

SUMMARY REPORT

COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEERS IN ITALY

JULY 2022 – JUNE 2024

BACKGROUND

Throughout the years, UNHCR has sought to increase its efforts to ensure forcibly displaced and stateless persons are at the core of the development and implementation of their own protection responses. By treating them as equal partners and including them in decision-making processes and protection mechanisms, UNHCR ensures that its activities effectively address the protection and integration needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, returnees, and stateless persons.

UNHCR has developed the Community Outreach Volunteers (COV) program, which has been implemented across nearly all continents. The COV program enables UNHCR to expand its outreach to the communities it serves. The program's main objective is to establish two-way communication between UNHCR, displaced persons, and the host community, including public and private sectors. COVs, as agents of protection and social change, play a significant role in identifying risks and individuals with specific needs. They are not just implementers but also key contributors to decision-making processes, proposing and providing protection solutions for the persons UNHCR works with and serves, thereby empowering them.

COVs can be also an effective protection mechanism, particularly in urban contexts, where the communities of persons UNHCR works with and serves are spread out. This could result in populations becoming susceptible to exploitation or specific urban protection risks and pressures on public services that are often strained or cannot easily be accessed for several reasons, such as cultural or linguistic barriers. COVs allow UNHCR to obtain immediate and accurate information on the needs, gaps, capacities of refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons.

BACKGROUND OF UNHCR MCO ITALY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Given the challenge of outreach, obtaining reliable and updated data on refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons in Italy and given the issues they face when accessing services, UNHCR MCO Italy has significantly increased its engagement and communication with communities of persons it works with and serves. The operation engages with communities through a whole-of-society approach and two-way communication, providing protection-related information through field presence, corporate tools such as UNHCR's HELP website, a child-friendly webpage, Telegram and WhatsApp channels, and *JumaMap* (the latter being a living website that has been developed by ARCI in collaboration with UNHCR). A support front desk in UNHCR's Rome Office is also open to the public twice a week. Additionally, since 2018, the operation has established *Partecipazione*, a capacity-building and empowerment program for refugee-led and community-based organizations, in collaboration with INTERSOS.

Through community-based protection (CBP) activities, the operation noted the value and effectiveness of engaging directly with communities of refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons in Italy. However, effective outreach and knowledge about community structures remained challenging in 2021. For this reason, the operation began exploring further avenues to enhance such communication and direct participation of these individuals in UNHCR's programs.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COV PROGRAM IN ITALY AND THE INTEGRATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION PRINCIPLES

Since the end of February 2022, when the war in Ukraine broke out, Italy has seen large numbers of refugees entering the country. While the newly arrived Ukrainian refugees received strong support from the Ukrainian diaspora, which had been present in the country for decades, a significant influx in an urban setting, often in widespread and family-like reception, was at times hard to reach and assist. Given this context, UNHCR MCO Italy was quick to react and [officially launched the COV program for the first time in June 2022 in collaboration with INTERSOS](#) to complement other UNHCR initiatives, such as the two light Blue Dots that were set up on the northeastern border, mental health and psychosocial (MHPSS) peer-to-peer support program implemented between Ukrainian refugees, among other initiatives.

The [community-based protection](#) (CBP) approach is at the core of the program. COVs serve as vital information channels regarding services and rights available in Italy, benefiting the communities UNHCR MCO Italy works with and serves. Throughout each step of the program, [UNHCR and INTERSOS regularly consult COVs](#) to ensure the project addresses their communities' needs. In Turin, during the program's second year of implementation, [the program was led by refugees for refugees](#). After shadowing and receiving training from the implementing partner, INTERSOS, the [refugee-led organization Mosaico, in Turin, took the lead in coordinating the program](#) with UNHCR in 2023. Over time, the COV program extended its CBP approach by [involving expert and knowledgeable COVs in training sessions](#) for their peers, covering critical topics such as LGBTIQ+ issues and gender-based violence, ensuring volunteers have an [age, gender, and diversity](#) (AGD) perspective when supporting their fellow community members. Over time, additional capacity development opportunities were also included in the COVs plan through private sector partners.

