

Evaluation of Welcome. Working for Refugee Integration Programme

Multi-Country Office Italy

Purpose	Contribute to learning on the strategic relevance and effectiveness of the Welcome programme. UNHCR aims to understand if and how the programme contributes to changes for refugees and asylum seekers, employers and the host community, and what can be done to improve results.
Evaluation type	Summative and formative project evaluation
Methods	Qualitative and qualitative with documentary review, key informant interviews and group discussions.
Implemented	2024 by Opcit Research
Scope	Country-specific 2020-2024
Commissioned by	UNHCR Multi-Country Office Italy

Evaluation Context

The Welcome. Working for Refugee Integration programme seeks to increase refugees'¹ inclusion in the Italian labor market. Welcome operates by creating partnerships between employers and CSOs² to develop inclusion pathways. These pathways may be direct recruitment or job-matching links, internships, or training opportunities for upskilling and reskilling appropriate to market demand. The Welcome program awards companies and CSOs with the 'Welcome' and 'We Welcome' logos respectively as recognition of their commitment to refugee labor inclusion. From 2017 to 2023, UNHCR presented over 900 Welcome and We Welcome awards, with many companies and CSOs awarded multiple years.

¹ Including refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, asylum seekers, those with temporary protection and stateless people.

Key Findings

Welcome improves refugees' employment and employability, links them to wider services, and prepares companies to hire them.

Welcome connects refugees to jobs. The program shows relevance in addressing systemic barriers to refugee inclusion while aligning with both UNHCR's strategic priorities and national integration goals. Data suggests that refugees involved in Welcome have higher levels of employment compared to the refugee population as a whole in Italy. Job seekers receive information about opportunities, recognition of transferable skills, CV and interview preparation, training, and language support. Welcome complements other protection and solutions services and provides access to the formal labor market in contrast to irregular work common among the refugee workforce. Welcome also prepares employers to deliver on CSR and Diversity and Inclusion goals, address employment gaps and resolve practical recruitment aspects such as recognition of foreign certificates, references and qualifications. The adaptation of Welcome from an award process to a structured program with tools, narratives and examples of 'what works' allows participants to build on experiences.

Welcome is effective at creating partnerships and networks, engaging the private sector, and improving opportunities for employment.

Job inclusion pathways are a significant innovation. Data suggests that leveraging partnerships to bridge refugee skills and experience to employer needs opens up formal job opportunities. This skill-to-job matching, with support to fill in knowledge gaps, increases job retention and stability for both refugees and companies. Adaptations such as the WelcomeNet and the Welcome-in-One-Click online job matching platform have increased effectiveness, enabling Welcome to respond flexibly to evolving needs. Companies highlight the 'community of experience' facilitated through Welcome, sharing lessons learned between sectors. Likewise, CSOs report increased effectiveness created through the WelcomeNet platform, encouraging trust and a common approach. There are systemic barriers that hinder full effectiveness, mainly, delays in processing residency permits that impede swift hiring

² Civil Society Organizations including non-governmental, faith-based and community organizations, cooperatives, labor agencies and training institutes.

and lack of relocation assistance, particularly for refugees hosted in remote reception centers.

The Welcome program and changes to refugees' capacities are sustainable. Changes to employer culture are detected, though sustainability of inclusive practices needs continual support.

Refugees retain skills, networks and knowledge of Italian workplace practices, as well as the sense of dignity and hope that comes through positive experiences. They find work that aligns with their qualifications instead of settling for the 'first job found'. Job permanence remains an important challenge, however. While short-term employment is part of the structural context of the Italian labor market, further efforts are needed to sustain refugee inclusion. Regarding employers, the Welcome Logo is a driver of action and raises the profile of good practice and success stories. Companies report that beyond the award, Welcome contributed to a new understanding of the benefits of hiring refugees and the positive contribution they can bring to a business. Companies require help to continue fostering an inclusive environment, part of which may weaken through natural staff turnover. Future efforts should focus on embedding Welcome's good practices into policy frameworks, bolstering structural support such as language access and housing advice, and strengthening micro-level monitoring and feedback loops.

Welcome has helped to foster a more inclusive society, responsibility sharing, and perception of refugees as contributors to development, consistent with UNHCR's Whole-of-Society approach.

Welcome has helped to foster a more inclusive society, combating xenophobia and racism against refugees. This is demonstrated most directly in how it has challenged and improved perceptions towards refugees within the private sector environment, touching hundreds of companies and thousands of employees as a result. The evaluation finds potential, positive, spillover effects into wider society. Refugee labour inclusion is re-framed as an economic benefit, as well as positioning refugees as people with valuable skills and expertise. Involvement of Government, CSOs, UNHCR and businesses encourages different actors to play their part and ensures that refugees' needs are met from different angles, recognizing the resources and expertise of each to contribute to the collective good. Risks remain, particularly regarding the retention of "soft" outcomes such as mindset shifts, inter-organisational trust, and the scalability of highly tailored programme models.

Recommendations

For UNHCR:

1. Build on and strengthen collaboration with local communities, municipalities, businesses and CSOs to ensure that programming is responsive to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.
2. Create stronger links to services on key issues directly linked to labor market integration such as refugee health and mental health, housing and social protection benefits.
3. Engage in advocacy to endorse and encourage good practice exemplified in the Welcome experience across other institutions that are responsible for refugee integration. This will involve making the case that labor market integration is deeply affected by the wider integration challenge.

For Employers:

4. Build on gains made through involvement in Welcome by formalising company integration policy and practice.
5. Employers' organisations could provide additional support and advice, in partnership with UNHCR, to augment coverage already provided by Welcome.
6. Improve monitoring of employment practice and outcomes for refugees within the business.

For CSOs:

7. Codify and share good practice and between different organisations to foster collaboration and innovation.
8. Advocate for policy change. Build on gains made in increased visibility and lobbying power with the government, using UNHCR as a conduit, to engage in advocacy to influence legislation and policy that affect refugee integration, ensuring that the voices of refugees are included in policy discussions.

For Local and National Government:

9. Acknowledge that refugee integration policy provides an economic win and build the business case for investment in refugee labour inclusion, particularly in terms of language support.
10. Learn from findings of this evaluation concerning employers' needs and acknowledging employers' appetite for refugee inclusion. This may involve continued consultation with employers about what types of support could help employers to meet their recruitment needs.

Contact information:

Mr Andrea De Bonis: debonis@unhcr.org



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