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WHITE BOOK ON REFUGEES RECEPTION

A participatory assessment conducted by
asylum seekers and refugees in
Emilia-Romagna

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Centro immigrazione
Asilo
Cooperazione
internazionale
di Parma e provincia



ASP
CITTÀ DI BOLOGNA
Azienda pubblica
di servizi alla persona

Summary



This brief summarises the main findings of the participatory evaluation resulting from the 11 focus groups with 54 applicants and holders of protection in the territories of Parma and Bologna. The themes were identified by the project team starting from the qualitative material collected, but each choice and priority was shared and validated by a representation of the participants in the back talk meeting.

Despite everything, gratitude and hope

In spite of the complex path and the difficulties still existing in the present, a sense of gratitude towards the projects, but also towards Italy for having received a welcome, and gratitude towards the operators emerged several times.

"[The keys] are possibilities that I had, that maybe if I was at home I couldn't have, that I didn't have for sure! [...] I am very grateful because then these keys are the things I was able to have, like the middle school licence, the driving licence..." (C., Fg_Pr_3).

When the reception is not there

Many participants shared the experience of numerous displacements, long waits and uncertainties about the future, resulting in prolonged periods excluded from any form of reception. Recurring is the need to be strong, tenacious, to have patience, to have faith, to not give up. All indicators of how much it depends on the willpower of the individual or on mere luck or chance for one's path to take a positive turn.

"I did eight months outside in Parma because I didn't know before that there was a reception that could help me" (M., Fg_Pr_4).

Opportunities and services: a question of 'luck'?

Entering a host project is for many a time when they can (re)orient themselves and think about their goals. People often try to do as much as possible in the short time available. Italian courses; apprenticeships; school and university; driving licence; social activities to create a network; physical and mental health, are all fundamental steps to achieve an adequate level of autonomy and well-being. However, access to these services is not always guaranteed in the same way for everyone and there are still big differences between the different levels of the reception system, in fact often one goes from not being able to do anything to having to do everything.

"I didn't do anything [...] I didn't study, not even out and about, nothing, just eating at home, I mean it was very difficult" (A., Fg_Pr_5).

Learning Italian: necessary (but difficult)

Learning Italian is one of the essential elements to achieve effective autonomy. Although knowing other languages such as French or English can be useful, in Italy it is not enough. A good knowledge of Italian often helps in the search for housing and is fundamental for finding work, building social relationships and interacting with local services independently. A poor knowledge of the language can also lead to situations of labour exploitation, misunderstandings with service operators or limit the possibility of making decisions for oneself. Investing in learning Italian is seen as a crucial step to improve one's chances of integration and autonomy.

"I always say that those who arrive must study, learn Italian which is very important because without that they cannot work [...] If a person does not know how to speak Italian, does not know the laws, other people will exploit you" (E., Fg_Pr_6).

A 'person-friendly' reception

Reception facilities can vary from large centres with hundreds of people to small shared flats. In the most crowded centres, high levels of stress and difficulties in living together are often reached, due to long 'empty' waiting times and rough management of shared spaces. Smaller facilities, with rooms shared between a few people, can facilitate interaction and the creation of positive bonds, also improving the opportunities for learning Italian and the general well-being of the people accommodated.

"In my opinion it was 200 people. Or 100 more. I was there five months. But it really stressed me out there. Really. Because I did nothing" (K., Fg_Pr_5).

An accessible reception

Being placed in a reception project far away from the city centres can have a great impact on the outcome of individual pathways as it affects the real possibilities and services one can access and can hinder people's social and work integration. In more isolated areas, essential services such as schools, hospitals and supermarkets are distant and difficult to access. Employment opportunities, as well as socialising opportunities, are also drastically reduced if people do not have access to their own means of transport.

"From the village to school, it's two hours and forty minutes by bus and I also have the baby. I had a hard time studying, I had a hard time shopping, even for doctor's visits I could only come here to Parma but the bus only comes down once a day. If you are one minute late you are closed at home" (R., Fg_Pr_6).

A reception with the right timing

Reception times in a project are standardised and pre-established with little consideration for individual differences, being unrealistic with respect to people's needs, so much so that requests for extensions are frequently made, without any guarantees. Moreover, the reception period is also perceived as 'lost time', characterised by uncertainties and lack of significant progress. The end of the project generates anxiety and concern for one's future, as many fear they will not be able to find accommodation or complete the bureaucratic paperwork necessary for their autonomy.

"We always know at the last minute if the request to extend the stay has been accepted by the Ministry and this makes us anxious [...] This can be for some a source of stimulus to do the things required by the project while for others it can be tiring" (N., Fg_Bo_5).

