

FOCUS GROUP ON INTEGRATION

FINAL REPORT



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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Final report

Introduction

As a result of new conflicts and ongoing ten-year global crises, the number of refugees and internally displaced people has grown exponentially, rising to 65 million¹ by the end of 2015. Most refugees and internally displaced people are hosted in countries neighboring conflict areas. This international situation is also impacting on Europe, although less significantly. In Italy, the number of beneficiaries of international protection has also considerably increased over the last three years. According to figures published by the National Commission, between 2011 and 2015, 98,272 applicants were granted some form of protection.

UNHCR sees integration as one of the possible durable solutions to refugee issues, together with resettlement and voluntary return to the country of origin in safe and dignified conditions. For this reason, UNHCR considers integration a key area of the asylum system.

Integration remains one of the main problem areas in the Italian asylum system. The economic crisis of the last few years and the cuts to the welfare system have increased integration problems for beneficiaries of international protection. Moreover, the overlapping of responsibilities between various institutional actors, both at national and local level, further complicates planning and managing of measures to promote integration processes.

Art. 1, paragraph 1, letter u) of Legislative Decree No. 18 of 21 February 2014, amending Art. 29 of Legislative Decree No. 251 of 19 November 2007, provides that the National Coordinating Board shall adopt a “National Plan defining lines of action to achieve the effective integration of beneficiaries of international protection”. The Plan shall be adopted every two years, unless a shorter deadline needs to be met. The regulation also states that UNHCR shall participate in the National Board when the Plan is being drafted.

In view of the drafting of the Plan and considering the significant impact it can have on devising measures to support inclusion processes in the near future, UNHCR has decided to promote active participation activities for refugees, in order to collect their views and proposals on integration. To this end, focus groups involving refugees were organized throughout Italy.

This report will present what emerged from the focus groups and the recommendations accordingly made by UNHCR. Far from being an overall and exhaustive analysis and assessment of the level of integration among beneficiaries of international protection, it aims at making a valuable contribution to the preparation of integration-oriented policies and programmes in the future.

¹ UNHCR *Global trends. Forced displacement in 2015*, June 2016.

1. DEFINING INTEGRATION

As with all complex phenomena, it is difficult to give an unambiguous, commonly agreed and thorough definition of integration.

Given the manifold dynamics and aspects characterizing integration, UNHCR is of the view that integration should be understood as the result of a “dynamic and well-constructed two-way process”, which actively involves beneficiaries of protection – who can retain their cultural identity, but must nonetheless be willing to integrate – as well as communities and public institutions, tasked with developing policies focused on the needs of a heterogeneous population.

The integration process thus entails three dimensions, related to three major areas:

- a legal dimension, whereby beneficiaries of protection should be granted rights broadly comparable to those belonging to citizens. The full enjoyment of civil rights and liberties, such as access to education, employment, social and health services, possession of identity and travel documents, and the fundamental right to family reunification, are essential prerequisites to start a new life, as is the acquisition of national citizenship in the host country, after an appropriate period of time;
- an economic dimension, as having a job means being able to support oneself and one’s own family. Beneficiaries of protection need to access the labor market in accordance with their skills, experience and aspirations, so that they can best contribute also to the economy of the country of asylum;
- a socio-cultural dimension, as integration occurs when beneficiaries of protection adapt to the culture of the country of asylum and, at the same time, the host community encourages and welcomes this process, by rejecting and combating discrimination and by promoting the participation of beneficiaries in the social life of the country.

2. METHODOLOGY

According to UNHCR, refugees should be enabled to express their needs and actively participate in decisions affecting their lives². Their involvement in identifying opportunities and gaps as well as in defining strategies and policies is also an important tool for their own empowerment.

Such participatory assessment can be built through different tools. In relation to the objectives outlined in the above introduction, UNHCR deemed that conducting focus groups was the most appropriate tool to ensure the participation of beneficiaries of international protection and enhance their interaction.

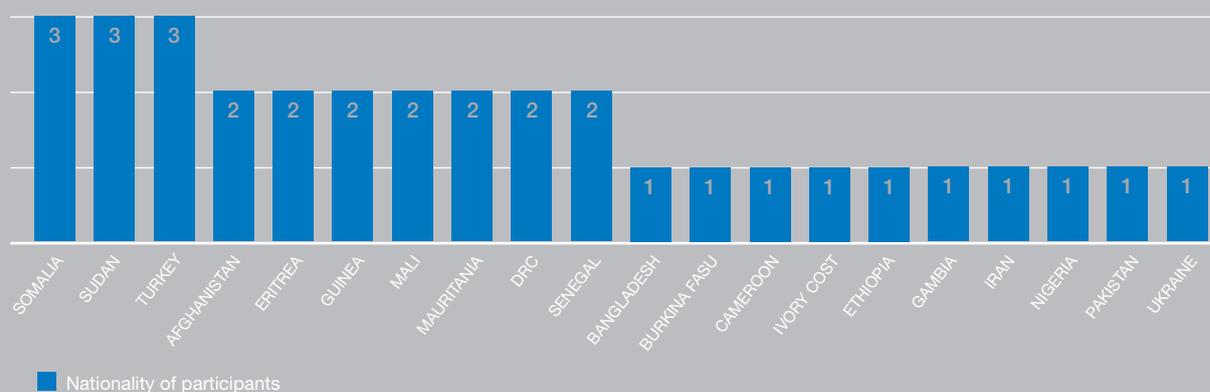
² UNHCR, *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in the Operations*, May 2006.

As Italy is characterized by a great regional variety, focus groups were conducted in different geographical areas. In particular, two focus groups were held in Rome (one with refugees and one with refugee women), one in Turin and another one in Lamezia Terme, attended by refugees from various parts of Calabria.

In total, 33 beneficiaries of protection (24 men and 9 women) took part in the focus groups. Refugees were contacted with the help of many associations and NGOs working in the field of refugee assistance. Two selection criteria were adopted: residence in Italy for a number of years, so to have significant evidence of inclusion processes in Italian society; a good knowledge of Italian, to ensure a fruitful interaction between all participants. In order to obtain more details on the socio-biographical background of beneficiaries of international protection, participants were asked to complete a short anonymous questionnaire; this, however, did not necessarily provide a comprehensive picture of the refugee population in Italy.