[Accountability to Affected People](#) (AAP) mechanisms have been implemented since the program's inception. Once recruited, COVs receive a *Dos and Don'ts* list of actions they should respect while carrying out their activities. Additionally, every year, they receive training on the [Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) (PSEA). In 2024, the AAP mechanisms were further strengthened [with the introduction of KOBO forms](#) to collect details such as the type of service requested and the profiles of the requestee. As of 2024, COVs also collect information on whether the service they referred the individual to met the person's needs and whether there were any barriers they might have encountered while accessing the service. This process enables COVs to [monitor service quality](#) and equips them with [valuable information for consultative initiatives](#) to improve services. The [COV website](#) was officially launched, containing email addresses that allow any person to [formally submit complaints or notify UNHCR and INTERSOS of any irregularities](#).

PROFILES OF THE VOLUNTEERS

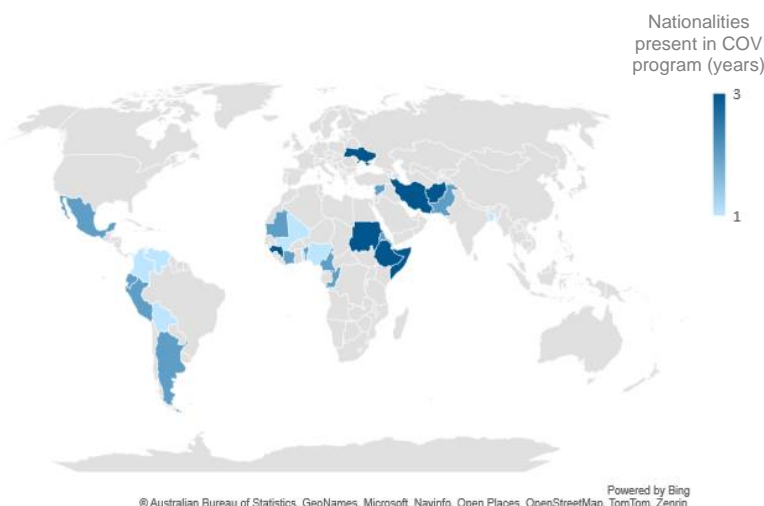
Regarding the profiles of the COVs, in 2022, **78 volunteers** were present in **7 regions** (Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Abruzzo, Campagna, Sicily); **45 of the volunteers were Ukrainian**, 16 volunteers belonged to the Ukrainian diaspora, and 29 were refugees who had recently arrived in Italy. **33 volunteers with different nationalities** were identified who originated from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Congo, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Iran, Palestine, Nigeria, Mali, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan.

In 2023, due to financial constraints, the program was reduced to **68 volunteers** from **22 different national communities**. One volunteer was stateless, while the others originated from the following countries: Afghanistan, Argentina, Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Ecuador, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Iran, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Mauritania, Mexico, Peru, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Togo, Ukraine, and Venezuela. At that time, most of the volunteers were still Ukrainian. The program ceased its activities in the region of Abruzzo as Ukrainian refugees were moved out of the hotels where they were being hosted and relocated into widespread reception arrangements.



As of June 2024, further cuts reduced the number of volunteers to **43**, having **21 nationalities represented in Turin, Milan, Bologna, Rome, and Naples**. Ukrainian volunteers were reduced to increase the **age, gender, and diversity (AGD)** approach within the recruitment process of volunteers, **allowing a transgender and a person with a disability to join the program**. Outreach, protection, and representational capacities of COV increased not only with national communities but also with social groups such as **LGBTIQ+** and **student communities**.

COVs have generally been recruited considering their outreach capacity, knowledge of services available to refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons but also their profile. Many COVs are heads of refugee-led or community-based organizations. COVs hold jobs as cultural mediators, psychologists, lawyers, students, athletes, translators, journalists, and many other **professions that allow them to have strong links to their respective communities**.



