

# Refugees in Italy: a pilot study of their reception and integration process

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## Abstract

This paper represents the preliminary analysis of a pilot research carried out by CIR and the Department of social Studies of the University of Rome “Sapienza” (together with Italian non-profit organisations) on the level of integration of beneficiaries of international protection (both refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection) who had been living in Italy for at least 3 years. The pilot research described has been conducted under the Project “Le strade dell’integrazione” (The integration paths), co-financed by the European Union and the Italian Ministry of Interior under the European Refugee Fund 2010 – Action 2.1.A<sup>1</sup>. Individual interviews and focus groups have been carried out in 7 different Italian territories, involving both beneficiaries of international protection and operators working with them. Questionnaires have been administered at national level. The preliminary analysis presented in this paper refers to some territories and to the partial material available. In the conclusion, results are discussed and recommendations for the final analysis are offered.

**Keywords:** refugees, Italy, reception, integration.

## Introduction

In the last years, no in depth research including both a qualitative and a quantitative methodology has been carried out to investigate the situation of refugees in Italy and their integration process.

As a result, CIR - the Italian Council for Refugees, the Department of social Studies of the University of Rome “Sapienza” and Italian non-profit organisations (“Comitato per il Centro Sociale” - Caserta, and “Xenia” – Bologna) sought to fill this gap by conducting a pilot study. The research has been carried is a FER (European Fund for Refugees) project which involved refugees who had been living in Italy for at least 3 years. The 7 different Italian territories targeted were Rome, Turin, Bologna, Lecce, Catania, Badolato and Caserta.

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<sup>1</sup> Project co-financed by:

European Union



Ministero dell’interno, Italia



European Refugee Fund 2010 – Action 2.1.A

The pilot research has different aims. First, to understand the situation of refugees in the Italian context according the areas of: accommodation, work, social integration, health and education; second, to identify “best practices” through an analysis of the various services to improve the policies; third, to plan targeted interventions which on the one hand answer the real needs of beneficiaries of international protection and, on the other, avoid economic and resources’ wastes; last, how these services influence the integration process of refugees.

## **Methodology**

The study consisted of a descriptive-explorative approach which involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Indeed, three different instruments were adopted for the purposes of the study: a quantitative questionnaire, an in-depth semi-structured individual interview and a focus group. While the quantitative questionnaire have been administered at national level (with an on-line version and a paper-based one) the other methods were explored in each of the 7 territories (Rome, Turin, Bologna, Lecce, Catania, Badolato and Caserta).

For the objectives of this paper only the qualitative methods are going to be presented and discussed.

The interviews consisted of stimulus-questions regarding various areas: accommodation, work, social integration, health, education, discrimination, the concept of integration and suggestions for best practices. The people interviewed were both refugees living in Italy for at least 3 years and operators working with them at different levels: legal, social, psychological, medical and wellbeing.

Accordingly, the focus groups included both operators and refugees, forming a group of minimum 5 people and maximum of 15, depending on the realities involved. In this occasion, the participants involved (whose majority had previously completed the individual interview) were asked to discuss the same thematic areas of the interviews.

In this study only the qualitative part of the research is argued and in particular the focus is on the interviews gathered in Rome and all the focus groups across Italy.

## **Analysis and Results**

The involvement of both refugees and operators who work with them seemed to be essential in order to give voice to two different perspectives on the situation of refugees in Italy: on the one hand, the needs of the beneficiaries (the recipients of services and interventions) and, on the other, of those who manage and operate in the services offered them. As a result, for the purposes of the analysis, considering the mirror viewpoints of these two groups of participants allowed a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of refugees in Italy.

The analysis and results section is structurally divided into 2 sections: the interviews in Rome and the focus groups in the 7 Italian territories.

Regarding the interviews, it seems important to underline that not only the perspectives of refugees and the operators agreed on the majority of the topics, but also they also brought the same concepts and contents in answering the questions.

Specifically, it appears reasonable to discuss the analysis and the results of the interviews conducted in Rome to both refugees and operators according to the thematic areas.

