



Inspiring practices : CO.A.ST – My Coming of Age Story

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the implementation of the CO.A.ST project, each partner organization engaged in a process of reflection, exchange, and practical experimentation aimed at identifying concrete ways to strengthen national guardianship and care systems for unaccompanied children. This process provided an important opportunity to assess existing mechanisms, identify structural gaps, and explore innovative approaches capable of improving the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of support provided to this particularly vulnerable group.

The transnational dimension of the project, involving partners from France, Italy, Greece, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, played a central role in this process. The comparison of different national systems highlighted the significant fragmentation that currently characterizes guardianship and protection frameworks across Europe, as well as the diversity of responses developed by individual countries. These differences reflect variations in migration patterns, institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and available resources.

Two key considerations are particularly relevant for understanding the context in which the good practices presented in this document emerged.

First, partner countries occupy different positions along migratory routes, which significantly influences the structure and functioning of their protection systems. France, Italy, and Greece represent major destination and entry countries, where national systems must respond to a high number of arrivals and ensure long-term reception, protection, and integration measures. By contrast, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Poland primarily function as transit countries, where the presence of unaccompanied children is generally more limited and often temporary. These differences affect institutional priorities, operational capacity, and the development of guardianship systems.

Second, guardianship and child protection systems vary considerably across countries in terms of legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and the actors involved. Roles and responsibilities differ, as do the financial and human resources dedicated to supporting unaccompanied children. Despite this diversity, partner countries face common challenges, including the need to strengthen coordination among stakeholders, ensure access to specialized expertise, support guardians in their role, and guarantee continuity of assistance during the transition to adulthood.

Within this context, the CO.A.ST project provided a valuable platform for identifying, analysing, and promoting good practices capable of improving guardianship systems and enhancing support for unaccompanied children and young adults. The present document presents the most relevant practices identified during the project, highlighting approaches that have proven effective in strengthening coordination, promoting child-centred support, enhancing professional capacity, and ensuring continuity of care.

GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CO.A.ST PROJECT

A fundamental aspect identified across partner countries is the adoption of a child-centred approach, ensuring that unaccompanied children are actively involved in decisions affecting their lives. Recognizing children as active rights-holders, rather than passive recipients of assistance, strengthens their autonomy, resilience, and capacity for self-determination.

A particularly effective practice is the involvement of children in the development of **individualized support plans**. In **Italy**, for example, unaccompanied children residing in reception centres participate in structured meetings with guardians and social workers to define their personal objectives and integration pathways. This participatory approach promotes ownership, strengthens accountability, and ensures continuity of support.

The CO.A.ST project further reinforced this approach by directly involving children and young adults in **focus groups and participatory activities**, allowing them to express their needs, challenges, and expectations. In addition, several partners implemented “**Know Your Rights**” sessions, support desks, and information meetings aimed at improving childrens’ awareness of their rights and available opportunities. These initiatives contributed to empowering beneficiaries and improving the responsiveness of protection systems.

Effective protection systems require also **clear coordination among the multiple actors involved**, including guardians, social workers, reception staff, legal professionals, and institutional authorities. The project highlighted that unclear role definitions and fragmented communication can hinder effective support.

To address this challenge, the formalization of cooperation mechanisms emerged as a particularly valuable good practice.

Memoranda of Understanding signed during the project implementation phase contributed to strengthening cooperation among stakeholders in several partner countries like **Italy, Greece and Slovenia**. These formal agreements improve service coherence, ensure complementarity of interventions, and enhance the overall effectiveness of protection systems.

A particularly noteworthy outcome of the CO.A.ST project pilot phase is the initiative undertaken by the Polish partner to develop a nationwide **list of curators (court appointed guardians)** available to support unaccompanied children. Given the high level of fragmentation and dispersion that characterizes the guardianship and care system in **Poland**, this initiative represents an important step toward strengthening coordination and enhancing effectiveness and coherence of the national protection system.

Peer-to-peer support among guardians and professionals represents another key good practice identified during the project. These mechanisms facilitate experience sharing, mutual learning, and professional support, contributing to improved case management and reducing professional isolation.

Italy offers a particularly advanced model through its **network of local and regional guardians’ associations**, coordinated at national level by the network [Tutori in Rete](#). This structure facilitates exchange of experiences, strengthens coordination, and supports guardians in the exercise of their role.

France provides a similar example through the **Fédération Nationale des Administrateurs Ad Hoc** (FENAAH), which supports professionals responsible for representing unaccompanied children. In Greece, a structured peer-to-peer model is already in place within the framework of the national guardianship programme. Within each organization implementing the programme (i.e METAdrasi and PRAKSIS), weekly peer-to-peer meetings are held between guardians and their coordinators, as well as monthly peer-to-peer meetings among all coordinators.