ACTIVITIES

Since its inception, the COV program had strong components of outreach and protection, with the general view of [empowering volunteers and their communities](#) so they may find solutions to their protection needs. Initially, the program had three pillars: [outreach, protection, and training activities](#). As the program was strengthened and COVs had more regular exchanges with their communities, a fourth pillar was introduced: [representational activities](#).

Despite annual budget constraints, the program’s impact has grown throughout the years, consolidating activities such as focus group discussions, informative sessions, and referrals. This upward trajectory owes its success to the [unwavering commitment of volunteers](#), who wholeheartedly believe their activities as COVs are serving their communities, and to the [strong collaboration and direct implementation efforts of INTERSOS](#), that are carried out with the [close coordination of UNHCR](#).

A. CAPACITY BUILDING

Since the commencement of the program, COVs were consulted on the topics they would like to be trained on, and in 2024, a [training scheme](#) was developed based on their feedback. Every year, COVs received tailored training on topics regarding [general protection principles](#), including PSEA, CBP, child protection, gender-based violence, psychological first aid (PFA), and [national and international laws and policies related to international protection and other forms of protection in Italy and so contributing the strengthening of the protection response](#). Over the years, UNHCR, INTERSOS, and a range of experts from the private sector and civil society have been facilitating for COVs. In some instances, COVs themselves have conducted the training for their peers. Additionally, [training of trainers](#) (ToTs) was conducted for COVs by DLA Piper, a UNHCR donor, through their series “Know your Rights” and by Museo del Risparmio, an entity of UNHCR’s donor Intesa Sanpaolo, which provided training on financial education. To ensure COVs have effectively increased their understanding of protection, they take [tests before and after the training](#).

Since June 2022	2023	2024, as of the end of May
29 Sessions	22 Sessions	15 Sessions
3 Collaborating entities	9 Collaborating entities	4 Collaborating entities

B. PROTECTION

COVs play a [crucial role by conducting assessments, referrals, and self-referrals for community members](#). Each referral requires COVs to fill out a KOBO form, which provides essential information about community needs and service quality. [COVs contributed to the design of the KOBO referral feedback form](#). Additionally, FGDs are conducted to explore underlying problems or unmet referral needs. COVs propose [FGD topics, moderate discussions, and assist in identifying participants](#).

Since June 2022	2023	2024, as of the end of May
2,492 Referrals	2,506 Referrals	468 Referrals
23 FGD (2 topics)	43 FGD (5 topics)	13 FGD (5 topics)
Topics: Access to services and information, Main protection risks for women and girls	Topics: MHPSS, Access to Services, Access to the labor market, Access to healthcare, Housing	Topics: Disability, Housing, Access to Services, MHPSS, Youth, Civic Participation

C. OUTREACH

COVs play a [crucial role in facilitating communication with the communities](#) UNHCR works with and serves. These volunteers have been instrumental in organizing informative sessions, where community members engage with experts and discuss essential topics. As part of the program, these [informative sessions have been adapted to include workshops and direct interactions with service providers](#). Topics covered during these sessions range from obtaining documentation and recognizing qualifications to enrolling children in schools, accessing the labor market, and receiving mental health services. Additionally, cultural events were also addressed.

Since June 2022	2023	2024, as of the end of May
749 persons attended	1,253 persons attended	573 persons attended
56 awareness-raising sessions	79 awareness-raising sessions	14 awareness-raising sessions

D. REPRESENTATIONAL AND CONSULTATIVE

As COVs have gained a more prominent role in outreach within communities UNHCR works with and serves, they have received invitations to participate in consultative and decision-making processes. Between January and June 2024, COVs in Italy have been actively involved in six representational and consultative activities. Here are the key highlights:

UNHCR MCO Italy's Annual Participatory Assessment:

- In 2023 and 2024, COVs supported and participated in FGDs used to draft UNHCR MCO Italy's annual Participatory Assessment.