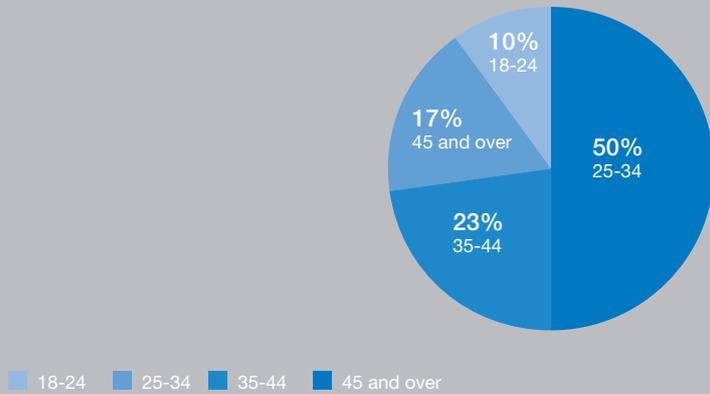
The target group aimed at reflecting the complexity and great diversity of beneficiaries of international protection residing in Italy, with participants coming from 20 different countries. The three most represented countries were Somalia, Sudan and Turkey, with three refugees each.

TABLE 1_ Nationality of participants in focus groups



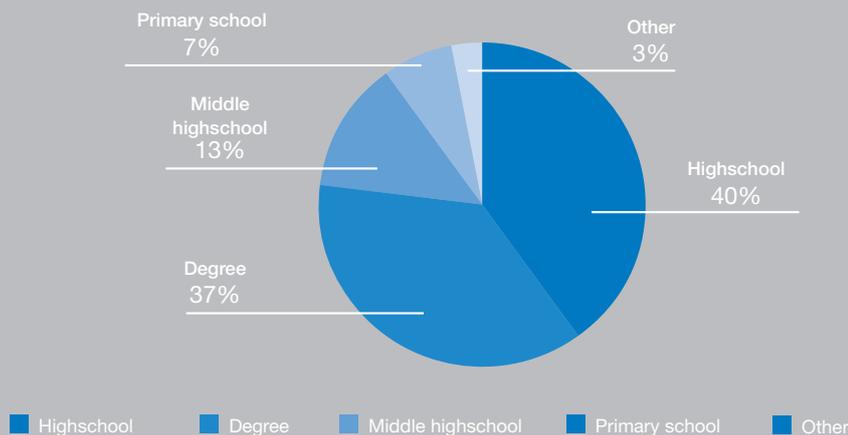
Other relevant factors were also considered such as gender and age (Age, Gender and Diversity Approach). Out of four focus groups, one was specifically aimed at refugee women, while efforts were made to ensure that refugees from different age groups participated in all four focus groups.

TABLE 2 _Age of participants in focus groups



The average level of education was particularly high. About 37% of beneficiaries of international protection said they had graduated in Italy or in their country of origin; 40% of them had a high school diploma, while only 20% among beneficiaries had achieved a lower level of education. Data relating to education differ significantly from those shown in other reports, where the target group was much larger than in the focus groups³.

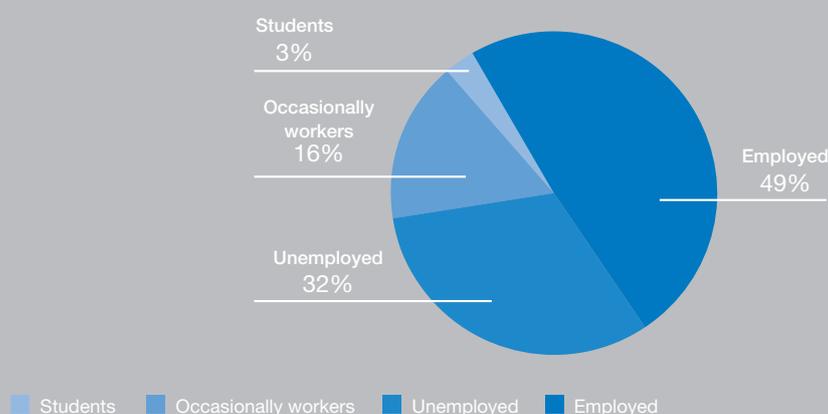
TABLE 3 _Qualifications of participants in focus groups



Although the average level of education was high, this was not matched by employment rates, which were rather low, also considering the participants' prolonged stay in Italy.

³ The SPRAR Annual Report 2015, for example, shows that 52% of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection had an elementary or lower education level. SPRAR, Annual Report 2015, June 2016, page 43.

TABLE 4 _ Employment situation of participants in focus groups



During the focus groups, approximately 32% of 33 participants reported being unemployed, while another 16% stated they work only occasionally, which further proves how difficult social inclusion is for refugees in Italy. Only 49% said they have a job. Data are almost homogeneous among male and female refugees.

As for the jobs mentioned, many work in the asylum system itself; due to recent increases in asylum claims, many refugees who have been living in Italy for several years work as cultural mediators and interpreters, in reception centres or within Territorial Commissions. Instead, those who do not work in the asylum system generally have lower-income jobs than what they could aspire to in light of their qualifications. Refugee women are commonly employed in domestic or care work, similarly to migrant women who arrive in Italy for work.

3. GENERAL REMARKS

The discussions held during the four focus groups revealed that all participants wished to actively participate in Italian society. What stood out most was indeed their strong willingness to distance themselves from assistance pathways and assert their own abilities and skills, thus contributing to the development of the host community towards which many already share a sense of belonging. Such willingness, however, is often hampered by the objective difficulties they encounter when they find themselves without support and resources, at the end of their time in the reception system. Lack of income, accommodation and social network has forced many to spend long periods in informal settlements or in makeshift shelters, where the living conditions are extremely difficult. Some of them continue to live in such conditions. In this context, most refugees see integration as a difficult goal to reach.

Although participants in the focus groups came from various countries, had different levels of education and had different experiences in Italy -both while in reception and during the early integration phase- some key issues were identified in all groups. The discussion mainly focused on these issues.

- Everyone highlighted the difficulty in achieving even a minimum level of economic independence and in regaining a reasonable standard of living. While being aware that this is not the only factor bringing about real social inclusion, most refugees strongly emphasized that employment is an essential pre-requisite to be integrated into the host community. Each participant highlighted how difficult it is to find a permanent job, even today, as well as to support oneself and one's own family and to find decent housing. These difficulties are greater for women, especially when they are single mothers with children.

“We are refugees, no one wants to leave his own country; we escaped because of a problem with the government, we escaped to avoid dying, to live here. And we got a document, but without a house and a job, it's tough”.

- Many participants pointed out that the reception phase, which can last from a few months up to a couple of years, is a crucial period to acquire the necessary tools (language, vocational training, cultural and service orientation) to undertake a journey leading to integration. With regard to this, experiences differed significantly among those who enjoyed a positive period in reception centers, where adequate standards were ensured, and those who, instead, were hosted in places offering unsatisfactory services.
- Another issue highlighted by many participants was the lack of post-reception support for beneficiaries of protection upon leaving reception facilities. This is even more problematic for those who could not stay in a second-line reception SPRAR facility and had to leave the CARA (First Line Reception Centres) immediately after they were recognized international protection.
- Furthermore, many refugees expressed the need for increased contacts with Italians to foster mutual acquaintance. Many highlighted that, in order to strengthen interaction, it would be important to facilitate the inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection in the local social context, through participation in voluntary, cultural or sports activities together with Italian citizens.