- The concept of integration

The concept of integration has been defined by most participants, both operators and refugees, in terms of having a job, an accommodation, friends, rights, being part of the society (and therefore familiar with the culture) and speaking the language of the host country. This definition is in line with the academic definition available in the literature<sup>2</sup>, which describes these factors as the main aspects and indicators of people who have integrated in a new society. Participants underlined the idea that integration is a process rather than a status or an achievement and that every person constantly negotiates and develops this process. In addition, it is remarkable to highlight how the interviewees pointed out that this process is a bi-directional process which sees two actors: on the one hand the refugees who need to actively participate in the dialogue of integration and, on the other hand, the Italian society which has to make their actions possible and interact in the dialogue with asylum seekers.

- Work

Work represents, according to the people interviewed, the most important aspect of refugees' life. This is due to the centrality and the function that it serves: in fact, having a job, and therefore earning a salary, enables people to fulfil the other aspects of their lives such as finding an accommodation, providing themselves with food requirements and sustaining the living necessities. It seems possible to argue that the interviews emphasised how the process of autonomy and self-realisation with a new life in a new country starts with employment. Unfortunately, despite the importance placed on work, many problems have also been arisen by participants regarding this topic. First, the lack of job positions due to the global economic crisis and the particular socio-political situation in Italy. Second, the inaccessibility to the job market due to the

<sup>2</sup> Entzinger, H. and Biezeveld, R. (2003). *Benchmarking in Immigrant Integration: Report for the European Commission Immigration and Asylum Committee*. Rotterdam: European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations.

Heckmann, F. (1999). *Integration Policies in Europe: National differences or convergence?* EFMS Paper Nr. 33.

Penninx, R. (2004). *Integration policies for Europe's immigrants: performance, conditions and challenges*. An expert paper for the Sachverständigenrat für Zuwanderung und Integration.

WODC (2004). *De ontwikkeling van een integratiekaart*. The Hague: WODC/Ministry of Justice.

discriminatory attitude towards refugees (people reported that refugees are perceived by the Italian society as “strangers”, meaning being just not Italian. In this regard, lack of information, biased knowledge, prejudice and discrimination play a key role in this). Third, the request, by employees, of only specific jobs in which they are willing to hire refugees: unqualified and unskilled ones such as storekeeper, worker, carer for aged people, carpenter, cleaning lady, etc.. It seems possible to argue that despite some refugees are highly qualified, skilled and experienced in different professions (for example engineers, geologist, teachers, etc..) it is extremely difficult for them to work in these fields. As a consequence, they are obliged to accept degraded and less-paid jobs in order to survive. Regarding this, a core issue has been exposed: the one that the Italian government does not easily recognise the degrees and diplomas obtained in foreign countries; this automatically select refugees, regardless their level of education, for the jobs mentioned above. However, some refugees have also reported that Italy offered them the occasion to learn new skills for a profession (such as hairdressers, aesthetician, etc..) and find a temporary job in that field.

Moreover, one of the most problematic aspect of working is the so called “black-job market”: by this term it is meant a job which has not an official and regular contract. This phenomenon represents a reality in Italy which involves not only asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and newcomers in general, but Italians too. Interviewees described that in most of the cases a black-work is the only possible reality to find a job and sustain somehow themselves. In this circumstance the working conditions are: to be underpaid, to work more than 8 hours and not having the job rights recognised (such as illness, retirement and holiday, etc). All these considerations were agreed among beneficiaries of international protection and operators; in addition, operators showed how it is difficult for them to work in this context, trying to create a link between employers and beneficiaries of international protection and helping the latter in their job hunting.

#### - Accommodation

The dimension of accommodation results to be strictly dependant on work. In fact, the scenario is that if beneficiaries of international protection do not work (and consequently cannot afford to pay a rent) they are hosted by one of the centres available (such as CARITAS, SPRAR, ONLUS etc..) or by friends most of the times and rarely members of the family. In other cases they live in “occupied houses” (a house illegally resided) or as homeless. On the contrary, if refugees work and can afford paying a rent they usually share a flat with other people (most of the times with other refugees or co-nationals, or immigrants). In this case the problems identified are: finding a landlord willing to rent a flat to beneficiaries of international protection, getting a regular rent contract and finding housemates. Again in this situation the

role of the operators is to help beneficiaries of international protection and mediate between them and the renters.