Rome:

- COVs regularly attend meetings of Rome's 14th municipality, which has a working group focused on affairs related to foreigners.
- They submitted proposals and participated in meetings before the "Tavolo della Convivenza," a participatory initiative by the Metropolitan City of Rome aimed at creating social cohesion and an inclusive city.
- COVs were also involved in three FGDs conducted by the Municipality of Rome, in collaboration with UNHCR and partners, to shape the 2024-2026 Social Plan for the city.

Lombardy (Milan):

- COVs supported the setup of FGDs and engaged in discussions within the framework of "Ci Siamo," a regional project sponsored by the Region of Lombardy. This project aims to improve access to services for migrants with disabilities.

Turin:

- COVs participated in a consultative meeting with the Office of Foreign Minors within the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies. The focus was on addressing the situation of unaccompanied minors.

Naples:

- COVs actively participated in the regional GrIS (Group for Health Services Access), working to enhance access to health services for foreigners.

In summary, COVs across different regions in Italy have played a crucial role in promoting inclusivity, social cohesion, and better services for refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons to use.

E. AD-HOC ACTIVITIES

I. Profiling of the Ukrainian Refugees

In 2022, as refugees arrived from Ukraine, UNHCR collaborated with INTERSOS and the COVs to conduct two extensive profiling exercises. The studies aimed to enhance UNHCR's understanding of the profiles of newly arrived refugees from Ukraine to ensure more effective emergency response planning. The Italian Civil Protection, managing reception centers in Abruzzo, requested UNHCR's support in understanding the hosted refugees' profiles. Over **2,200 individuals**, hosted in **78 reception facilities**, participated in the profiling exercise in Abruzzo, which aimed to identify criteria for transferring people out of reception centers into more widespread arrangements. Additionally, a second [profiling exercise](#) involving more than **1,500 individuals** was conducted in **Milan, Rome, and Naples**.

II. Report on Engaging with Refugee Communities in Italy: Understanding Structures, Leadership and Communication Dynamics

UNHCR and INTERSOS commissioned an expert to conduct a study to facilitate and enhance the organizations' engagement with the host society, promote outreach activities, and ensure the protection and integration of the communities UNHCR works with and serves in Italy. The study analyzed community structures, drivers of aggregation, leadership profiles, determination processes, and preferred communication methods. In total, **approximately 150 refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons** were consulted through **29 interviews** and **20 focus group discussions** that COVs set up.

III. Three Thematic Protection Reports

Throughout the years, the protection elements of the COV program were strengthened as the volunteers more frequently consulted their communities. During these consultations, communities of persons UNHCR serves and works with have expressed various concerns regarding **access to the labor market, healthcare services, and receiving mental health and psychosocial support**. For this reason, in 2023, three thematic reports on the previously mentioned topics were drafted. COVs supported the facilitation of **23 focus group discussions** that saw the participation of **178 individuals** of **over 16 nationalities**. The reports were made available in 2024 in both English and Italian on the [official COV UNHCR webpage](#). The thematic reports had **four main objectives**:

- Ensuring UNHCR programs address the needs of refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons in Italy.
- Identifying community needs for relevant informative sessions through COV.
- Expanding the network of service providers engaged by COVs.
- Enhancing COVs' understanding of community needs for better representation.

SYNERGIES WITH OTHER UNHCR PROGRAMS

Despite being a relatively young program within UNHCR MCO Italy, COV has rapidly and effectively fostered strong synergies among the operation's various programs and implementing partners.

PartecipAzione:

- COV and PartecipAzione, UNHCR MCO's main community empowerment programs conducted in collaboration with INTERSOS, complement each other.
- COV-organized training sessions are open to associations participating in PartecipAzione.
- COVs are invited to attend the final annual networking event organized under PartecipAzione.