Alongside these core issues, however, other issues were addressed differently, in line with specific territorial realities.

During the focus group held in Calabria, for example, the issue of secondary movements to other countries emerged as a major theme, contrary to what occurred during other focus groups: participants reported experiences of friends and acquaintances with whom they had lived in first-line reception centres. In most cases, persons had moved onward to other countries due to poor employment prospects. On the other hand, in southern Italy, the housing problem appeared to be less urgent than in other places in Italy.

During the focus groups held in Rome and Turin, the fact that metropolitan areas attract people was highlighted; indeed, many had moved to the cities after periods spent in southern Italy. On the other hand, however, difficulties in finding decent housing and in obtaining a residence permit were also pointed out. Many emphasized that when they left the reception centre where they had been

accommodate and moved to another city, it was difficult to obtain legal residence due to the lack of stable accommodation.

During all focus groups, situations of serious labor exploitation were consistently discussed; in some cases, participants shared first-hand experiences, in other cases they reported situations experienced by friends or acquaintances.

4. IMPACT OF RECEPTION ON INTEGRATION PROCESSES

For asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, the reception phase is a great opportunity to acquire the necessary tools for their future inclusion into Italian society. Therefore, making the most of this period and providing appropriate services and activities, is strategic to any integration policy.

The length of stay in reception facilities, however, differs from case to case. Asylum-seekers lacking adequate means have the right to access the reception system pending the outcome of the refugee status determination procedure, the duration of which can vary significantly depending on the period, the location and the appeals proceedings a claim may go through.

Many refugees pointed out that prolonged stay in reception facilities pending a final decision on their asylum claim has an extremely significant impact also from a psychological point of view, leading to lower expectations for the future and, consequently, to a lower investment of time and efforts in a concrete integration path.

“Those who have documents cannot perceive this thing, cannot understand these feelings. It is a mental torture for those who wait ages to get a piece of paper, to be able to live like a human being”.

Refugees themselves emphasized how important it would be for applicants to make profitable use of time, also in view of their future integration, by being encouraged to undertake vocational training courses or being involved in voluntary, sports or cultural activities.

“An immigrant who comes here remains inactive for nearly two years. This type of reception is an obstacle. (...) An immigrant should work, also for the community, for instance cleaning streets, lakes, things that no one does. Collaborating in this way is good, because work means growth. Work means growth”.

While reception is a right for all asylum-seekers without adequate means, only those who manage to be included in a SPRAR project – where only few places are available- can live in a reception centres

for up to six months after they are granted protection. As pointed out by participants in the focus groups, this is a key opportunity to start a path leading to integration.

“What I have seen is that not everyone has such luck, not everyone has this chance. When I was in the centre (a CARA centre, ed.) and I was about to leave, I knew already that I would go to a second-line reception centre and it was a real privilege. I don’t know if things have changed now, but in the past only one out of a hundred people could go to a SPRAR centre. For me it was very useful. I think that without the SPRAR project I would be a tramp somewhere in Europe now; certainly, I would not be here studying at the University of Calabria. I would not have made it on my own, that’s for sure”.

On the contrary, lack of access to a second-line reception facility has forced many to spend long periods in the streets or in precarious housing conditions which have made independence particularly difficult to achieve, if not totally impossible.

“It’s a real thing, let’s say. When I arrived in Italy, I went to Trapani. (...) I applied to the Commission within a month and I was given the permit to stay. After that, I was thrown out of the centre - not just me, other people too. I didn’t even speak a word of Italian, where could we go? (...). I mean, I don’t have a family here, where can I go? (...) There were also children, pregnant women, old people and even young people like us. There was no other place to stay, we were just given the ticket to Rome”.

Many refugees also highlighted that reception standards differ considerably among facilities. In some cases, services provided are particularly inadequate to support refugees’ social inclusion, and in extreme cases it is just a mere provision of assistance.

The quality of reception services varies according to the type of facility a person is sent to (tents, reception facilities or flats) and to the expertise of the managing entity. This variety affects the quality of life of people accommodated; likewise, differences among managing entities inevitably have an impact on the quality of the services provided, impacting on an individual’s integration process. Currently, allocation procedures are carried out on a totally random basis, mainly depending on the availability of places.

“If you are lucky you go to a centre where you are helped. But you can also go to a centre where you have three meals a day and a place to sleep. A bed and that’s it. If you go there, in two months, or within a year, you are again out in the streets. And what did you do during that year? Nothing. You didn’t learn the language, you did nothing”.

Many participants discussed the need for reception standards to be upgraded and harmonized; they argued that it is particularly important to strengthen monitoring mechanisms, adequately sanctioning facilities failing to provide adequate services.

“We have made this proposal, and we sincerely hope that one day it can become real: centres should be monitored; those where there are abuses should be closed down, while better ones should be re-opened and maybe even placed at the same level, because this would help a lot. We are linguistic mediators and we hear people saying: “Oh, the other centre is better, I want to go there’. It’s not fair. Centres should be all the same”.

Lastly, a significant issue raised by refugee women is the need for a more sensitive approach to gender issues within the asylum system, since many of them underwent traumatic experiences during their journey to Italy.

“Women in particular must be better dealt with, from a health and linguistic point of view, also because these women – I don’t mean all of them, but most of them - arrive with really serious problems”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that all beneficiaries of international protection who are destitute are allowed access to suitable reception conditions for a minimum of six months after having been recognized international protection. This period, to be renewed in specific cases, should be aimed at supporting refugees in the early phases of their integration into Italian society. Beneficiaries of international protection should be guided and supported in undertaking the pathway which is best suited to their skills and aspirations, in order to quickly gain independence.

UNHCR recommends that necessary measures be implemented to ensure that the refugee status determination procedure is faster, both in the first administrative phase and in any subsequent judicial phases, while providing all necessary guarantees for an adequate assessment of each applicant’s protection needs.

UNHCR recommends the control and monitoring system be strengthened by standardizing the methodology used by competent authorities, paying attention not only to material reception conditions, but also to services provided, particularly those related to integration, and taking into account the specific situation of people with special needs. Furthermore, UNHCR recommends that the monitoring system include mechanisms for the consultation and active participation of asylum-seekers as well as a sanctioning system based on objective and verifiable parameters.

UNHCR recommends that, pending the outcome of the refugee status determination procedure, applicants can either acquire tools facilitating their integration or be re-integrated in case of return to their country of origin.

5. TEACHING ITALIAN

Many refugees participating in the focus groups highlighted that a key prerequisite for integration is learning Italian as soon as possible. Everyone argued that effective interaction with local people is the starting point to integrate into society.

“Those who want to remain here in Italy must learn the language, to be understood by Italian people. If I want to talk to her and she doesn’t understand what I’m saying, then we become strangers. But if I can talk, then there is understanding”.