On the contrary, some beneficiaries of international protection and operators witnessed that some persons do have a regular contract for their rent and have also been able to bring their relatives (generally wife/husband and children, but sometimes other relatives such as cousins, sons/sister, mother, father, etc..) from abroad.

- Social integration and discrimination

Both operators and refugees stated how it is difficult for beneficiaries of international protection to integrate in the Italian society. This is caused by different factors, as mentioned above, for example biased knowledge about refugees, lack of information about the differences among immigrants, refugees and economic migrants, prejudice and discrimination. Regarding the latter, the topic was deepened in the interviews and the analysis revealed that refugees are discriminated in all the main contexts: work, accommodation and social life. The factors by which they are discriminated are diverse, however the most important one is the skin colour. Indeed, both refugees and operators claimed how black people suffered of being associated with negative characteristics such as being a thief, dirty, aggressive and dangerous. The attitudes Italians show towards them are the ones of reluctance, distrust, estrangement and isolation. Furthermore, interviewees, either beneficiaries of international protection (both blacks and non blacks) or operators reported how the darker the skin the hardest it was to face discrimination. Another problematic aspect that interfered in the relationship between beneficiaries of international protection and the Italian society was stated to be the culture of origin. In fact, often participants pointed out that Italian showed disrespect and false myths in regards to the traditions and ways of living of foreigners' natives countries. On the contrary, only few beneficiaries of international protection indicated to have contact with Italians outside the work environment and that had friend- relationships with natives.

- Education

Education for beneficiaries of international protection in Italy largely and mainly consists of professional courses. Despite the fact that this training opportunities represent a chance to learn new skills and become competent in some fields, some problematic nodes have been acknowledged also in this area. As a result, the main issues brought concerned: first, not considering refugees' capabilities, competencies, education and preference towards certain fields; second, several times the courses did not match the needs of the job market and consequently it was difficult for beneficiaries of international protection to find a job; third, sometimes the course was too theoretical and not practical which resulted not compatible with the contingency of finding a job and facing the workload to do.

On the other hand, the other type of courses provided to beneficiaries of international protection were the language ones. Regarding these, in some cases they have been evaluated as helpful for learning the language and in some others negative aspects have been pointed out: the big number of participants attending the course, the timetable (which overlapped with working hours) and the disorganised progress of the course (for example people reported that the teacher was a different person each time).

- Suggestions for best practices

The suggestions that operators and beneficiaries of international protection recommended for improving the system and the conditions were: a mediation job and accommodation hunting, attendance of language course as soon as people arrive in Italy; educational programs for Italians in various contexts (such as schools, hospitals, etc...) in order to fight discrimination and inform people about beneficiaries of international protection and their cultures; improving beneficiaries of international protection living condition in CARA (Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers) such as allocating a few people for each room and not as many as 10 sometimes, having availability of cultural and linguistic mediators (which not always were present), being careful that operators treat refugees with respect and politeness; and, last, making the bureaucracy faster and easier to be recognised as a beneficiaries of international protection.

Likewise the interviews, also the focus groups are presented and examined according to the thematic areas. In this case the focus groups are also compared, highlighting similarities and differences among them.

Firstly, the reason and the importance for choosing the cities of Rome, Turin, Bologna, Lecce, Catania, Badolato and Caserta lays in the objective of gathering a comprehensive picture of the situation of beneficiaries of international protection in Italy. Indeed, these 7 territories involved in the study are typified by specific characteristics and they represent the National asylum system.

In fact, these cities are representative for various reasons: for geographical distribution (they are spread across Italy from north to south. Including islands); for dimensions (metropolitan cities, medium-size cities and small towns); for services demanded to foster the integration of refugees starting from very structured services such as the one of Turin, those which are in the process of being structured (for example Bologna), proceeding with others which are characterised by a strong informal system (Caserta and Rome), to conclude with the ones which are involved in the SPRAR system (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) as in the case of Badolato, Lecce and Catania.

