

Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

National Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations in Italy

Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i Rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the project webpage: <https://aditus.org.mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

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This report was published in December 2020.

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“I can give all of my energy to defend and promote refugee rights but first I need a job. I need to be stable, to be independent and have mental and physical health before I can think about others and become part of an organisation”

S. O., refugee, June 26th, 2020

Introduction

At an historical time when the “Black Lives Matter” movement is in full swing and the Mediterranean Sea continues to receive the corpses of people trying to cross EU borders, the present report aims to analyse the ability and potential of asylum seekers and refugees to organise themselves and become advocates of their own rights in Italy. The timing of the report is particularly interesting for two main reasons: first, the presence (and numbers) of asylum seekers and protection holders in Italy has been consolidating particularly in the past decade, even though the Italian history of asylum dates back to the late 1990s. Second, the narrative about asylum seekers and refugees has been highly polarised around two main positions: refugees as victims in need of help and refugees as criminals living off the taxes of honest Italian citizens.

Against this background, the research presented in this national report is the first one carried out in Italy, to date, on Refugee-Led Community Organisations’ (RLCO) ability to interact with public and private institutions and organisations, and their effectiveness in advocating for refugees’ rights. UNHCR, Intersos and their staff have provided invaluable support and data to map refugee-led organisations in Italy. This has been possible particularly thanks to “*PartecipAzione – Azioni per la protezione e la partecipazione dei rifugiati*”, a capacity building and empowerment programme organised by INTERSOS in cooperation with UNHCR to promote refugees’ active participation to the Italian economic, social and cultural life.

The present national report is structured in four parts. The first provides an overview of the Italian asylum context, highlighting the main changes in the history of refugee arrival to Italy, of their reception and integration prospects, and the role of civil society organisations in this field. The second part presents the most relevant examples of RLCO active in Italy and the already mentioned *PartecipAzione* programme, which is becoming a great incentive and guide for RLCOs. The third part describes positions and opinions of four categories of people and entities, directly or indirectly involved with RLCOs in Italy, namely, refugees, representatives of RLCOs and non-refugee led organisations, experts, and representatives of local/regional governments. The last part sketches preliminary findings on the main challenges and opportunities for RLCOs in Italy and reflects on the difficult relationship between participation and representation and the challenges related to researching organisations made “by refugees for refugees” with a certain degree of formalisation.

Part I – National Context

The first fully-fledged national asylum system in Italy was launched in the first years of the new century, in 2001. Before the 2000s, refugees' reception – regulated by the Geneva Convention of 1951 and art. 10 of the Italian Constitution – was organised and run by religious entities and civil society organisations. This innovative grassroots and local approach to reception was not limited food and shelter but focused on refugees' successful integration in the local community through the provision of health (including psychological), legal and social assistance, with special attention devoted to vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors¹. This model of reception and integration has been so successful that has been translated in 2001 in the first *Programma Nazionale Asilo* (National Asylum Programme), signed by the Ministry of Interior, UNHCR and ANCI (National association of Italian municipalities), which *de facto* became the ordinary reception system in Italy: the *Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati* (SPRAR – Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees).

The actual management of these reception facilities is usually delegated to local civil society organisations selected through public bids issued by the municipalities. In 2018, SPRAR has been significantly revised following the entry into force of the so-called “Security and Immigration Decree”². The new Sistema di Protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati (SIPROIMI – *Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and Unaccompanied Minors*)³ is now accessible only to international protection holders and unaccompanied minors. This implies that the individualised integration services foreseen within the ordinary reception are no more available to asylum seekers⁴.

On the other hand, the sudden and steep growth of asylum applications following, first, the Arab Spring, from 2011, and then the Syrian war and the overall destabilisation of the North African region, from 2014/2015 (see Figure 1), triggered the creation of a second system of reception (see Figure 2). This parallel system, born officially in 2014, was conceived to remain an extraordinary and temporary system governed by the Ministry of Interior to deal with the emergency. *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* (CAS – extraordinary reception centres or governmental centres) still play a crucial role in the Italian reception system, with more than 70%⁵ of all people hosted in the two-pronged Italian reception system (see Figure 3).

¹ For a full account of the beginnings of the SPRAR see: <http://www.osservatoriomigranti.org/assets/files/anci-asilo.pdf> (Italian only).

² Legislative Decree 113/2018 adopted on 5 October 2018 and converted into Law 132/2018

³ For more details on the history of the ordinary reception system in Italy see: <https://www.siproimi.it/la-storia> (Italian only)

⁴ For a full description of the reception conditions within SIPROIMI but also of the whole Italian reception system after the entry into force of the Security and Immigration Decree and its recent developments with the COVID-19 crisis, see the latest AIDA country report on Italy (updated May 2020): https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_it_2019update.pdf

⁵ Data retrieved on July, 15th 2020. Data on the presence of refugees (as defined within the framework of the present Erasmus + project, thus including asylum seekers and protection holders) in the Italian reception system are constantly updated, since 2017, by the Ministry of Interior and can be found here:

<http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>

For what concerns the integration of refugees in Italy, the Ministry of Interior approved a National Integration Plan for International Protection Holders, for the first time in Italy, on September 2017⁶. The Plan however has never had specific funding allocated so that integration projects are mainly implemented following SPRAR national guidelines (and thus within SPRAR project) and within AMIF funded projects, without a national assessment of refugees' integration outcomes. Another national instrument collecting information on integration projects for refugees and third-country nationals is the Italian Website on Integration⁷; active since 2012, it was established by the Italian Ministry of Labour with the support of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education. However, a national coordination of integration projects in Italy is still far from being a reality, with the notable exception of SPRAR (now SIPROIMI) guidelines, and thus civil society organisations and local administrations take the lead in creating local networks and designing integration projects. The Municipality of Milan, for example, in cooperation with the Bocconi University⁸, has established a set of integration indicators and a monitoring system to better understand and manage the integration needs of refugees and third-country nationals residing on the territory of the municipality.