The specificity of families

Families with young children or with young students have needs that require special attention, such as having adequate space to study or activating specific support networks, given the absence of other family members, friends or acquaintances who can contribute to managing the care burden. Another concern relates to family reunification or maintaining contact with the family in the country of origin. The rapid increase in the number of families in reception makes it necessary to update and adapt services and the approach of projects and individual operators, as well as to initiate social innovation processes in synergy with other public and private social bodies.

"We were too sad and we were too afraid because we were alone and we did not know where the other part of our family was...it was nine days but for us it was like nine years" (S., Fg_Pr_3).





The relationship with the operators

The operators present in the reception centres play a fundamental role for some of the participants, even more relevant (for better or worse) in the face of the aleatory and uneven nature of the services provided.

"You know where you have to go to ask for a hand, for advice... I found the right people" (A., Fg_Pr_5).

Leaving the project and finding a home

The transition towards autonomy after the end of the reception project is a critical phase for the success of any pathway. It is a delicate moment as it is characterised by significant challenges in the search for housing, a job and a new stability. This moment often generates anxiety and frustration, even in those who feel ready to leave, as it implies the need to find a tenancy on their own: a complex task for many in these years, but especially for foreigners due to prejudice and discrimination on the part of agencies and landlords. In this phase, knowledge of Italian, the support of a good social network and access to additional resources, guaranteed by specific projects, is fundamental.

"In Italy it is very difficult to find rent. Especially for foreigners it is very difficult. Sometimes there is also the fact that it is difficult to rent because there are no resources, but the more difficult it is to find someone who trusts to rent the house and unfortunately this problem, in my opinion, is a big problem. For me it is unfair that the door is so closed" (C., Fg_Pr_3).

Work and rights

In order to be autonomous, it is indispensable to also have one's own economic independence, but it is not easy to obtain it. Even after years in Italy, many are unable to find a job that is stable enough or suited to their needs, as in the case of a disability. The difficulties in finding a job and a suitable contract can be linked to many reasons but for foreigners the risk of being exploited is very high, because when one needs to work but does not know the language or Italian laws well, one also accepts contracts that do not respect workers' rights.

"I did 12 hours a day and got €600 without rest because I needed the money and he exploited me. If a person can't speak Italian, doesn't know the laws, other people exploit you. I had to earn a little bit of money to send them home because I was the only one working in my family and I knew I was being exploited, but I couldn't go and work with Italians" (E., Fg_Pr_6).

Waiting and bureaucracy

Before being able to present one's application before the Commission, one often has to face long waits, even years, without updates, remaining in uncertainty and frustration. To obtain results and information, it is not enough to wait, but it is necessary to persevere and be lucky enough to meet the right people. Mistakes and delays due to complex bureaucracy significantly hinder access to fundamental rights, such as applying for citizenship, schooling or family reunification, but they also negatively affect smaller, everyday issues.

"After two and a half years, I don't have papers. I got my passport, but I'm still waiting for my residence permit, however it's too difficult a process for documents. So many days I went to the police station, so many days in Ciac, so many days in the municipality of Parma, finally a passport to participate in school trips" (M., Fg_Pr_1).

The comparison with other European countries

The reception and experience in Italy are often compared with what happened to the refugees themselves (or to their family members and/or acquaintances) in other European countries: they are often sought and desired destinations, with the aim of reuniting with family, friends or fellow countrymen. Sometimes, however, Italy also becomes a choice, dictated by economic circumstances or born after negative experiences in another country.

“Italians are very kind and polite. It’s not like others [...] If you want to live peacefully, live in Italy. Even if money is tight, it is not a problem” (M., Fg_Pr_6).



The support of friends and the community

The presence of a network of friendships and the possibility to confront and support each other in an equal relationship is a fundamental element for the success of the reception project and is a sign of true inclusion in the community. Friendships, both with other fellow countrymen and foreigners and with Italian citizens, were important in finding housing and providing support in small daily problems, such as school, work or bureaucratic issues. During the project, it is also important to take care of relationships with neighbours, people in the neighbourhood or work colleagues, because when they are positive, they contribute to creating a sense of well-being and belonging to the area.

“This reception gives me the opportunity to attend a cinema where they do different activities for both foreigners and Italians and I really like this and it distracts me” (K., Fg_Bo_5).

Racism and discrimination

As foreigners in Italy it can happen to be the object of discrimination. Occasionally one chooses not to give weight to the comments or looks one receives, but the problem becomes particularly relevant when interacting with real estate agencies or homeowners: appointments are cancelled for no real reason; owners do not trust them and others take advantage of them. Even in the work context one encounters racist comments and microaggressions and is often not judged on one's qualifications but only on one's origin, further hindering the integration process.

“At work I feel lonely, I hear words I don’t like. A few years ago a black girl there was just cleaning, these people think: what are you doing here? When one wants to do things but there is so much negativity around, sooner or later you are tired” (F., Fg_Pr_5).