Although these differences, all the territories are particularly significant in terms of presence of refugees and reception/integration strategies.

Regarding the city of Rome, pretty much the same issues and topics of the interviews arose in the focus group, as all the participants were previously interviewed. Therefore, the results of the analysis are not reported once again in this section. Rather, a comparison between this city and the others is presented in those cases in which they differ significantly.

- Work

*Caserta*: This city is strongly typified by black-work and the vast unemployment of beneficiaries of international protection. In addition, Caserta is characterised by a particular situation called “Califfo”. With this name people mean the scenario in which refugees stand in the streets at particular “meeting points” since sunrise and wait for some natives, employers, to pick them up and bring them to work for a day. It is nearly impossible to find a job and the only opportunities are with a day-by-day underpaid and tiring work, most of the times in the agricultural or agricultural fields.

*Badolato*: In this city most of the beneficiaries of international protection who participated in the focus group had a job. However, also in this context black-work and unemployment are the core aspects of the working situation.

*Catania*: 2 of the 3 beneficiaries of international protection involved in the study had a job, although they did not have a regular contract, working much more hours than the standards and earning less than expected.

*Lecce*: The working conditions of beneficiaries of international protection did not differ much from those in the other cities. Unemployment and black-work remain the main realities, although there are some cases of beneficiaries of international protection who are employed.

- Accommodation

*Caserta*: According to accommodation Caserta represents a very difficult reality: in fact, in the focus group the main factor that emerged was the one of the so called “Shaolin”. Shaolin is an area with abandoned buildings where refugees live, obliged to pay a rent. In this context a lot of people reside in the main place and the hygienic and living conditions such as water, gas and electricity are below decent standards.

*Badolato*: Being a small town, offers a completely different scenario: indeed, here participants reported that although it is difficult for refugees to pay a rent (because it is not easy to find a job), some of them found an accommodation, most of the times shared with other a beneficiaries of international protection Also, in some cases

natives have voluntarily hosted refugees in difficulties. It seems possible to say that in this context the small size of the city and the interpersonal interactions have made possible to know each other and reduce the forms of prejudice and discrimination.

*Catania:* As a city of the south of Italy, offers the chance of cheaper costs of life, including accommodation. This represents an advantage because refugees are more capable of paying their rent and the participants of the focus group lived in apartments. One of them had also brought his family from the country of origin.

*Lecce:* The scenario of Lecce is very similar to the one of Badolato and Catania but in addition a specific situation takes place in this city: some ethnic groups, especially the one of refugees from Sri Lanka were spontaneously organised like a reception system. Specifically what was reported to happen in this context is that those beneficiaries of international protection and families living in Italy for quite a long time were hosting and offering help to the newcomers, providing them with all the possible support: information, material help (food, accommodation, clothes, etc..), social and psychological.

#### - Health

The area of health, a crucial issue in understanding the situation of refugees in Italy, emerged only in some circumstances. In fact, this aspect was strictly related to the working conditions and the cities where this topic arose were these were relatively extreme.

*Caserta and Lecce:* In these two cities the topic of health was directly and unmistakably related to the working condition and to accidents happened in the workplace. Many refugees reported of having had injuries due to the irregular conditions of their work (extra hours, safety procedures below the standards, physical stress, etc..). Moreover, in most cases, because the job was a black-work, refugees were denied of all their rights in these circumstances.

#### - Social integration and discrimination

*Caserta:* Represents an exception regarding discrimination and social integration as there is practically no contact with natives despite the job opportunities in the workplace. Furthermore, some episodes of racial harassment have been described.

*Badolato:* According to the topics of discrimination and social integration the particular reality of the city of Badolato has been previously described.

*Catania and Lecce:* These two cities are similar for description of discriminatory attitudes towards refugees and their integration in the society of settlement. In particular, despite the fact that the scenario cannot be defined as hostile to beneficiaries of



international protection, some common problems in the social area are: distrust in renting apartments to non Italians, preference to hire nationals over refugees and wrong beliefs about their ethnic groups. However, some cases of social integration are also present, with refugees being accepted in the Italian society and having good relationships with Italians.