According to UNHCR's data finder portal, in 2015 in Italy there were 118.047 refugees of which 96.042 males and 22.005 females⁹; no information is provided on their nationalities/countries of origin. **In 2019, the UNHCR Global Trends reports 270,487 among refugees and people in refugee-like situations, asylum seekers and stateless people in Italy.** According to the Italian Ministry of Labour, in 2019 of all the residence permits issued, 26,8% were issued for asylum or humanitarian reasons. More data are available for asylum applicants in Italy¹⁰: from 2008 to 2019, on average, 80% of all applicants were males and, roughly, 80% of all applicants in the same period were registered as being aged 18-34, with considerable yearly variations. In the last three years, there has been an increase in applications of unaccompanied minors, which are now more than 10% of the total number of applicants in Italy (12% in 2019). The countries of origin of people applying for asylum in Italy used to be mainly West African countries (Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria) in the years from 2015 to 2017, while more recently there has been a growth in applications from Ukraine, and Latin American countries (i.e., El Salvador). Pakistan and Bangladesh have always been present among the top five countries of origin of people seeking asylum in Italy.

⁶ The full text of the plan is available here: <https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/piano-nazionale-integrazione.pdf> (Italian only)

⁷ See <http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/en/about-us/Pages/default.aspx>

⁸ Patuzzi, Liam (2020) "European cities on the front line. New and emerging governance models for migrant inclusion", Admin4all IOM project

⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=T8hZ>. Regarding refugees' demographics, data on overall refugee population currently residing in Italy is provided by UNHCR, while the Italian Ministry of Interior and Eurostat provide publicly available yearly (and monthly) data on asylum seekers. Demographics, including nationality, geographic distribution, level of education and employment sector are available only at an aggregated level for foreigners (non-EU nationals) residing in Italy.

¹⁰ These data can only describe a partial image of refugees currently present in Italy. Indeed, even though refugees are constrained by the so-called Dublin system to stay in or return to the country of first arrival in Europe to apply for asylum, some of them prefer to abscond to cross EU internal borders to reach their designated destination country. See:

http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/cebb1cf2-fccb-11e7-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.0001.03/DOC_1

Finally, data on refugees' education and skill levels, and labour market conditions are difficult to retrieve because available data do not allow distinguishing refugees from other immigrants, except for a survey carried out in 2014 at the EU level by the EU Labour Force Survey¹¹.

¹¹ European Commission and OECD (2016), *How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe? A first evaluation based on the 2014 EU Labour Force Survey ad hoc module*, Working Paper 1/2016. Available at:

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/87a8f92d-9aa8-11e6-868c-01aa75ed71a1>

Part II – Mapping

Mapping refugee-led organisations in Italy is not an easy exercise. Indeed, official regional registries of formally recognised civil society organisations do not contain an indication of the legal status of the founders or of the people sitting in the boards of registered organisations. The registers usually include the indication of the founders' nationalities, which facilitates the identification only of organisations established by third country nationals. Moreover, experts interviewed affirm that, generally, while well-established RLCOs, as defined for the purposes of the present research, are very few in Italy, in the past five years a number of RLCOs were created locally, also thanks to the support of local communities and civil society organisations involved in reception and integration initiatives, but then quickly disappeared. Finally, experts have evidenced that refugee-led organisations often have a high degree of informality and operate as networks of single individuals who act as contact persons.

However, at the national level, UNHCR Italy, together with Intersos, has set up, since 2018, a unique programme to support the creation and the survival of refugee-led organisations, named *Partecipazione*¹² already mentioned in the Introduction, and, since then, it has mapped hundreds of refugee-led or “mixed” (i.e., led mainly by Italians but with a significant participation of refugees) organisations. UNHCR and Intersos have shared the main figures of the mapping and a list of fully-fledged refugee-led organisations, showing a great support for the present project. Using the data shared by Intersos and UNHCR and the data retrieved from the interviews and focus groups conducted, the researchers have identified three main types of RLCOs in Italy, described in the following paragraphs.

A – RLCOs founded by refugees who have been in Italy for more than 5 years

These associations are generally founded and led by refugees who have been in Italy for more than 5 years and who usually have a strong connection with the local community. The activities of these associations often include asylum advocacy, social inclusion and refugee participation issues, thus making them organisations “by refugees, for refugees”. Moreover, their survival is usually not strictly linked to their project management and communication abilities but they have surely developed strong networks, partnerships and ability to manage projects. Among these organisations there are: *Associazione Mosaico Refugees – Azioni per i Rifugiati* (Torino), *UNIRE – Rifugiati in Rete* (see Box 2), *Generazione Ponte* (Torino, <https://www.generazioneponte.com/>), and *Associazione Donne Africa Subsahariana e II Generazione* (Torino, <http://donneafrica.org/>).

BOX 1: example of refugee-led organisation type A

Unire – Rifugiati in Rete

- **Size of membership:** 16 members

¹² For further information see: <https://partecipazione.intersos.org/il-progetto/> (Italian only).

- **Particular focus:** It is the first national platform created and managed exclusively by refugees in Italy with the aim of offering a positive narrative of the socio-cultural and political commitment of refugees and creating a true refugee-led network at national level. Aim of the organisation is to bring refugees' voices to the national institutional level.
- **Online presence:** Facebook only
- **Main areas of activity:** networking, advocacy
- **Established in:** Rome, 2019
- **Links to websites:** <https://www.facebook.com/unirerifugiati/>

B – RLCOs founded by refugees who have been in Italy for less than 5 years

Usually less structured and stable than type A RLCOs, these organisations are mainly founded by refugees who arrived in Italy after 2015. The creation of these organisations is the result of either a virtuous local reception and/or integration initiative or of a support programme such as *Partecipazione*. This kind of association has difficulties in accessing financial resources and project funds, even if supported in the very first phases of its foundation with specific training or with targeted funding. Even if these associations can sometimes not be as long-lasting as type A RLCOs, their network usually remains strong over time thanks to the engagement of key members of these organisations who keep offering a point of reference for the community and for refugee people. Among these organisations there are: *Cresci con noi per rifugiati e migranti* (Bologna, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Interest/Associazione-Cresci-Con-Noi-Per-Rifugiati-E-Migranti-336426446887802/>), *Migr' action* (Torino, <http://migraction.it/>), and others¹³.