Knowledge of Italian is also a practical, sometimes essential, necessity, in order to access employment and fundamental services and to effectively exercise one’s rights.

“If I cannot write or read (in Italian Ed.), how can I find out about my rights? First of all, children must be helped to go to school, to study”.

In emphasizing the importance of knowing the language, participants argued that each asylum-seeker should primarily attend Italian classes. To this end, some of them discussed whether some incentives should be given to attend classes provided for in the context of the reception project, even considering to withhold other reception benefits should a person fail to attend educational activities.

“Refugees must know their duties, at least a little bit (...) and if you go to school your right is fulfilled. But if you don’t go to school, if you don’t learn, if you don’t follow the programme of the day, you have to be left out”.

Many refugees focused on how to make courses more effective and enhance learning. Some pointed out that often teaching - in some cases done by volunteers lacking specific training - does not prove satisfactory, causing difficulties and sometimes frustrating the expectations of those who face this complex process with great motivation. Discussion on this point was very intense in all focus groups, resulting in a variety of proposals that do not necessarily conflict. Some focused on the fact that staying in reception centres should be organized in such a way as to encourage applicants to learn Italian as soon as possible and prevent them from interacting exclusively with their national community or with people sharing the same mother tongue, especially in collective centres. For this reason, groups coming from the same country or having a common language should not be allocated to the same center. As much as possible, centres should instead promote external activities, possibly in contact with local communities, to stimulate interaction in Italian.

“Yes, school is fundamental. However, to improve, to speed up the user’s linguistic ability, the starting point is the reception centre. We all want to live in a community. But I think the

strategy is wrong. I think integration starts there, in rooms: you should not group together only French-speaking people, because as they have a common language, they will not speak in Italian. You need to find other ways: through music, through art, through sport, going out. This is where I think your speaking skills can quickly improve. You can go to school, learning 'I am, you are', but when you go home, and you speak only French, the ten hours you spent in school are useless. But if you go back to your room (...) you must make an effort, because Italian is the language you will use in the future".

According to other refugees, language teaching should take place within the reception facilities only in an initial phase, while later on courses should be organized in external facilities, to ensure that applicants have regular contacts with Italian speakers.

“I think that, in the first phase, teaching in reception centres should never exceed three months. In the second phase, Italian is taught within the facility and this is a mistake, it separates the asylum-seeker from the citizen. Instead, it should be taught in a place where, while you go to school, you hear three words, you can see two people, you can interact with an Italian. In the second phase this is crucial, school should not be in the centre”.

The importance of adapting courses to people's different needs, background and education levels was also emphasized. Some refugees had to attend basic courses that did not meet their needs and, in some cases, were designed for illiterate people or for people who did not know the Latin alphabet. Even when this kind of approach is aimed at ensuring language learning for everyone, it could have a strongly negative psychological impact, undermining the self-esteem of those who have higher educational levels.

“At first I was ashamed; I taught nine years in my country, I came here and I was told to learn 'a, b, c, d'. I felt I was on another planet. I said to myself: don't they take me into account or what? This is what I thought at the beginning. They could have told me, for example, to study at a higher level, but that course was for illiterate people, people who have never studied”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that Italian teaching be considered a priority when planning services to be provided during reception and integration actions for asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

UNHCR recommends language courses be taught by teachers specialized in teaching Italian as a second language and be provided at different levels according to the educational background of participants. UNHCR also suggests that teaching takes place, as much as possible, in external facilities rather than inside in reception centres, so to promote interaction with the local community.

UNHCR recommends that in addition to basic courses, initiatives be organized combining language learning with participatory activities (such as cultural, sports or recreational activities), in contact with Italian citizens. In particular, UNHCR suggests taking into consideration the good practice, adopted in Sweden, of combining language teaching with vocational training courses at the workplace.

6. INFORMATION

In describing their experience and integration process, many refugees pointed out that in some cases the difficulties they encountered were linked to a lack of information about their rights, about how they could exercise such rights and about the services that could have supported them.

Lack of information and guidance is, therefore, a barrier for those who are planning their own life pathway, which is complex and difficult in itself, as it does not allow them to make informed judgments on resources, concrete possibilities and individuals who can help them.

“Foreign people lack information. Many don’t know who to turn to”.

Art. 21 of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007, as amended by Legislative Decree No. 18/2014 transposing the recast Qualification Directive 2011/95/EU, provides that applicants who have been recognized international protection must, upon notification of the decision, receive an information brochure setting out the rights connected to their status, in a language they can understand.

In the past, this provision was implemented, albeit not uniformly, across different territorial contexts, by way of the Police immigration offices distributing a Guide for beneficiaries of international protection, which had been prepared by SPRAR Central Service, UNHCR and

ASGI (Association for Legal Studies on Immigration), and which had been translated into ten languages⁴. Today, however, beneficiaries of international protection hardly ever receive information about their rights, thus leaving the above-mentioned provision unapplied. Those who received the guide in the past continues to stress its importance, also symbolic importance, and pointed out the difference with those who do not have this opportunity today and thus have no adequate information about their rights.

“I arrived in 1997. Fortunately, in that period procedures were not very long, and therefore we didn’t wait long to receive an answer. I will always remember that day and the policeman who gave me a long document together with a letter and the positive answer, telling me: ‘These are your rights’. I have asked many others, but no one else has ever received a document explaining their rights”.

To meet this need, the possibility of using diversified tools should be considered, as it already happens in other contexts where special multimedia applications have been created providing applicants with timely information on their rights and advising them on how to access public services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that Art. 21 of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007 be implemented and that, upon being issued with a positive decision, all beneficiaries of international protection be adequately informed on their rights through an updated and specifically prepared information brochure.

UNHCR also suggests investigating the possibility of using innovative information tools, through social media and new technologies.

7. POST-RECEPTION SUPPORT

As we have seen, reception can abruptly come to an end as soon as a person is recognized international protection, or within the following six months in the case of a person who has been accommodated in a SPRAR facility, unless a further extension is needed. All refugees, however, must be supported in this transition phase, which is often very difficult. Proper management of this transition is key to integration.

As discussed in the focus groups, for many refugees the end of their time in reception and the lack of initial support can quickly result in failure, forcing them to turn back to the social assistance system, with the risk of duplicating efforts and increasing the use of resources.

⁴ SPRAR, *Guidelines for refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and of humanitarian protection holders. Instructions for access to territorial services*, 2009.

“Reception lasts six months and then you have to leave the centre. But where shall I go - this is the question – if I’m not integrated into society? No, it’s over, you have to go away! If I have nothing, if I don’t work, how can I rent a house? You need to pay the letting agency in advance, but you don’t have the money. Where can you go?”.

Other refugees recounted personal experiences or those of friends, pointing out how little support, such as reimbursement for the internship done, was helpful to become more confident.