Spazio Comune:

- COVs refer community members to various Spazio Comune locations across Italy.
- In Naples, Spazio Comune provides a space for COVs to meet monthly and conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) and informative sessions.
- Spazio Comune in Rome is open to meeting with COVs to improve its services.
- In Turin, Spazio Comune is coordinated by Mosaico, the same RLO coordinating the COV program.

Welcome:

- COVs referred and supported with the recruitment of community members through Welcome.
- They developed informative sessions and workshops on labor market access, collaborating with UNHCR's Welcome focal point and liaison focal points in various Spazio Comune locations.

UNICORE and Community Matching

- COVs engaged with UNICORE students and participants of community matching inviting them to informative sessions and FGDs.

LGBTIQ+ and MHPSS

- COVs engaged in MHPSS activities to reach out to transgender refugees in informal settlements. Additionally, a transgender COV member facilitated capacity-building initiatives for COVs as well as for UNHCR's partner, MEDU, in Rome through a project involving mobile clinics and a psycho-social support centre.

COLLABORATIONS WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Through a [whole-of-society approach](#), the COV program has fostered numerous partnerships and collaborations with public and private entities. These collaborations have been facilitated by the [training](#) received by COVs, [informative sessions](#) developed in collaboration with experts, and [consultative and representational activities](#) requested by entities in both the private and public sectors. The following actors have contributed to the COV program:

Governmental Institutions

Civil Protection (Abruzzo, Campagna, Lazio, Lombardy) • Department of Social Policies and Health (Rome) • Italian Revenue Agency (Turin) • Local Health Authority (Bologna, Naples) • Metropolitan City of Rome Capital • Municipality of Rome • Office of Foreign Minors of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (Turin) • Antidiscrimination Help-Center of the Municipality of Bologna

Private Sector, Civil Society, and International Organizations

Action Aid • Arca di Noè • ARCI • Arci Gay • ASCS • AVSI • Azione contro la fame • Associazione Avvocato di strada • AUSL • CeSPI • Centro Alfredo Rampi • CIAC • CBM • CGIL • CISL • Conecta migrants&refugees • Dedalus • ELIS • Emergency • Esarcato apostolico d'Italia • Folias • Fondazione ISMU • IAL • IRC (Turin) • Italian Red Cross • Programma Integra • LEDHA • LILT • l'orma • Medihospes • Museo del Risparmio • NAGA • Punto Cometa • Randstad • Associazione Realmonte • Refugees Welcome • Rete Migrazioni e Lavoro • Sistech • Soleterre • SOS Villaggi dei Bambini • Uasi Blest (Bocconi University) • WASI • World Bank

Refugee-Led and Community-Based Organizations

Coop Siamo • Coordinamento Italia Ucraina • Mosaico • Nono Lab • UNIA (stateless-led organization) • UNIRE • Universo

CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The COV program in Italy improves outreach and empowers refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons to address protection and integration needs within their communities. The program has supported communities by increasing their capacities to address important protection concerns such as GBV and MHPSS. It facilitates direct interaction with public institutions, enhancing local and regional protection mechanisms.

The program serves as a link between UNHCR and the communities, creating synergies among various UNHCR programs to effectively address refugees' needs. It allowed UNHCR to build trust with the communities it works and serves, establishing two-way communication and obtaining key real-time information on refugee and stateless communities and protection trends. Building and maintaining trust were made possible given the strong AAP and CBP approaches incorporated since the program's inception. The program integrates all activities and mainstreaming strategies of the CBP Unit, covering the following topics: communication with communities, child protection, gender-based violence, MHPSS, and disability. Additionally, it incorporates strong elements and synergies with activities covered by UNHCR MCO Italy's Solutions Unit.

The COV program is paving the way for UNHCR MCO Italy to increase its community engagement activities and ensure that refugees and stateless persons actively and meaningfully participate in decision-making processes. UNHCR, in collaboration with INTERSOS, will continue working to ensure that COV becomes a sustainable program run by refugees for refugees.

For more information:

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