C – Other organisations composed by both refugees and Italians with different missions

Refugees' active participation is often triggered by issues and topics that are not strictly related to asylum, advocacy or political issues. Refugees hosted in reception facilities have sometimes met with local associations, usually led by Italians, and have embraced and even re-shaped these organisations' missions by becoming boards' members, once they have achieved some level of stability within the local community. These associations deal with a variety of issues such as job inclusion, mediation services, legal support services, and sports. Among them there are: *Barikamà* (see Box 3), *Morus Onlus* (Ceres, Piedmont, <https://www.facebook.com/morusonlus/>), *World in Progress* (Parma, <https://www.facebook.com/World-IN-Progress-2325769807653989>), and *Ikenga Voice of the World* (Palermo, <https://www.facebook.com/ikenga.palermo/>). A special place in this category is occupied by

¹³ <https://partecipazione.intersos.org/associazioni/>

LGBT+ organisations, like *Lesbiche Senza Frontiere* (Milano, <http://www.lesbichesenzafrontiere.org/>) and *Boramosa* (Padova, <https://www.facebook.com/boramosa/>) that have been established thanks to the support of ARCI and specifically of ARCIGAY¹⁴, an Italian network of cultural associations supporting the rights of the LBTQI community.

BOX 2: example of refugee-led organisation type C

Associazione di Promozione Sociale e Cooperativa Sociale Barikamà
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of membership: 12 members • Particular focus: Founded by "Resistant" Africans, they produce and sell quality organic yogurts and vegetables. They manage a bar called "Caffè Nemoense". Their aim is to promote the inclusion of vulnerable people. • Online presence: website, Facebook • Main areas of activity: production and sale of agricultural products • Established in: Rome, 2011 • Links to website: http://barikama.altervista.org/

¹⁴ See: <https://www.arcigay.it/>

Part III – Environment

This section describes the challenges that RLCOs face to start their journey, to survive and to make their voices heard, and the value and potential of RLCOs in connecting with refugees and advocating for refugees' rights in Italy. These issues are addressed from the perspective of four different groups of people/stakeholders: refugees, representatives of refugee-led organisations, representatives of non-refugee-led organisations together with experts and scholars, and, lastly, regional and local government actors.

Refugee-led Organisations

The representatives of refugee-led organisations interviewed for the present report during an online focus group (July 17th, 2020) have been in Italy for more than 5 years, have established strong links with the territory where they live, and have a significant experience in being part and creating different forms of organisations (e.g., associations, cooperatives).

According to the interviewees, there are several reasons to create an organisation and be active in the public life of the country of residence, but first and foremost they believe that to share ideas and promote participation is important not only to improve refugees' condition but also to challenge and regenerate the local community.

Among the main **challenges** for the establishment and survival of refugee-led organisations, interviewees mentioned that, at a personal level, it takes a lot of energy and dedication to be part of an organisation. This is because in these organisations time spent working for the organisation is usually unpaid and the need to find a job and economic stability makes it difficult, especially for recently arrived refugees, to engage in the activities of an organisation:

“It is difficult to enlarge the association involving other refugee volunteers who are as committed as we are. Not because they do not care, but because they have other urgent priorities and are struggling to survive.”

A. S.

“The activities [of the organisation] can suffer from many ups-and-downs, depending on availability of volunteers as well as of beneficiaries who may decide to move to other areas seeking for better integration prospects.”

S. H.

At an organisational level, instead, the main problems are **communication** and **fundraising**. Indeed, **sustainability** is a big issue for refugee-led organisations as well as for any other small organisation in Italy. As a solution, refugee-led organisations could attract human resources and acquire skills for

fundraising in order to avoid being co-opted by larger organisations, especially when considering big projects such as EU funded projects:

“Se non hai tanta esperienza ti chiedono il partenariato quelle associazioni grandi [che poi] prendono la tua idea e la gestiscono loro [...] quindi si fatica ad andare avanti.”¹⁵”

S. O.

Nonetheless, these organisations have already achieved a lot: for instance, the cooperative *World in Progress* has reached with its services around 11,000 people since its inception in 2013, including refugees, third country nationals more in general, and Italians. The association *Generazione Ponte*, instead, has established a strong network, has engaged in Covid-19 related support activities, and has participated to a local festival where its members could promote their awareness raising campaign. As a further example, the association *Associazione Donne Africa Subsahariana e Il Generazione* has created, with the support of the Municipality of Torino and other private funders, a number of services to support refugee and migrant women, including sex workers, and the association is part of a local institutional roundtable discussing how to address racism.

The gender issue is one of the issues that have to be addressed in the future, also in terms of representativeness. Among refugees it is crucial to be aware that men are often the majority while women have peculiar and serious issues related to their living conditions as refugees in Italy that need to be discussed and tackled.

Refugees

The refugees interviewed, with different nationalities and different lengths of stay in Italy, all had previous contacts with both an historic refugee-led organisation, Mosaico Refugees, and other non-refugee led organisations. They refer to Mosaico’s holistic approach to their problems (e.g., taking care of sanitary issues, as well as nutrition, job and legal issues, especially of refugees living in the streets) which is totally different from what they have experienced with other organisations. What emerged is that **a refugee-led organisation** like Mosaico, **differently from other organisations**, can establish a relationship based on **trust** and **shared experiences** with refugees that are not part of the organisation:

“E’ importante perché la gente con cui hai a che fare dell’associazione sono persone che già conosci; hai fatto le stesse esperienze; è molto più facile, non direi che è come le altre organizzazioni. Le associazioni non di rifugiati non riescono a vedere alcune cose che solo l’esperienza comune può far capire. E’ anche più facile entrare in contatto con le persone dell’associazione di rifugiati, perché si ha lo stesso passato, quindi è più facile riconoscerli dentro questa dinamica.”

