: Your teeth look great. Do you brush them often?

C: Yes. In Spain they took one of my teeth out!

I: What things did you bring from Spain with you?

C: A lot of clothes, socks, food, Nocilla (chocolate spread)

I: Were all these things for you?

C: Yes. They (host family) gave them to me, for me and my family

I: Are you still in contact with your host family?

C: No, they want to talk to me but I do not have for WhatsApp

(Sahrawi boy, aged 14. VP I-7)

I: Do your host family keep in contact with you?

C: Yes, I talk to them through WhatsApp, they video call me and so on.

I: And what do they tell you?

C: Not much, that they are doing fine

C: Do you want to always live here or somewhere else?

C: No, I want to live here, because I like it very much in the camps

(Sahrawi boy, aged 14. VP I-8)

A3. *Teenagers who have participated in the VeP programme 16 – 19 years old*

In situ: mostly fluent Spanish with help of peers if needed.

Interviewer: How did you learn Spanish?

Teenager: During my time in Spain with the family

I: What did you learn in Spain?

T: A lot things, like writing in Spanish and plenty of things

I: Do you stay in touch with the host family in Spain?

T: Yes, I miss them. I am not going there because my years are over

(Sahrawi teenage girl, aged 16. VP I-1)

Interviewer: Do you keep in touch with your host family?

Teenager: Yes, but not anymore because I lost their phone number. They were a very good family

I: Which things were good for you in Spain?

T: Everything was good, the family they were also very good

I: Where would you like to live in?

T: In Western Sahara, I like it very much.

I: Why does Spain have the VeP programme?

T: Because Spain has a good relationship with the Sahara

I: Why is that? Why do you speak Spanish in the Sahara?

T: I don't know really

I: Have you heard about the children's rights?

T: No, I don't know what it is

(Sahrawi young-woman, aged 18. VP I-2)

I: What do you mean exactly?

T: In a lot of things, no one is going to tell you something there. My Spanish parents are very nice, but here they are more strict

I: Would you send your children to Spain if you had them?

T: Of course! I would send them with no concerns. Even though there are families that are very nice, there are also families who are not.

I: Have you heard of the Children's rights?

T: Yes, here we have not seen anything, but on TV we see that there is the UNICEF, who work with them and take care of the children, but here we do not have any right.

I: Do schools or parents tell you about the children's rights?

T: No, they have never told me about it. I heard it from a woman talking on TV

I: What do you think about the Western Sahara?

T: We need to be free now, we need

to leave this place w the camps, we are sick of it already, I am sick of it already. I always talk with my cousins there

(Sahrawi young-woman, aged 18. VP I-3)

Interviewer: So you want to live here in the camps?

Teenager: Of course my dream is living in my country, Western Sahara

I: What do you know about your country?

T: Almost everything

I: Who did tell you about it?

T: My family

I: What do they tell you for instance?

T: For instance, where my mother was born, in her country, in Laayoune (Western Sahara), in her house, the house of her parents, that is what I dream about, being there, see how they lived in their houses, how they were happy, how they had all things, that is, see my country is very different, even though I have never in my life gone there, my whole family left from there.

I: I guess you were born here – in the camps

T: Yes, therefore it is surely my dream going there – Western Sahara

I: When did you realise about this situation? I wonder if children understand this...

T: Children do understand this indeed, we learn it in kindergarten. Even the songs we sing tell stories about it (the Sahrawi struggle), and then we realise this is not our country. That our country is occupied by the moroccan folk. We are not Algerians.

I: Do you think that the VeP programme benefited you?

T: That's indeed, and to my family tremendously. And it still does, because I have a good (host) family

I: Are you keeping in touch with them?

T: Yes, yes. They visited us twice.

I: How was it for them to be here in the camps?

T: They liked it very much. They also hosted other children years before, with the only girl that they kept in touch was with me. They hosted me for seven years in a row, that is not easy.

I: Do you think that going to the VeP programme helps you at school?

T: Yes, because the family that hosted helped me a lot, taught me how to write, so when I came back to the camps from holidays in Spain I already knew how to write, and how to read also. They taught at home, and also at class. She is a very nice woman, she had two older sons, but I was the only girl in the house, so she felt very happy about it, and even when I was a very active girl and I would miss behave, she was always nice to me
(Saharawi young woman, aged 18. VP I-4)

Interviewer: Are all the Sahrawi children going to the VeP programme?

Teenager: yes, that is a favour that they do for us (Polisario)

I: And how did you know about the VeP programme?

T: Rabuni (the administration centre) told me "you have to go". I have to do little about it

I: Is it possible to communicate in Rabuni that you would not like to participate?

T: Yes, then you do not go and you will never go

I: How was it for you in Spain?

T: Bad. The family was always mad at me, punishing me. Because I did nothing, the children of the family said to me: You have done this. She has done that (to the host family) and I will get punished, I would not be allowed to go out, in the street.

I: Did you always go with this host family?

T: No, only two years, and four years with another family, a very nice one they treated me very well, I got along with the siblings and they did not punish me

I: Would you tell your kids to go to Spain if you had?

T: Yes! As I did they would. I would tell them how it was for me

I: Why do you think the VeP programme is done?

T: Rabuni does it, for the children to learn things

I: Did you tell your host family and other people about the camps?

T: No, they did not ask, then I did not tell them

I: Do you think life in Spain is different than here?