Recommendations for agencies and operators in the reception system

1. **Implement individualised pathways:** Ensure a personalised approach that takes into account the specific needs of beneficiaries, considering variables such as cultural background, age, family composition and state of vulnerability.
2. **Promoting the person's wellbeing and health:** Taking care to promote a holistic approach to the wellbeing and health of each and every person. Working in close synergy with territorial public services and integrating psychological support services within reception projects, so as to address trauma, anxieties and difficulties related to migration paths and adaptation.
3. **Facilitating the learning of Italian:** Offering accessible language courses, adapted to different literacy levels and customised according to participants' needs, while also paying attention to families' reconciliation needs (e.g. by providing spaces for children so that mothers or fathers can profitably participate).
4. **Improving the quality of cohabitation:** Reduce overcrowding in centres and/or individual rooms in reception facilities and promote housing solutions that facilitate harmonious cohabitation, avoiding cultural and logistical tensions.
5. **Provide clear information:** Ensure that all beneficiaries have access from the outset to transparent information about their rights, available services and opportunities for employment and social integration.
6. **Open up to the territory:** Adopt an open, inclusive and welcoming approach not only towards beneficiaries but also towards local communities, favouring contact and participation of sensitive citizens, associations and any other component of society (including the economic and productive sectors) in reception, which must in any case avoid appearing as a 'bubble' outside ordinary social dynamics.
7. **Strengthen the training of operators:** Offer continuous training courses for operators not only on specific skills related to reception, but also on complementary topics such as intercultural mediation, empowerment, group management, empathic approach.
8. **Encourage the active participation of applicants and holders of protection in reception:** Consider the persons received as the real protagonists and directors of their paths, as well as being political actors to be recognised as having the capacity to intervene also on more general issues, related to reception and not only.



Recommendations for local institutional decision-makers

1. **Ensure widespread reception services:** Encourage reception models based on flats and small housing units, avoiding concentration in large centres which reduces the quality of life and the effectiveness of integration.
2. **Investing in public transport:** Strengthen connections in peripheral areas where reception centres are located, reducing isolation and facilitating access to essential services.
3. **Supporting school integration and adult education:** Ensuring that received minors have facilitated and supported access to education, with specific programmes for those with fragmented school experiences. Ensuring accessibility and quality of adult education pathways, enhancing the role of CPIAs and other training agencies.
4. **Promote access to autonomous housing solutions:** Promote the autonomous exit of the beneficiaries accepted, integrating them into the support, facilitation and housing mediation measures provided for citizens, also encouraging the private market not to implement discriminatory practices.
5. **Promote inter-institutional collaboration:** Set up working tables between social, educational, health and labour services to better coordinate responses to beneficiaries' needs.
6. **Involve local communities:** Promote awareness-raising initiatives and citizen involvement to foster social inclusion and combat stereotypes and discrimination.
7. **Create public occasions to give a voice to the protagonists of reception:** Activate so that refugees, operators, bodies involved in reception find space and legitimacy in local public debate and institutional contexts, even beyond 'ritual' occasions (e.g. World Refugee Day).



Recommendations for national institutional decision-makers

1. **Ensure safe and timely access to reception:** Give full effect to the right of each applicant for protection to have access to a dignified reception as soon as he/she arrives in Italy, regardless of the modality and place of arrival, according to the standards provided for by European legislation, avoiding undue waiting times that foster blackmail and marginality. This also applies to the transition from CAS to SAI reception, for protection holders.
2. **Extend reception times:** Review the maximum duration of reception programmes to make them adequate to the real needs of beneficiaries, avoiding premature interruptions that jeopardise paths to autonomy and restoring continuity between the asylum application phase and the post-recognition of protection.
3. **Reforming the management of CASs:** While waiting for the hoped-for overcoming of extraordinary centres, guarantee uniform minimum quality standards in all CASs, including legal protection and guidance, Italian language teaching, training and job orientation.
4. **Promote inclusive housing policies:** Introduce incentives for landlords who rent to beneficiaries of protection, counteracting housing discrimination phenomena.
5. **Simplify bureaucracy:** Reduce the time and steps to obtain basic documents such as residence permits and citizenship, minimising uncertainties and delays.
6. **Engage in policies to counter racism and social exclusion:** Promote active policies of awareness-raising, information, communication, joint activation by public and private actors, aimed at countering all forms of racism, discrimination, hate speech, induced hostility and fear.
7. **Activate co-programming and co-design of reception policies:** Include those directly involved and protagonists of reception in the definition of a concerted, informed and forward-looking planning of reception and social inclusion policies. Legitimise coordinations and networks involving protection and management bodies, as well as formal and informal refugee associations, also structurally integrating forms of listening and involvement also of applicants and holders of protection not organised in associations or other forms of representation.