¹⁵ “If you don’t have a strong experience, bigger NGOs ask for your partnership [and then] they take your idea and manage it [...] in this way it’s hard to keep moving forward”

L. M., refugee

In order to become able **to voice their concerns and push for change**, the refugees interviewed have evidenced several issues that need to be tackled and abilities that need to be developed. In particular, they all underlined the need to **know their own rights** before asking for them:

“Ad esempio tanta gente pensava in questi anni che senza permesso di soggiorno non sarebbero potuti andar dal medico ma in realtà non è vero! Il problema è che non solo loro [i rifugiati] non lo sanno ma anche gli impiegati pubblici dei servizi non lo sanno spesso. Questa poca conoscenza dei diritti uniti alla difficoltà di esprimersi e farsi capire e all’essere intimiditi dalle istituzioni rende tutto più difficile.”

L. M., refugee

Storytelling was mentioned as an important competence to be acquired to be able to voice concerns and to change the narrative about refugees in Italy. Of course, this requires in turn a **good command of the language of the host country**. Another significant element mentioned is the need to create or find spaces of exchange where refugees can express themselves.

Lastly, refugees clearly see a **lack of representation in the Italian institutions**, which not only ignore their need but also fuel the type narrative about refugees that refugees themselves consider discriminatory. This lack of representation could be addressed by having refugees fighting for their own rights also through politics:

“L’etichettatura [dei rifugiati] da parte dei politici e dei media è discriminazione...Sono necessari dei rappresentanti dei rifugiati a livello politico che si battano per i rifugiati per mettere delle leggi per mettere un argine alla discriminazione.”¹⁶

L. M.

Non-refugee-led organisations

According to both experts and representatives of non-refugee led organisations interviewed, who have and have had a high level of interaction with refugees in Italy in the past decade or more, refugee-led organisations can emerge only after refugees have settled, found stability and a “sense of home” in the territory of arrival. According to interviewees, other organisations already present on the same territory – be those ethnic organisations or Italian associations – can act as catalysts for the creation of refugee-led organisations, even though it is easier for these organisations, especially the ones formed by refugees who arrived after 2015, to remain largely informal.

¹⁶ “The labelling [of refugees] coming from politicians and the media is discriminatory...we need refugees’ representatives within the political arena to fight for refugees rights and put an end to discriminatory practices.”

“Spesso [i rifugiati] sono persone che non sono qui da tanto tempo. Mi sembra che ci sia una difficoltà generale dell’associazionismo straniero ad arrivare a farsi ascoltare o a partecipare a una serie di finanziamenti in modo tale che la associazione possa arrivare ad avere una propria vita e un peso sociale e politico.”¹⁷

R. V., non-refugee led organisation representative

Therefore, refugee-led organisations in Italy rarely take part in partnerships and in consultations with other organisations, except for the ones that are well-structured and whose members have been in Italy for a long time, and usually only make quick appearances in conferences and workshops organized by other organisations. An issue that non-refugee led organisations share with refugee-led organisations is the need to access funding more easily and to build their capacities to be able to voice their concerns to a wider audience.

Government and other Stakeholders

Interviewing government representatives and other institutional stakeholders was not an easy task in this period of COVID-19 crisis. Nonetheless, the ones that accepted to be interviewed were eager to share their view on refugee-led organisations. In particular, they stressed that active participation of refugees is essential to become a member of the Italian society. At the individual level, participation is crucial because it supports the empowerment and the feeling of being part of a community. At a territorial level, participation of refugees to the socio-political and cultural life helps addressing the idea that refugees only need assistance by recognising their competences and their contribution as a value added for the territory itself. At the national level, refugees’ participation is crucial to ensure that democracy is well-functioning in Italy and to check “*lo stato di benessere complessivo della nostra democrazia*”¹⁸ (A. F., institutional actor).

What is missing in terms of competences that refugees need to be able to make their voice heard at the institutional level, according to this category of interviewees, is the knowledge of how institutions work and how they can be approached. Capacity building activities in this sense would be highly beneficial not only for refugee-led organisations, but also for institutions, which would be facilitated in finding an interlocutor.

¹⁷ “Often [refugees] are people who have not spent a lot of time in Italy. It seems to me that there is a general difficulty for associations led by foreigners to be heard or to participate in fundraising activities; this hinders the ability of these associations to survive and voice their socio-political positions.”

¹⁸ “The overall health status of our democracy”.

Part IV – Analysis

In Italy, the **history of the governance of reception**, the **heterogeneous approach to reception conditions of non-profit and profit organisation**, and the **level of activation of the local civil society** has had a significant **impact** on refugees' integration and participation to the socio-cultural and political life of the host community and thus **on the development of refugee-led organisations**¹⁹. RLCOs whose members have been residing in Italy for a long time (type A) and organisations led by refugees arrived after 2015 (type B) usually have their headquarters in cities where there is not only a strong presence of diaspora movements but also a strongly organised and locally rooted Italian civil society that has been engaged since the beginning of the 2000s with refugees' reception and integration (i.e., Turin, Milan, Bologna and Rome – see Figure 4). Overall, Intersos and UNHCR dataset counts **around 30 fully fledged refugee-led organisations that are currently active in Italy**. “Type C” organisations, usually led by both Italians and recently arrived refugees, are the ones that have appeared all over the Italian territory, including in remote and rural areas, to provide specific services and to promote the labour market integration of refugees in the communities that host them²⁰.

The **reasons why, overall, only few refugees are engaged in the associative life of a refugee-led organisations** in Italy are numerous, but three appear to be the most relevant. First, refugees in Italy are generally struggling to become or to remain self-sufficient, to find adequate housing, to access health and social services, and the Covid-19 crisis has only exacerbated these problems²¹. The opening quote of this report clearly depicts the scenario in which too many refugees are still living in Italy today. Second, personal networks are crucial for survival in a new country; for people like refugees who do not have strong networks in the country of arrival, an organisation can be a lifeline but it is the **personal connection** with the organisations' representatives which makes the difference. Third, it is not easy to understand the value added of helping and sensibilising others within an organisation. Finally, participation depends on awareness, engagement and drive – crucial factors for the setup and development of any type of advocacy organisation –, which differ considerably from person to person. Due to the chaotic changes in the refugee population, particularly of the past five years, we can affirm that nowadays times are still not ripe enough to draw anything more than preliminary conclusions about the factors that influence the presence or absence of RLCOs in Italy.