It seems important to mention that despite the importance of the results and the interesting aspects emerged, the present paper presents a preliminary analysis which will be further explored as soon as the rest of the data collected will be available. In addition, a supplementary investigation in the light of the upcoming material would give a more realist and comprehensive picture of the situation.

In conclusion, the strengths of this study, considering its preliminary analysis and results, can be recognised in: above all representing the first attempt to understand the situation of refugees in Italy according to the main areas of living: work, education, accommodation, health, social integration and education; second, in identifying and providing suggestions for “best practices” according to both refugees’ and operators’ experiences; third, in offering a pilot study on which it would be possible to build further studies on these topics.

However, some limitations of the study need to be mentioned: first, the design and methodology of the study concerned mainly a descriptive-exploratory approach, while including also a specific quantitative approach would have provided important data that, integrated with the qualitative ones, would have offered a more complete picture of the phenomenon. Second, the relatively small sample size: a broader one would have allowed more information and a more realistic description of the situation.

To conclude, despite the importance of this pilot study further research is need to better understand the phenomenon of refugees in Italy, to deepen the analysis of some topics and to improve the intervention strategies of answering asylum seekers’ needs.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the important presence of refugees in Italy, little research is available on beneficiaries of international protection integration process in this country. Moreover, it seems important, for different reasons, to gather a better understanding of the processes in which refugees are involved and their conditions after living in Italy for years. These reasons can be identified in the evaluation of refugees’ living conditions according to accommodation, work, social integration, health and education; the identification of “best practices” and the planning of targeted interventions for beneficiaries of international protection. Therefore, the present research aimed

to investigated the situation of refugees in Italy according to different areas: work, accommodation, social integration and health. Interviews were conducted in Rome and focus groups in 7 territories across Italy with both refugees and operators who work with them. Results of the interviews revealed that according to the area of work the main problems are embodied by unemployment and black-work (and its related consequences such as underpaid work and extra hours of work). However, some possibilities in specific sectors are available for refugees.

The area of accommodation was described as being strictly connected to the one of work with expensive rents and distrust in giving a flat to asylum seekers. On the other side, some internationally-protected people succeeded in living by themselves and, in some cases, with their children and spouse. According to the area of social integration and discrimination, despite some positive examples of interpersonal relationships with Italians, the majority of participants pointed out the high level of discrimination and prejudice that jeopardise their acceptance by the Italian society. The area of education highlights pros and cons of the professional and linguistic courses offered to refugees. For example pros are that people learn the language of the host country and gain new skills and competences to enter the job market; while cons are that these courses could be more efficient and better organised. Last, the suggestions for best practices recommended by operators and refugees can be identified in improving the system and the conditions of refugees (for example with educational programs for decreasing discrimination, attendance of language course as soon as people arrive in Italy, being careful that operators treat refugees with respect and politeness, etc..) and in making the bureaucracy faster.

On the other hand, results of the focus groups revealed that the cities had similarities and differences among them according to the areas of investigation. Specifically, according to the work, the cities present on the one hand cases of employment (although black-work embodies the main obstacle and problem) and on the other, a percentage of unemployed people. Caserta and its specific reality of “Califfo” represents a special case in this context. Regarding accommodation the focus groups revealed two opposite realities: the one of Caserta with the “Shaolin” case and the one of Badolato with natives hosting refugees in many occasions. Regarding to discrimination and social integration, again Casert and Badolato mirror two completely different scenarios: on the one hand the lack of contact or the high level of racial harassment and, on the other hand, the success of intercultural encounters and the good relationships among natives and refugees. According to the topic of health, the issues brought were the physical injuries strictly related to the black-work and the consequent denial of rights.

The main strengths of this research consisted in being the first attempt to investigate the phenomenon of refugees in the Italian context in a broad perspective and in

offering the basis for future and more detailed studies. Also, limitations in terms of research design and methods were presented.

In conclusion, it is recommended to analyse the data in comparison with the upcoming ones collected in a second moment and to further explore these issues to be better aware of the dynamics involved in the process of integration of refugees and to better answer their needs through services and intervention projects.

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