“There are some centers (...), not so many, I don’t know the exact number, that help children and those who leave the centre to get a part time job or an internship, where they can earn 300, 400, 500 Euros a month (...). It’s not much to rent a house. But they have a chance of survival”.

For many, therefore, the opportunity to plan a gradual exit from the reception system, even through specific forms of support, is essential, and in some cases it represents a real incentive. In this regard, refugees themselves suggested alternative solutions, already partly used with success in many SPRAR projects, such as, for example, receiving a rent subsidy, even as a security deposit, for the initial period.

“This idea of semi-independence would already be a good thing: it gives a person the chance of becoming self-sufficient. Because if you teach someone to walk and then you say ‘run’, it’s impossible. So you should gain semi-independence at the (reception Ed.) centre and then maybe you can leave”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that a support programme for beneficiaries of international protection be set up as they leave the reception system, to help them in the initial transitional phase towards full independence.

8. EMPLOYMENT

As already pointed out, everyone thought that difficulties in finding a permanent job represent the main problem, as this impacts on all other areas of the integration process and of one's life. Lack of income makes it impossible for many to find or maintain a stable house and, in some cases, it even prevents them from accessing appropriate medical care. Lack of employment, moreover, often has a negative impact on one's self-esteem and self-respect, with inevitable consequences for socialization, including with the local community.

Employment is one of the key elements for successful integration into the host society. Even the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU underline that *“employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of immigrants, to the contributions immigrants make to the host society, and to making such contributions visible”*.

Such difficulties are certainly due to the current labour market conditions and the high unemployment rate, but they are also due to some specific critical situations. It should indeed be noted that, due to a number of circumstances, the condition of refugees is more problematic than that of the host country's workers and of other third-country national workers⁵.

Compared to other migrants, refugees often have to quickly flee from their country of origin and therefore cannot plan their journey and their destination. Furthermore, they have no social support networks like locals or other categories of immigrants, whose national communities have been residing on the territory for a longer period.

Finally, refugees are a particularly vulnerable group, partly because of the traumatic experiences they underwent in their country of origin and during the journey. Recent data reveal that finding a job is more difficult for refugees than for Italians or other immigrants. The Bank of Italy estimates that *“five years after arriving in Italy, asylum-seekers and refugees have a lower chance of finding a job compared not only to native Italians, but also to other immigrants (respectively 16 and 12 percentage points); the gap is reduced, but not cancelled, ten years after their arrival”*⁶.

“When I arrived in Italy, I tried to integrate, I studied. I did the training course and everything, but I have not enough to live on, like many refugees who are here and don't have a job. Work is the first thing. If I work, I can be independent. If there is no work, how can I be independent”.

Without a stable job, the only viable options for many are either working in some rural areas of Italy – where for years now people have been intensively exploited during the harvest seasons - or resorting to gimmicks, as this refugee clearly explained during the focus group in Turin:

⁵ European Parliament, *Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and Good Practices*, March 2016.

⁶ The Bank of Italy, *Annual Report 2015*, Rome, 31 May 2016, page 92.

“Four buildings are occupied, more than 500-600 asylum-seekers and refugees live there. But in what conditions! There are two main jobs: one is during the fruit harvesting period, like now; they go to Saluzzo, to Naples, or to Foggia; they work for two or three months and then wait for the following year. The second job is done at night. What does it mean to work at night? It means taking the bike, turning on torches and starting to look for things in the rubbish to be sold on Saturday”.

These problems are heightened for refugee women refugee, who have to face not only the difficulties linked to their status as refugees, but also those relating to their status as women and parents, often alone.

“I do many things, I am very busy, I’m not just making speeches against racism or non-integration. I work as an interpreter; I work as a cleaner; I teach in language courses. People want to learn French and also Swahili, which I speak; I can do everything: caregiver ... I mean, no matter what, just to be able to get a living, to support my son, make him feel that he also has a right to life. This is my role as a woman. When my female side comes out, I feel like saying: ‘I will not wait, because if I wait, I will feel empty’. But eventually you kind of disappear. I feel like I’m disappearing”

Another aspect highlighted by many refugees, in particular refugee women relates to employment levels, which are often well below individual qualifications. Many pointed out that in Italy it is very difficult to get a more prestigious job or at least one in line with individual skills and education levels.

“It’s for our children as well, if you go to school, you work well, you have good marks, and in the end you get a diploma”.

“All that we can do here is working as caregivers, because finding a job as a cleaner is not so easy. Why can’t we work in an office?”

If finding a job as employees is difficult, even setting up a business is hard. Many refugees and refugee women expressed legitimate aspirations to become self-employed, both because it is difficult to achieve career progress as an employee, and because it is seen as a mean for self-realization. However, there are two obstacles to setting up a business: firstly, having access to credit, when it is not possible to provide adequate guarantees; secondly, receiving support in the start-up phase and immediately after, as relevant institutions and private organizations often lack the necessary skills and resources to meet refugees’ needs.

“For us refugee women, who have experience in business, you can give us financial goodwill. But it’s not enough; after we have started an activity you have to support us, until you see that we have become independent (...) You have to encourage creativity, compatibly with the available market”.

8. VOCATIONAL TRAINING

In recent years, part of the strategy to support access to the labour market has rightly focused on vocational training and grant-assisted jobs. The strategy has been implemented locally through SPRAR projects and centrally by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy through some pilot projects (such as the In-side project). Many participants in the focus groups accessed the labour market through on-the-job training programs; their views on such programmes, however, greatly differed.

Many refugees have doubts on how on-the-job training projects have been selected by those who are tasked with providing this kind of service, as in many cases legitimate aspirations were not taken into account and previous skills were not given adequate value.

“For example, if you are given a grant-assisted job, you can’t choose where to work. Self-realization counts for nothing; I have never cut a tomato in my life, why did I have to help a cook? I had other skills that could have been easily employed here: I could have been a computer technician, or other things. But this was not very important for the staff member who was there in front of me, he thought I knew nothing. I could instead have also realized myself, I could have had that opportunity or done another internship in a place where I could have been helpful; I have skills”.

In other cases, refugees complained about the lack of a labour market analysis, which makes it impossible to assess the real chances of finding employment. Many refugees stated they had attended unnecessary and useless vocational training courses.

“I spent six months in school studying to be an electrician, but I ended up in a kitchen. So my point is: there should be a real effort to understand what students want and what the labour market needs”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that, for the first two years after having been recognized international protection, refugees be included in disadvantaged workers categories, as provided for by social cooperatives legislation (Law No. 381/1991).

UNHCR recommends that a common system of skills assessment be promptly adopted in order to ensure that beneficiaries of international protection can find adequate employment.

UNHCR recommends that a local network be set up to bring together individuals involved in assistance and support programmes, institutional and non-institutional actors dealing with on-the-job training and recruitment, trade unions and employers' associations, in order to develop common strategies for the benefit of beneficiaries of international protection.