However, all the stakeholders interviewed consider refugees' participation in the Italian socio-cultural and political life and, possibly, even representation at the political level as quintessential to defy the current negative narrative proposed by media and politicians alike:

¹⁹ See Part I.

²⁰ See Part II.

²¹ For an insight on the effects of COVID-19 on integration in Italy see: <https://trafig.eu/blog/migrant-integration-and-marginalisation-in-times-of-lockdown-some-reflections-from-italy>

“A destra ci attaccano e ci dicono che siamo spacciatori e criminali, mentre a sinistra ci dicono che siamo poveracci che hanno bisogno di aiuto... noi diciamo che siamo persone [...] e che ci sono molti rifugiati preparati che sono medici, infermieri giornalisti.”²²

A. S., member of a refugee-led organisation

Indeed, some refugee-led organisations are fighting stereotypes by using their competences to support public services in answering to the needs of vulnerable people (including Italians) and third country nationals²³.

Among the main **challenges** faced by refugee-led organisations access and ability to secure **funding** is considered crucial by all interviewees for the survival of these organisations. This is achievable through either the acquisition of specific competences (e.g., proposal writing, reporting) and thus the creation of *ad hoc* capacity building courses which should include also trainings on refugees’ rights and on how public institutions work in Italy, or the simplification of funding procedures:

“Il maggiore problema che abbiamo sono gli strumenti e la capacità di raccolta dei fondi.”²⁴

P. A., refugee-led organisation representative

[...] Sarebbe quindi necessario predisporre dei bandi per l’accesso ai finanziamenti semplificati, e questo potrebbe essere utile non solo per le associazioni di rifugiati, ma in linea generale anche per le associazioni più piccole e meno dotate di strumenti utili al lavoro di progettazione.”²⁵

R. V., expert

All focus groups and interviews touched upon the issue of the **relationship between representation and participation of refugees through refugee-led organisations**. The RLCO UNIRE and its members have clearly in mind the fine line between the two concepts and the risk of co-optation that derives from being the only national refugee-led organisation clearly aimed at advocating for refugees’ rights in Italy:

“Abbiamo pensato di creare la prima rete di rifugiati nazionale per prendere voce anche perché sono sempre gli altri a parlare per noi. Il tavolo asilo nazionale²⁶ non ha

²² “From the right [i.e., right wing parties and likeminded people in Italy] they tell us that we are drug dealers and criminals, while from the left [i.e., left wing parties and likeminded people in Italy] they tell us that we are poor people who need help. We say that we are people ... and that there are many prepared refugees who are doctors, nurses, journalists”.

²³ See Part III.

²⁴ “The biggest problem we have are the tools and the ability to raise funds”

²⁵ “[...] It would therefore be necessary to imagine simplified calls for funding, and this could be useful not only for refugee associations, but also for smaller associations having less resources for project management.”

²⁶ The national asylum roundtable is composed of 17 civil society organisations (plus UNHCR as an observer) which have the largest share the management of refugees’ reception (both SPRAR and CAS) and integration projects in Italy. This roundtable is not only a venue to coordinate the delivery of reception and integration services but also an advocacy venue in which refugees’ voice is still absent.

rappresentanti rifugiati e questa cosa è una delle gravi motivazioni che ci hanno spinto a creare UNIRE.²⁷

A founder of UNIRE

"Noi non possiamo rappresentare tutti i rifugiati, nemmeno in politica il presidente può rappresentare" tutti gli italiani.²⁸

A founder of UNIRE

An important issue evidenced particularly by refugee-led organisations' representatives is that venues for refugees to interact with local and national institutions are often hard to find:

"C'è poca interazione con le istituzioni e poca possibilità di portare la voce dei rifugiati. Prima c'era la scusa che non c'era una rete dei rifugiati con cui interagire....Ora che c'è la rete di rifugiati [i.e., UNIRE] le istituzioni non sono disponibili per potere realmente comunicare veramente e migliorare le politiche... facciamo veramente fatica sia a livello locale, che a livello nazionale.²⁹ a founder of UNIRE i rifugiati e i migranti ... vedevamo che molti erano considerati come un oggetto a cui si dava l'opportunità, "gentilmente", si consentiva di dare loro voce solo per raccontare "mi hanno accolto bene" e si fermava lì.³⁰

A. A., member of a refugee-led organisation

An interesting institutional venue for migrants and refugees to voice their concerns is the so-called "Consulta delle Culture" (i.e., Council of Cultures) of Palermo, a municipal advisory body, which was born as an experiment in 2013 and is still alive³¹.

However, all interviewees stress that representation and participation have been in crisis mode in Italy since the beginning of the 2000s. Against this background, interviewees have expressed the view that refugee-led organisations should be considered as one among the many forms of aggregation to express refugees' voice.

"Non dobbiamo dimenticare che il rifugiato è anche un'etichetta burocratica inventata da noi. Quindi considerare l'elemento del rifugiato come comune denominatore di condivisione di valori e obiettivi è un'astrazione che si basa su una categoria sociale costruita su procedure e una burocrazia; peraltro è una categoria da cui spesso le persone

²⁷ "We thought about creating the first national refugee network to finally have a voice because until now other people have spoken for us. The national asylum roundtable has no refugees' representatives and this is one of the serious reasons that pushed us to create UNIRE."

²⁸ "We cannot represent all refugees, not even the president can represent all Italians"

²⁹ "There is less interaction with institutions and less possibility of bringing the voice of refugees. First there was the excuse that there was no refugee network to interact with ... Now that there is a refugee network, the institutions are not available to really communicate with us and improve policies ... we really struggle both at local and national level"

³⁰ "refugees and migrants ... we saw that many were considered as objects, or at least they "kindly" gave themselves the opportunity to be given a voice only to tell about how they were "welcomed me well" and stopped there."