The CO.A.ST project also contributed to promoting peer support and interdisciplinary support networks and mechanisms in all partner countries through its pilot phase. One of the most remarkable outcomes of this phase, was the experience of **Slovenia** where guardians participated in an exchange with representatives of *Tutori in Rete*, exploring the opportunity to develop a similar network there.

Peer-to-peer support proved to be an effective and sustainable mechanism for strengthening the capacity of professionals involved, while also serving as an important measure to reduce frustration, fatigue, and the sense of isolation often experienced by these professionals.

Fostering **interdisciplinary support networks** that allow guardians to access support and resources from other disciplines, such as **pro bono lawyers** was also a key outcome.

The CO.A.ST project was able to build from the experience of KIND and CIR in Italy where guardians were connected with pro bono lawyers to ensure better case management and support to guardians and children including as they come of age. Building from this, the CO.A.ST project highlighted the needs of guardians to access legal support from pro bono lawyers at the PILnet Global Forum in Rome in November 2025, an event which convenes pro bono lawyers from across Europe and globally. **Slovakia** also held its first roundtable with pro bono lawyers where the needs of guardians were shared and the first stages of a pro bono model to benefit guardians, caregivers and children and youth was put in place.

Access to **structured and continuous training** for guardians and professionals emerged as another fundamental component of effective protection systems.

Italy provides a strong example, where voluntary guardians must complete **mandatory training** programmes before assuming their role. Similarly, **Greece** has in place a mandatory training for guardians. **Slovenia** also demonstrates an **advanced approach**, requiring both **initial and periodic refresher training** to ensure guardians maintain updated knowledge and professional competence.

The CO.A.ST project contributed to strengthening capacity-building by providing training sessions to guardians and other professionals, promoting improved preparedness, coordination, and quality of assistance.

Ensuring **continuity of support** beyond the age of majority represents one of the most critical aspects identified during the project. The **transition to adulthood** is a particularly **vulnerable phase**, during which young people are expected to achieve autonomy while still facing legal, social, and economic challenges. Without adequate support, young adults risk losing access to essential services at a decisive moment in their integration pathway.

Italy provides a significant example through the implementation of Article 13 of Law 47/2017, which allows for the **extension of reception and support measures** beyond the age of 18. This provision ensures continuity of housing, guidance, and social assistance, enabling young adults to gradually transition toward independent living in a structured and protected environment.

Similar measures exist in other partner countries. In **France**, the **Contrat Jeune Majeur** allows young adults to continue receiving institutional support after reaching the age of majority, based on an assessment of their needs and vulnerabilities. In **Slovakia**, support measures may be **extended up to the age of 25**, reflecting an understanding that integration and autonomy often require sustained accompaniment over a longer period.

Another practice observed in the Italian context is **social guardianship**, which provides the possibility of the continuity in the relationship between guardians and young people beyond the age of majority. Although this practice is not uniformly implemented by the Juvenile Courts nationwide and its transferability to other national contexts may be limited due to differences in legal and institutional frameworks, it represents an important example of relational continuity and long-term support.

Mentorship programmes, by contrast, represent a highly effective and transferable practice. These initiatives provide young people with trusted mentors who offer emotional guidance, practical support, and orientation, thereby facilitating their transition to independent adult life and strengthening social inclusion. **Italy, France and Greece** have established examples of mentorship and aftercare programmes, while **Slovakia** has developed similar initiatives through **buddy systems** within the university environment.

In **Slovenia**, the **integration counsellor** represents another relevant support figure. Although not specifically linked to reaching the age of majority, this professional plays a key role in orienting and monitoring the integration process of beneficiaries of international protection, providing guidance and continuity of support throughout their integration pathway.

Overall, these practices demonstrate the importance of ensuring continuity of support during the transition to adulthood, highlighting the need for structured aftercare measures, stable support relationships, and long-term integration mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The good practices identified during the CO.A.ST project demonstrate that effective protection systems for unaccompanied children require coordinated, child-centred, and sustainable approaches. Key success factors include the active participation of children, clear coordination mechanisms, peer support networks, structured training opportunities, and continuity of support during the transition to adulthood.

These practices emerged from the initial research conducted by each partner and were further explored through exchanges with institutional and civil society stakeholders.

These exchanges allowed partners to deepen their understanding of the operational functioning, strengths, and potential impact of the identified practices, and to assess their **relevance and replicability** in different national contexts.

Some of the identified practices - particularly those considered flexible, adaptable, and easily replicable - were also tested during the pilot phase of the project.

This was notably the case for peer-to-peer support mechanisms and the formalization of cooperation through Memoranda of Understanding, which contributed to strengthening coordination and fostering sustainable collaboration among stakeholders.

The practices identified informed the **advocacy efforts** carried out within the project and contributed to the development of **concrete recommendations aimed at strengthening guardianship systems across Europe**. Together, they represent valuable and transferable approaches for improving protection frameworks and ensuring more effective and sustainable support for unaccompanied children and young adults.



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