UNHCR recommends that adequate measures be implemented to help beneficiaries of international protection who wish to be self-employed, in particular by promoting access to credit and by improving support services for the start-up of businesses, in a multicultural perspective, providing staff with specific training on asylum issues.

9. ACCOMMODATION INDEPENDENCE

Accommodation independence is another significant issue, a key precondition to regain confidence and begin a process of social inclusion.

Many refugees highlighted the difficulties in finding a place to live, especially in the post-reception period; as already stated, reception may abruptly come to an end after that a form of protection is recognized or later, depending on the type of facility where refugees are accommodated pending the outcome of the refugee status determination procedure. Accommodation problems, however, are different across different regions. In southern Italy, finding a stable and regular job is harder, whereas it is easier to find accommodation, thanks to lower costs and fewer guarantees requested; on the other hand, in large cities in central and northern Italy, even those who have an income at times struggle to find stable accommodation and must resort to precarious solutions.

Even many refugees participating in the focus groups who have resided in Italy for a number of years are still living in very precarious conditions, often in overcrowded or illegally occupied houses.

“Here (in Turin Ed.) there are people belonging to African communities, even Somali, who sign a lease for a four-bedroom house, and then rent it to other people in the community. (...) I was paying 100 Euros a month. (...) But the room is not a room just for myself. There are five people in one room, until now”.

Such difficulties are confirmed by recent research, which shows that a very significant and steadily increasing number of asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of protection live in precarious situations, such as in squats or informal settlements⁷.

⁷ Doctors without Borders, *Leftover. Asylum seekers and refugees in Italy: informal settlements and social exclusion*, March 2016.

While in the past these situations seemed to occur only in large urban areas and in some rural areas of southern Italy, as they related to seasonal jobs, the aforementioned research reveals that the phenomenon is rapidly expanding in other areas of Italy too.

Some interviewed beneficiaries highlighted that landlords' distrust, and in some cases discrimination, are often insurmountable obstacles in finding accommodation.

“Renting to a foreigner? ‘Where are you from? You’re not Italian? No, I’m sorry’. Lately I’ve seen it happen very often, because I help my friends looking for a house. ‘You go, now you speak a little Italian... you speak better than us, come on, call, maybe they will trust you’. However, anyway when they ask: ‘Where are you from?’, there it ends. I’m sorry, two minutes earlier the house was available, we were making an appointment, but when they ask: ‘Oh, where are you from?’ and anyway the accent gives you away, they say: ‘Foreigner? Where are you from? Oh no, sorry, it’s already ...’”.

“One day I was with a friend, we saw a house that was up for rent, I stopped to take the number and call the owner. A lady leaned from above. She saw that I was noting down the number. She stopped me: “No, no, no, this is for Italians only”**”**.

To facilitate access to housing, refugees suggested, inter alia, to include beneficiaries of international protection in underprivileged social categories when drafting calls for tenders for social housing, giving beneficiaries of international protection a specific score.

“Having a house is a basic right, isn’t it? If you look at the bid for tender to get a social flat in Rome, there are no points for refugees. But a refugee can never return to his or her own country. How is it possible? A point, just a little point”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that refugees be supported in finding suitable accommodation after being granted asylum and that all possible measures be taken to prevent social disadvantage and to ensure that they do not become homeless.

UNHCR suggests considering the creation of a housing guarantee fund for beneficiaries of international protection, allowing them to access funds aimed at settling down in the early period after having been recognized international protection.

UNHCR also suggests that competent authorities carefully consider the specific situation of beneficiaries of international protection when drafting bids for tender to allocate resources for social housing assistance and rent support.

10. HEALTH

Health can be a very serious obstacle for the integration of beneficiaries of international protection. Besides common problems that may arise in the course of life, many have to face specific health conditions resulting from traumatic experiences, such as persecution in countries of origin, or from deprivation and violence suffered in transit countries during the journey to Italy.

Although there are no statistical data on the number of beneficiaries of international protection who have been victims of torture or serious violence, some recent research gives evidence that the phenomenon is quite widespread among people arriving on the coasts of southern Italy⁸.

Poor health, particularly mental health, may adversely affect other important aspects of the integration process, such as language learning, the search for a job or for accommodation. In turn, failure to integrate and social distress may lead to vicarious traumatization. For these reasons, emerging vulnerabilities relating to health conditions should be promptly identified in order to adequately address them and prevent them from becoming chronic.

When there are potentially significant health needs, beneficiaries of international protection are granted full access to health care at the same conditions as Italian citizens. Art. 27, paragraph 1 of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007, provides that beneficiaries of international protection *“are entitled to the same treatment granted to Italian citizens in social and health care”*.

Vulnerabilities, especially in connection to torture or serious violence, were not discussed during focus groups as they relate to a very intimate aspect of an individual's experience. Participants, however, highlighted some critical aspects in effectively exercising their right to health due to economic problems and in particular due to lack of sanitary tax exemption. Both asylum-seekers, when authorized to work, and beneficiaries of international protection, including those lacking a job and a salary, are not considered unemployed but are rather described as ‘not in employment’, just like Italians looking for their first job: as such, they are not entitled to sanitary tax exemption.

“Many can enjoy sanitary tax exemption, at least under current regulations, but this should be given to the unemployed. Asylum-seekers in Italy are not considered unemployed and therefore have to pay sanitary taxes. And paying them is not so easy”.

“At the beginning, sanitary tax exemption was always granted: (Code Ed.) 92. Then, at the very last minute, code 92 was canceled and replaced with code 02, which means unemployment. But how can someone who has never worked be considered unemployed? It's difficult. Children and sick people still enjoy exemption, then the health problem is that there is nowhere to go when there are problems”.

⁸ Medici per I Diritti Umani (Physician for Human Rights), *Migratory Routes from Sub-Saharan Countries to Europe*, July 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that guidelines for assistance and rehabilitation of beneficiaries of international protection who are victims of torture, rape and other forms of serious violence be adopted and implemented as provided for in Art. 27, paragraph 1-bis of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007.

UNHCR recommends that, given their specific vulnerabilities and lack of resources, asylum-seekers, including those who are allowed to work, and unemployed beneficiaries of international protection be exempted from sanitary taxes.

11. RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

As pointed out by some participants in focus groups, difficulties in finding a job or in having career advancement opportunities are in many cases due to problems in getting qualifications, professional skills or work experiences recognized.

“We fled, that’s true. But many of us studied. For example, I have a university degree, you understand? And I feel like I threw it in the bin, because it’s useless. So here there is no integration”.

The impossibility of having past experiences recognized is certainly a source of great frustration for refugees, as they cannot draw on their personal capabilities to adequately contribute to the host society’s development; it also represents a limit for the host country, as it does not satisfactorily value available human resources, nor does it support them or enable them to contribute to social and economic life.