³¹ For more information see: https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/nasce_la_consulta_delle_culture_di_palermo (Italian only).

cercano di smarcarsi... Le associazioni di rifugiati sono importanti per portare avanti questioni politiche ma questo non solo perché sono rifugiati, ma anche perché è una spinta che arriva da loro in quanto persone. Non necessariamente il rifugiato ne sa delle questioni dell'asilo. Importante che gli operatori abbiano antenne sensibili a intuire competenze delle persone e favorirne lo sviluppo. Ma se si forza la mano su associazionismo [dei rifugiati] fai folklore.³²

C. M., expert

Finally, it is important to underline that beyond organisations that have a certain degree of formality, over the last years there has been an increase in informal advocacy movements. *Black lives Matters*, *Io accolgo*, *No borders*, to name a few, but also other protest movement, such as the ones currently growing in the logistics and agriculture sectors in Italy, in which also refugees play a role.

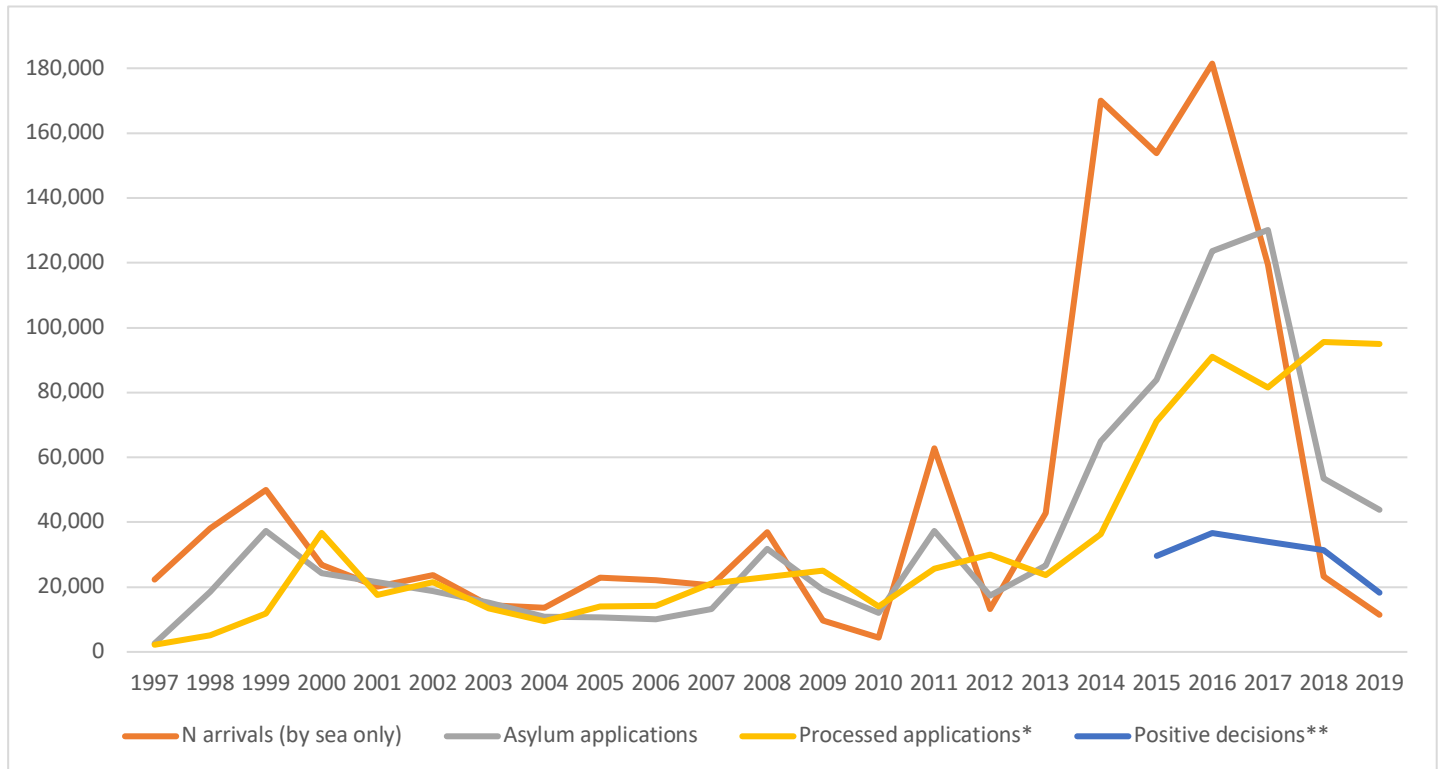
"Non si può essere stranieri per sempre" ("we cannot remain foreigners forever")

Motto of the refugee-led organisation Generazione Ponte

³² "We must not forget that 'refugee' is a bureaucratic term invented by us. Therefore, considering the refugee element as a common denominator for sharing values and objectives is an abstraction based on a social category, which is in turn based on procedures and bureaucracy; besides, 'refugee' is a label from which people often try to get away... Refugee associations are important for bringing political issues to the fore, but this is not necessarily because they are refugees, but because they feel this drive as people. Refugees not necessarily know about asylum issues. So, on one hand it's important that social workers [i.e., the ones working in reception centres] pay special attention to people's skills and support their development, but on the other hand if you push too hard to support the creation of [refugee-led] associations it becomes folklore."

Annex I: Figures

Figure 1: Comparison between arrivals by sea, asylum applications, processed applications, and positive decisions in Italy (1997–2019)



*examined within the same year, independently from when the asylum request was filed

** asylum, subsidiary and national protection status. The latter has been erased by the Security and immigration Decree of 2018

Source: authors' own elaboration of data retrieved from ISMU (<https://www.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Sbarchi-richiedenti-asilo.pdf>) and Italian Ministry of Interior (http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/nuove_schede_rie_pilogative_al_31_dicembre_2019_0.pdf)

Figure 2: Changes to the Italian reception system introduced by the “Security and immigration Decree” of October 5th, 2018

BEFORE 5 October 2018	AFTER 5 October 2018
Two-pronged reception system with different standards, locally managed either by Prefectures or by municipalities in cooperation with civil society organisations.	Consolidation of the differentiation of reception conditions for asylum seekers, on the one hand and international protection holders on the other.
CAS (extraordinary reception centres):	First reception: (CAS) - for asylum seekers only

- born in 2004 as extraordinary measure and managed by Prefectures, which for profit and non-profit actors

