

FACT SHEET

**PATHWAYS TO
ACCOMPANYING
AUTONOMY:
A REFLECTION BASED
ON THE ITALIAN
CONTEXT¹**

BACKGROUND

The absence of a shared legal framework, both at the national and international level, for the Italian Humanitarian Corridors initiative allows the organizations involved in the process to structure reception according to vastly different rationales and rules. Based on interviews regarding the Italian and wider context, two main categories of reception initiatives can be identified:

- reception models based on experiences from government-led projects, such as the Extraordinary Reception Centers (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria) and the Integrated Reception System (Sistema di Accoglienza Integrato) involving professionals (social workers, educators, psychologists, etc.), often supported by volunteers, and following pre-established support phases;
- volunteer-led reception models, typically managed by volunteer groups, often connected to religious organizations, without predefined support phases.

The duration of support, type of services offered, involvement of operators and volunteers, and level of economic support vary widely across contexts, depending not only on the type of reception model but also on the specific approach of the managing organization. Over the years, these parameters have evolved and continue to vary significantly based on the territorial contexts where they are implemented.

Funding for these reception initiatives depends entirely on the organizations promoting the protocols. Resources are typically raised independently through donations or specific grants such as the Italian Otto per Mille funds.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS SHAPING RECEPTION OFFERED AND IMPACT ON THE INTEGRATION PATHWAYS

In reception models based on experiences from government-led projects, the **duration** is clearly defined at the outset and communicated to the individual through a memorandum of understanding signed in the initial days of their stay outlining the duration of support, conditions for early termination, included services, and detailed descriptions of benefits such as financial assistance for daily expenses, healthcare costs, transportation, and other essential supports. In more structured projects, benefits and operator involvement in support activities are gradually reduced, typically at three-month intervals, to help individuals transition to independence. On average, these structured pathways last between 12 and 24 months, with some exceptions.

In reception settings managed by volunteer groups, typically supporting smaller numbers of individuals for sustainability reasons, there is often greater flexibility regarding the duration of support. While some agreements may include indicative timelines, these arrangements can sometimes extend for several years. The timeline for achieving full autonomy is, therefore, more negotiable, though it remains constrained by limited financial resources.

Overall, the varied approaches reflect differing priorities and resource availabilities, but all emphasize the importance of transitioning individuals toward self-sufficiency while balancing flexibility and sustainability.

The duration of the reception period can significantly impact integration pathways and the level of autonomy achievable. While the rationale behind setting a fixed time limit for reception—primarily due to financial constraints—is understood, many participants reported substantial difficulties in coping with rigid timelines typical of more structured projects. Some interviewees highlighted the challenges of managing all the required activities for

¹ This factsheet summarizes research effected during the lifetime of the COMET project. Using one of the active Humanitarian Corridor routes as a case study, it contains useful reflections for all COMET partners and, indeed, for those managing pathways external to the COMET project. This factsheet is an excerpt from the report *Humanitarian Corridors: From the Assessment Process to Support towards Autonomy. An analysis of experiences and expectations*, Debora Boaglio, Eleonora Voli, Associazione Frantz Fanon.

autonomy-building, especially during the initial post-arrival phase (language courses, job searches, bureaucratic processes, etc.). For many, this phase represents both the realization of being safe—often for the first time in years—and the emotional burden of being far from their families in an unfamiliar yet eagerly awaited environment. This duality necessitates adjustment, a time to “arrive” both physically and mentally. Interviews revealed that this period of pause, coupled with the difficulty some individuals face in immediately becoming active and proactive, sometimes leads to tensions with operators. Whilst operators may interpret these attitudes as a lack of motivation, these dynamics may cause individuals to feel a profound sense of loneliness and abandonment by the project. Flexible timelines for the reception period, and timely and effective support interventions for professional, educational, or other integration pathways are often deemed essential for envisioning a process aligned with the individual’s profile, history, and expectations but such perspectives may be curtailed by the restrictive timelines of reception pathways or ineffective support.

A **memorandum of understanding** becomes a valuable tool for the professionals involved in these projects—fully aware of the system’s limitations and the importance of maximizing the available time. This instrument establishes a clear framework from the first day, guiding the dialogue with the individual. Additionally, it serves as a critical resource for creating a relational structure that helps set boundaries on the operator’s involvement, thus preventing professionally challenging situations that could also impact their psychological well-being.

Interviews with operators revealed significant and ongoing concern about the success of the pathways, often accompanied by frustration when individuals needed to engage fully with the proposed autonomy-building projects. In this complex landscape, operators frequently work on “supporting autonomy” within an inherently unwelcoming broader social, cultural, political, and economic context. For example, the so-called “Refugee Gap” (Ires, 2021) still heavily affects the labour market in Italy. Professional training pathways often lead to underemployment, “ethnicization of labour” (a concept initially articulated by Wallerstein and Balibar and recently revisited in the Italian context by Taliani, 2015), and a general lack of resources in critical areas such as housing searches and recognition of educational qualifications.

Arriving in the host country clearly represents a significant **paradigm shift** for those welcomed. This transition fundamentally alters the grammar of interpersonal relationships between the beneficiaries and the system’s representatives. Before departure, relationships in the field and access to Humanitarian Corridors are based on mutual trust mechanisms. Upon arrival in the reception contexts, particularly in more structured settings, these relationships increasingly formalize, manifesting as practices, protocols and deadlines that define the relational dynamics among the involved parties.