“I’ve got two diplomas, in my country I was a professor of music and dance. I worked as a deputy headmaster in a high school, but to get a job these two certificates are completely useless”.

“I’ve got a diploma and a law degree, I worked nine years before arriving in Italy and here, up to now, my qualification has not been recognized”.

“I’ve been here almost five years and I studied in my country of origin. Unfortunately, our qualifications are not recognized in Italy, so I had to start all over again. That is, lower-

secondary school, higher-secondary school, and then university. [...] Despite knowing other languages, Arabic, English, my language... but to integrate here in Italy, I never happened to have a steady job, which unfortunately is hard to find”.

Participants in focus groups discussed different types of critical issues. For a refugee who already faces daily hardships and difficulties in meeting basic needs, the procedure is highly discouraging because of its length, costs and bureaucracy. Furthermore, procedures for the recognition of qualifications greatly vary depending on the reasons why such recognition is needed and on the competent authority with responsibility over the specific degree. The specificities linked to refugee status are not always taken into account, especially when it comes to the possibility for a refugee to liaise with the authorities of his own country of origin.

Paragraph 3-bis of Art. 26 of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007 (introduced by Legislative Decree No. 18/2014) provides that: *“To recognize professional qualifications, diplomas, certificates and other qualifications obtained by refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection abroad, competent authorities shall identify appropriate systems of assessment, validation and accreditation allowing for the recognition of qualifications under Art. 49 of Decree of the President of the Republic No. 394 of 31 August, 1999, even when the country where the degree was obtained will not issue a certification, provided that the person concerned will prove his/her impossibility to acquire such certification”.*

The regulation, which could potentially have a very significant impact on the integration of beneficiaries of international protection, has been implemented on an occasional basis until now, mostly by single universities that have autonomously recognized qualifications even in the absence of original certificates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that refugees have their academic and professional qualifications recognized, through swift and certain procedures. To this end, UNHCR recommends that Art. 26 of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007 be implemented and that all competent authorities adopt a standard procedure for the recognition of qualifications, even in the absence of original certification.

12. RESIDENCE

Many refugees participating in focal groups confirmed a fact that has already been well documented in studies and reports on human rights and on the situation of refugees in Italy, that is, the difficulties in being included in the civil registry of the municipalities where they habitually reside⁹.

⁹ ASGI, CESPI, Caritas Italiana, Consorzio Communitas, AICCRE, *The right to protection*, June 2011; Caritas, Cooperativa Roma Solidarietà, Centro Astalli, Caritas Ambrosiana, *Metropolitan mediations*, 2012; CIR, *Roads of integration*, 2012; Juss-Buss, Swiss Refugee Council, *Asylum procedure and reception conditions in Italy*, May 2011; Nils Muiznieks, *Report on the visit in Italy from 3 to 6 July*, Strasbourg, 12 September 2012; Pro Asyl, *The living conditions of refugees in Italy*, February 2011.

Residence is an essential prerequisite beneficiaries of international protection to effectively exercise important rights¹⁰. Without residence, for example, they cannot obtain an ID card or access local social services and apply for housing support. In some cases, it is difficult even to register with the National Health Service.

The issue, which was mainly discussed in the focus groups held in Rome and Turin, is closely related to the housing problem and the lack of support when leaving reception facilities. Difficulties in finding stable accommodation are the main obstacles to being included in the civil registry. When beneficiaries of protection leave the reception centre, their names –that had been entered on the register with the centre’s address—are taken off the register, but in the absence of another address they can live at, their names cannot be re-entered on the register.

“When you leave the reception centre, there is a big problem, because after a few months your surname is deleted from the list of the centre’s residents and you become untraceable; if you don’t have a place to be registered at, you are deleted”.

Those who live in precarious housing conditions, such as informal settlements or occupied buildings, cannot be granted residence pursuant to Art. 5 of Decree Law No. 47 of 28 March, 2014, converted into Law No. 80 of 23 May, 2014. Likewise, those who are compelled to resort to precarious solutions, such as subletting or illegal renting, cannot demonstrate legitimate possession of the property and thus cannot be entered in the civil registry.

“I wish to speak about residence because we live in the ‘Selam’ building. There are many occupied buildings where you cannot prove to be resident. I cannot prove to be resident in the Selam building. I applied for it, but my request was rejected. What shall I do? Now it’s ok, because my former partner declared this as my place of residence, for my son’s sake. If I hadn’t had my former partner, where would I have gone? (...) This thing is a problem. My son lives in the Selam building; near the building there is a school, but his place of residence is somewhere else. So I’ve been told he can’t go in that school because he doesn’t live in that area. What should I do? I asked the social worker and I was told: “You must send him to a school in the same area where your place of residence is”. I’m not living with my former partner, I’m living with my son, I am a single mother. What should I do?”

“The gentleman who rented me the house said: ‘I do not give anyone residence. If that’s not ok with you, you can go’”.

¹⁰ ANUSCA, ASGI, SPRAR Central Service, UNHCR, *Guidelines on the Right to residence of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection*, December 2014.

Many municipalities have tried to find specific solutions, for example using virtual addresses, as for the homeless, or accepting residence at institutions' or associations' addresses. These solutions are temporary and in some cases fail to ensure that beneficiaries of international protection can effectively exercise all their rights.

“The city of Turin has created the so-called virtual residence, which does not exist. It is not a real place. When you ask for Italian citizenship after five years (years spent at the virtual place residence Ed.) they are not valid, you are a zero, you see. They are valid only to register with the health service and to have the city bus ticket... Yes, and it's called ‘Municipal House Three’. If you go to the job centre, they say: ‘No, we can't accept it, you do not live in a real place of residence’.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR considers it essential that all asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection can be recorded in the civil registry of the municipalities where they have their habitual residence or, failing that, in the municipalities where they have their domicile. To this end, UNHCR recommends that the Ministry of Interior, which is the competent authority for demographic services, sends specific instructions to municipalities regarding the registration of asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

13. SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Social integration is one of the most complex issues to deal with given its markedly subjective nature. There are many aspects that can potentially facilitate or hinder this process: language proficiency, cultural differences, uncertainty about social norms, concerns relating to the economic instability. However, some commonalities were highlighted and shared by participants in the focus groups.

Many refugees expressed a positive opinion about Italians and their openness towards refugees, giving specific examples of solidarity which they themselves experienced or directly witnessed. Many said they have numerous Italian friends and underlined how important it is to increase interaction with the locals and promote social networks with them.

“I think the state must create more networks. Networks that can truly guarantee the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. Facilitating for example the cohabitation of Italian citizens and foreign citizens”.

Those who socialized with Italians in a meaningful way recalled these interactions as an important step in their own integration process. Thanks to such experiences, they could establish a relationship

based on mutual and equal recognition with Italian citizens, other than the usual interaction with institutional actors in charge of asylum procedures or with the staff at reception centers.