- great variety in quality of reception and service provision, depending on the managing entity: from provision of food, shelter and language courses in isolated collective centres to provision of food, shelter, legal and psychological support and a wide range of integration services in small, dispersed accommodations (similar to SPRAR)

SPRAR (ordinary reception centres):

- born in 2001 with a bottom-up approach and managed by Municipalities, usually in cooperation with civil society organisations
- provision of food, shelter, legal and psychological support and a wide range of integration services often in small, dispersed accommodations

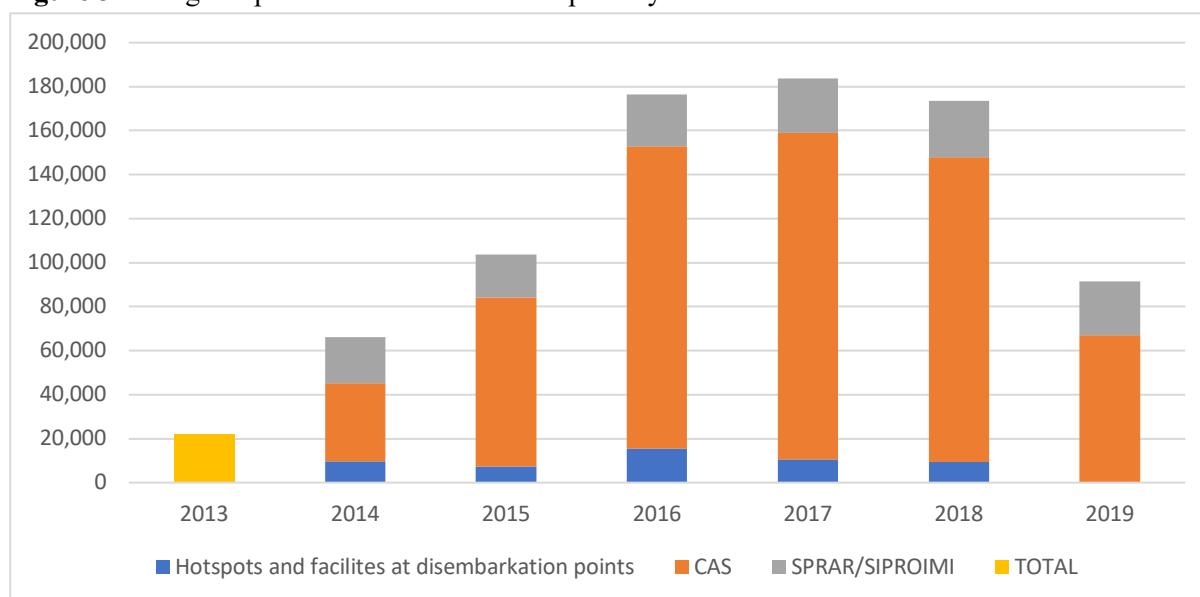
- managed by for profit and non-profit actors selected through competitive bids issued by the local Prefectures

Second reception (SIPROIMI)

- for international protection holders only
- managed by Municipalities, usually in cooperation with locally rooted civil society organisations