T: Yes, because there are many things in Spain we do not have here. For instance, work.

T: In Spain women and men can work, here only few women can find a job

I: Where would you like to live in the future, in Spain or in the camps?

T: In Spain, I would like to become Spanish teacher

(Saharawi young woman, aged 18. VP I-5)

Interviewer: Do you think children are aware that the camps are not their land?

Teenager: Sure! All of them, we know that from the moment we are born, I am always talking about this subject with my father, always, also with my grandmother

I: Do you think your time in Spain helped you to improve your studies?

T: Yes, through the VeP programme I learnt a different world, and I can talk in another language. I've learnt a lot of things that now I do not have, but I know them. I liked the VeP programme very much.

I: Is it difficult for a child to come back from Spain to the camps? Since life in Spain is more comfortable, is it not hard to live in the camps afterwards?

T: Not really. There might be a couple of days where the children feel sad, but after being in the camps for a couple of days, they are used to it again and happy

I: Would you recommend the VeP programme?

T: Yes, that is a very good thing. Because you will like meeting a Spanish family. I remember everything I experienced with my (host) family. My clothes (showing them) are a gift from my (host) family, they sent it and it arrived last week, boxes, parcels

I: How do you picture your future?

T: I honestly want us to be free. I would also like to visit Spain again

I: Do you think children going to Spain know about their rights?

T: They don't, but little by little they learn about them

I: Which age do you think is the best to participate in the VeP programme?

T: I would say from 8 year old, I went when I was 5 year old, I was too little

I: How is the medical care in the camps?

T: Well, for instance finding medicaments sometimes you do, sometimes not at all

(Saharawi young woman, aged 19. VP I-5)

B. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

B1. Sahraui children group aged 7 who have not participated in the VeP programme

In situ: Hassaniya Arabic simultaneous translation to Spanish

Interviewer: What do your friends tell you about Spain?

Children: They say it is very beautiful there, and there is a swimming pool, markets, beaches, and the swimming pool is very beautiful!

I: Why do your friends and siblings go to Spain?

C: To go to another place, to see Spain.

I: Do you know what they eat in Spain?

C: Hamburger, pizza, delicious food. Chocolate, nougat, candies.

I: How is your daily life in the camps?

C: Also very good here. We study, meet our cousins and friends to play, go to the shops...

I: What are your favourite things to do in the camps?

C: Study, play with the ball, the jumping rope, the bikes...

C: Is Spain beautiful? I want to go to see Spain, and go to the beach and all!

C: We need to learn a bit of Spanish, to answer to the other children (in Spain).

I: What is your dream?

C: Going to Spain and stay a little while (come back)

I: Why do you go to school?

C: In order to learn, and to know everything in life, and also to work

I: What do you want to become when you grow up?

C: Nurse, pilot, car driver, doctor, hairdresser, police

C: I can speak a bit of Spanish because I learn from my sister who goes to VeP.

C: I would like to work in Spain because there you can work longer than here.

I: Who did tell you so?

C: My mother

B2. Children group aged 12 who have participated in the VeP programme

In situ: basic spoken Spanish with help of a translator

Interviewer: What was the first thing you thought when you left for Spain?

Children: Swimming pool! Gifts! Beach!

I: Why do you like learning Spanish?

C: to speak with the kids in Spain. To speak

I: Why do you go to the VeP programme?

C: to help the family, I help my family who have nothing, help for everyone

C: we want Spain, we do not want here!

I: Would you like to stay in Spain?

C: no, not always, no

I: Would you live here or in Spain?

C: here! Here because the families are here!

I: What did you bring back to the camps?

C: clothes, gifts, shoes, chocolate spread...

I: Was it all for you alone?

C: No! Also for our families

I: What did you bring for your family?

C: perfume and money

I: Which differences are between Spanish and Sahrawi children?

C: no difference, it is the same but here a bit different, here it is very hot.

I: Do you know why you children have to live in the camps?

C: Yes, we do not have houses of our own because Morocco took it from us

I: How was it the first time you returned from Spain?

C: Very hot, I liked Spain more

I: What did your family tell you about Western Sahara?

C: About my grandparents in war, and their parents in war, of war.

I: Did the Spanish families tell you about Western Sahara?

C: Yes

I: What did they tell you?

C: they say it is sad and I forgot the rest.

C. INTERVIEWS EXCERPTS WITH ADULTS

C1. Director of the camp high-school visited for field research

Interviewer: Do you think that the VEP program benefits intellectual development and capacity in children's school? Do you think there is a difference between children who go to Spain and those who do not?

Director: Yes

I: Can you explain a bit with some examples?

D: IF there is a difference because the children here, those who have not gone to Spain are here in the desert, and there is nothing. Only houses and haimas. But children who go to Spain see and learn many things, they see cars, animals that study them but they don't see them here. They learn about many things, the beach, trees, animals. Here there is none of that. That is why there is a lot of difference between a child who has never gone to Spain and one who has gone.

C2. Minister of Youth and Sports (UJSARIO) Musa Selma

Interviewer: selection criteria, that goes by age, does it affect all Saharawi families, without discrimination?

Minister: First you have to see what is the amount requested.

I: Yes, the demand, but then the age goes, all the Saharawi families?

M: Yes, all families, without exception. You must always meet the standards set, although there has been a time that was a reward for the results you have taken in class. Not now, but now it is an obligation, that by age you have to go. It has been varying.

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