“Let me give you a simple example, which helped us. They (the managers of the reception centre Ed.) took us to a picnic outside the centre. There was a group of Italian boys, peasants, and they were doing other jobs. We were a group of guys and we stayed with them for two or three days, we ate, we cooked, isn’t it? It was the first time I witnessed Italian hospitality, I saw Italians closely, I talked to them”.

“Also when (the manager of the reception centre) came with the Legambiente team into the centre, he brought all Italy to us, northern Italy and southern Italy. Students who had finished school spent their summer holidays with us. It was a good experience, and in the end we shared it with a final show”.

Strengthening mutual understanding is important also to fight some misrepresentations concerning refugees, which are conveyed by the media and through public debate, making the interaction between refugees and Italians more difficult. Some refugees highlighted how, in their experience, Italians are not given correct information on refugees and their status.

“There is great confusion between foreigners, migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. There is complete confusion here in Italy. And there’s a wall, like he said, between foreigners, migrants and Italian workers, because they think that all those who come here, do so for economic reasons”.

In all focus groups there was at least one refugee who reported specific instances where Italian citizens have accused him or her of benefiting from disproportionate economic assistance, at the expense of the neediest Italian population.

“Italians seem people with whom you can integrate. However, what happened to me many times is that they say: you are given an allowance of 35 Euros a day. I told him: no, I’ve never had any money in my life. But this perception exists, and it is strong. They think that all refugees on the Italian territory have 35 Euros a day”.

To facilitate social inclusion, some of them stressed the importance of encouraging their participation in the institutions, individually and through associations; their experience could make a valuable contribution to the development of asylum policies and governance.

“Institutions, refugees, communities should participate more. People who have suffered these problems can make significant contributions. It is a very important issue; refugees should participate more in institutions, they have experienced situations”.

“Refugees should participate more and refugee communities should be taken into account. Refugees should not be excluded”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UNHCR recommends that increased efforts be made to promote and enhance the creation of social networks involving both refugees and Italian citizens. To this end, UNHCR recommends that the civil society, and in particular sports, cultural and volunteer associations, be more involved in policies supporting the integration of refugees.

UNHCR recommends that, in compliance with the Charter of Rome, public and private media provide more correct information on asylum and refugees, in order to avoid misrepresentations of refugees, which can fuel racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

UNHCR recommends that in developing asylum policies, particularly on the integration of refugees, the contribution of refugees, as individuals or as part of a community, be enhanced.

CONCLUSIONS

The focus groups conducted revealed a consistent pattern of obstacles to the integration of beneficiaries of international protection, especially due to the objective difficulties they face in gaining a minimum level of economic independence that would guarantee them an acceptable standard of living. In some cases, these difficulties force refugees to live as social outcasts, in occupied buildings or in informal settlements, and to resort to welfare assistance again. This situation often leads to misrepresentations about them, which fuel negative attitudes and make interaction with the local population even more difficult.

Nevertheless, there are many examples of people, including among refugees attending focal groups, who have managed to integrate in a satisfactory way, as they themselves argued, in some cases thanks to the concrete support received.

On the basis of these examples, among other things, UNHCR believes that in the current asylum system, integration policies should focus on supporting beneficiaries of international protection.

Gaining a sufficient degree of independence is a prerequisite for integration, however complex the process may be. To this end, refugees should acquire useful tools to find a job and to access services as soon as possible. They should attend adequate Italian courses and be informed about local services already when applying for asylum. They should also be correctly informed about the rights attached to their status, both during the refugee status determination procedure, and immediately afterwards.

In addition, UNHCR believes that all applicants should have the opportunity to stay in a SPRAR facility after being recognized international protection, and be supported for the first few months in their difficult process of integration.

In this phase, it would also be appropriate that a personalized integration project be developed for all beneficiaries of international protection based on an assessment of their skills and aspirations, through consistent methodologies and tools throughout Italy.

Besides integration tools, structural measures to support inclusion processes are particularly needed. Finding a healthy place to live and a job are key issues and must be given priority in integration policies. To this end, it seems therefore appropriate that all beneficiaries of international protection should have access to support measures in the early phases after leaving reception facilities. Furthermore, UNHCR believes that including beneficiaries of international protection among disadvantaged workers for the first two years after they have been recognized protection should be considered, as provided for by social cooperatives legislation.

That is why, when developing and implementing measures aimed at promoting independence, attention should be paid to their social impact upon asylum-seekers' entry into the territory. All measures implemented, from language teaching to vocational training courses, should be carried out outside reception facilities as much as possible and be an occasion for beneficiaries of protection to interact with local people. For the same reason, all activities involving social interaction should be promoted, such as voluntary work, or sports, recreational, cultural and even religious activities, even though they do not have a specific educational purpose. Mutual acquaintance and the establishment of relationships between people seem to be the best response to widespread opinions on refugees which fuel suspicion, discrimination and, in certain contexts, xenophobia and racism. They are also the best tools to facilitate cultural permeability in the host community and allow beneficiaries of protection to feel part of it on a par with other citizens.

UNHCR wishes to thank the refugees who took part in the focus groups, whose surnames are not mentioned for reasons of confidentiality:
Adam, Ahmad, Akahel, Aratz, Bubakar, Chahide, Dembele, Efrem, Eromo, Fall, Faty, Fiori, Hasan, Hector, Hooman, Ibrahim, Isshak, Katrisa, Khader, Kibrom, Lancine, Lazar, Madhi, Malang, Mamadou, Marguerite, Momo, Musa, Nataliya, Ousmane, Sussy, Silan, Ugur, Yossuf.

UNHCR wishes to thank, for the contribution and support provided in the organization of the focus groups:
Simone Andreotti, Associazione Balon Mondial, Associazione Cittadini del Mondo, Associazione Senza Confine, Associazione Mosaico, Centro Samifo, Pietro Cingolani, Cooperativa Be Free, Consorzio Casa della Solidarietà, Cooperativa Esserci, Cooperativa Orso, Cooperativa Sociale Tenda Onlus, Francesca De Masi, Diaconia Valdese di Torino, Francesca Di Blasi, Valentina Fabbri, il FIERI, Laura Gentile, Piera Gioda, Massimo Gnone, Alessandro Gordano, InMigrazione Onlus, Valentina Itri, Laboratorio 53, Carlo Leone, Liberi Nantes, Carla Mariani, Safia Moalin, Alessia Montuori, Parì Nayyere, Sara Negarville, Non solo Asilo, Berthin Nzonza, Valentina Paciullo, Enza Papa, Ferruccio Pastore, Angelo Patriarca, Irene Ponzo, Tommaso Pozzato, ProgrammaIntegra, Giorgia Rocca, Marcella Rodino, Marjan Salchian, Ester Salis, Giancarlo Santone, Francesco Tarantino, Sergio Troilo, Alberto Urbinati, Maurizio Veglio.