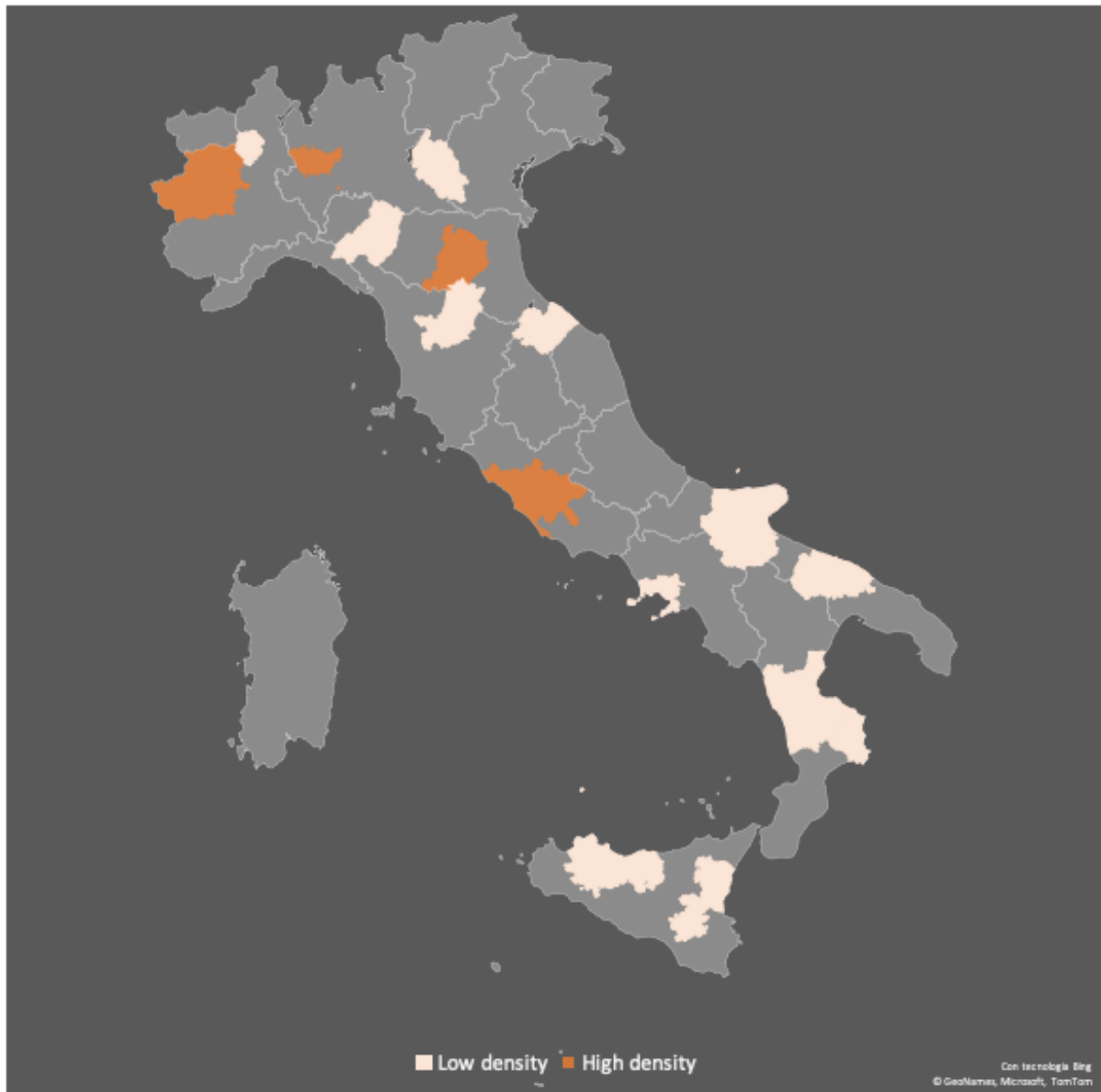
Source: authors' own elaboration

Figure 3: Refugees' presence in the Italian reception system



Source: authors' own elaboration of data retrieved from: <https://www.openpolis.it/parole/che-cosa-sono-i-cas-lo-sprar-e-gli-hotspot/>

Figure 4: Refugee-led organisations' (type A and type B) presence in Italy, per province



Source: authors' own elaboration of data retrieved from Intersos and UNHCR

Annex II: Focus groups and interviews

All Focus Groups and interviews took place between June and July 2020. In this period, public offices and many organisations in Italy were still in reduced and smart working mode due to COVID-19 sanitarian restrictions. Therefore, the researchers experienced some difficulties in organising the focus groups and interviews, particularly with public entities. As an example, representatives of the municipality of Turin and the municipality of Naples cannot be interviewed before September 2020. The researchers conducted three focus groups, one per each category of stakeholders (i.e., refugees, non-refugee led organisations and experts, and refugee led organisations) except for the category “government and other stakeholders”. Representatives of this category were interviewed individually.

Focus Groups

Refugees

Name of interviewed entity: refugees with different countries of origin (Nigeria, Sudan, Niger, Palestine, Gambia) and different migration histories.

Date of the focus group: June 26th, 2020.

Known information on the group composition: four men and one woman, aged between 25 and 35 years old, who have been living in Italy for 2 to 5 years.

Non-refugee led organisations

Name of interviewed entities:

- Ires Piemonte - Public Research Institute: www.ires.piemonte.it
- Naga (association): www.naga.it
- UNHCR www.unhcr.it
- CIAC Onlus <http://www.ciaconlus.org/>
- Intersos: <https://www.intersos.org/>

Date of the focus group: July 16th, 2020

Known information on the group composition:

- Ires Piemonte: based in Turin is a public research institute that manages funds and projects focused also, but not only, on social inclusion for foreign people, asylum seekers and refugees.
- Naga Association: based in Milan, this association counts over 400 volunteers operating in the field of health, legal and social assistance for foreign citizens, as well as carrying out training documentation and lobbying activities on the institutions.
- UNHCR: international organisation co-managing the national program (PartecipAzione) whose goal is to promote the protection and active participation of refugees in the Italian economic, social and cultural life.
- Intersos – former employee: NGO managing the program PartecipAzione.

- CIAC Onlus: active since 2001 in Parma, is an NGO operating in the field of migration by managing reception projects, social help desks, and field research on migration and integration topics.

Refugee led Organisations

Name of interviewed entity:

- Generazione Ponte: <https://www.generazioneponte.com/>

Based in Turin, founded in 2018, the Association aims to promote and disseminate a culture of peaceful coexistence, dialogue and intercultural exchange that respects diversity, focusing on young refugees and new Italian citizens. Abroad, it supports informal groups and youth associations through support for training and cultural activities, carries out international cooperation and exchanges, collaborates between public and private bodies in the North and South of the world for activities of co-development and decentralized cooperation.

- World in Progress: <https://www.facebook.com/World-IN-Progress-2325769807653989>

Based In Parma, founded in 2013, is a cooperative with the aim of promoting socio-economic integration opportunities and the possibility of autonomy for refugee people.

- UNIRE: <https://www.facebook.com/unirerifugiati/>

Based in Rome, founded in 2019, UNIRE is a refugee national association, aiming to network the refugees' associations on the Italian territory who work on inclusion issues, with the aim of discussing, sharing good practices and examples of socio-political insertion. It aims to build a national network, aimed at spreading a new image of refugees and asylum seekers in the social fabric of the city.

- Donne Africa sub-Sahariana e II generazione: www.donneafrica.org

The association, based in Turin, aims to support women and their needs, from help with requests for documents to looking for a job. All the actions are not limited only to obtaining the exhaustion of the request, but to the involvement of the applicant in an active participation in the activities proposed by the association and / or by the local entrants.

Date of the interview/focus group: July 17th, 2020

Known information on the group composition:

- All the participants in the focus group are president of the associations represented
- They are from: Somalia (2), Afghanistan (2) and Nigeria (1)
- Age: all members are aged between 25 and 40 years old;
- Gender: 4 males, 1 female;
- All members have been in Italy for more than 5 years.

Interviews with Government and other Stakeholders

Interviewee n. 1

Name of interviewed entity: Municipality of Turin

Date of the interview: July 23th, 2020

Known information on the interviewed entity:

The municipality of Turin has been involved for more than 30 years in managing the reception and other issues asylum seekers, refugees, victims of torture and trafficking challenges. It has a dedicated branch dedicated to managing reception projects (SPRAR/SIPROIMI) and policies for social inclusion.

Interviewee n. 2

Name of interviewed entity: Turin Prefecture

Date of the interview: July 27th, 2020

Known information on the interviewed entity:

The Turin prefecture is involved in the management of the former extraordinary reception centres (CAS) for asylum seekers and refugees in the province of Turin. Moreover, the prefecture is involved in the implementation of projects focused on supporting social inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees.

Interviewee n. 3

Name of interviewed entity: Emilia-Romagna Region

Date of the interview/focus group: July 24th, 2020

Known information on the interviewed entity:

The Emilia-Romagna Region has been extremely proactive since the early 2000s in addressing issues related to the integration of refugees and third country nationals and remains one of the most active regions on these topics.