Interviews strongly highlight how arriving in Italy profoundly alters the understanding of the word “**privileged**,” often used by staff to describe beneficiaries.

For those hosted, undergoing an assessment process justifying their right to arrive safely in Europe and reside there significantly impacts their expectations, how they perceive their migration project and envision their future. Being among those who were “chosen” often triggers an imaginative process, leading beneficiaries to project themselves into a reception reality capable of fulfilling their aspirations for success. The reception project is often experienced as a space for embracing desired prospects, with the staff seen as facilitators of this journey toward reclaiming their freedom, security, and success—resuming their lives where they were interrupted.

For staff, working within Humanitarian Corridors is perceived as catering to a “privileged” group compared to governmental reception programs, a perception stemming from the fact that these individuals have been able to reach European territory through safe channels, avoiding the violence and trauma associated with irregular migration routes. Due to this notion of privilege, a strong expectation of unconditional adherence to the proposed integration project frequently emerges in staff accounts, coupled with the assumption that the so-called “autonomy level” required to exit the reception program can be achieved relatively quickly. The latter is particularly evident in recent years, as the criteria for selecting individuals have increasingly shifted between “vulnerability” and “integrability.”

The operators’ narrative thus reveals how this term introduces a new meaning compared to the one attributed to it by the people being welcomed. The word “privileged” seems to mark the beginning of a new phase of identity and migratory (re)negotiation for the individuals being received. From this moment, the idea often emerges that, having been fortunate enough to arrive safely in Italy and benefit from a reception program “reserved for a select few,” those hosted have incurred a sort of debt to be repaid through motivation and collaboration. This oscillation

between the semantic fields of rights, aid, and merit significantly shapes the relational dynamics between operators and beneficiaries. Such dynamics, particularly evident in the Humanitarian Corridors framework and present in social work more broadly, can influence the relationship with beneficiaries regardless of the European context in which it unfolds. As a result, the relationship between hosts and those hosted becomes a tense and contested space, often reflecting what Fassin (2015) describes as a “tension between inequality and solidarity, and between domination and assistance.” This tension characterizes many dynamics in the reception context, often leading to conflict and suffering for both parties involved and, at times, to the failure of integration pathways.

On the one hand, by ensuring safe travel, the Humanitarian Corridors mechanism sends a strong message of solidarity. By eliminating a significant inequality, it recognizes the Other as equal. On the other hand, during the realization of the reception process, systemic limitations frequently lead to mechanisms where beneficiaries’ expectations are significantly downsized, thereby re-establishing a relational distance with them. Staff –mainly volunteers – tend to view beneficiaries as individuals to be “saved,” imagining them as inherently grateful toward the project and the host country. This **vision** is often contradicted, especially when operators and volunteers interact with individuals who do not align with such an image and present profiles remarkably like their own. Although conflicts or severe circumstances have disrupted these individuals’ lives, many led socio-economic lives comparable to those in Europe before such events. This creates a direct and constant confrontation for those working in reception, fostering dynamics of mirroring with the beneficiaries. These individuals often strongly demand equal collaboration in shaping their migration journey. This factor influences the reception process in many ways. The perception of this similarity can generate frustration among team members who, aware of the limitations in resources and time, foresee the risk of being unable to support the beneficiaries’ envisioned migration project.

Drawing on Fassin (2015), this context often brings forth the phenomenon known as the “compassion fatigue.” This refers to the frustration staff feel when dealing with beneficiaries who appear not to understand the system in which the staff member is both a victim and, reluctantly, a complicit participant—and to which the beneficiary refuses to conform. This compassion sometimes manifests as more explicit, reactive attempts to control the welcomed individual. At this stage, hosted people often express a marked ambivalence between gratitude for their “gifts” and resistance to staff demands and the system they represent (Fassin, 2015). As they renegotiate their subjectivity within the reception context, beneficiaries may, through various requests, languages, and behaviors, emphasize that migrants are not merely temporary presences. Consequently, they cannot remain outsiders—like guests—nor be confined within the asymmetric power dynamics that define the relationship between host and hosted (Khosravi, 2010).

In volunteer-based settings, the **gap between the expected and actual beneficiary** often provokes significant anxieties about the volunteers’ ability to manage and meet the demands of the Other. When volunteers perceive this difference, they question whether they can offer hosted people adequate pathways. Since the availability of services depends on the volunteer group, they often feel burdened with fulfilling the beneficiaries’ desires.

These ambivalences and divergences frequently result in an implicit demand for beneficiaries to gradually abandon their status as “rights holders” and conform to the identity of “immigrant” (Sayad, 2002). This implicit demand becomes more pressing as the end of the reception pathway approaches. It is formalized and enacted through protocols, signed agreements, and numerous daily practices, which regulate the hosted people presence and define the boundaries of their subjectivity and journey in the host country.

Interviews reveal that the risk of reproducing these power dynamics and regulating others’ subjectivity appears lower in volunteer-run settings. Here, beneficiaries are supported with greater flexibility and personal engagement, fostering more equitable and long-lasting relationships. However, these volunteer-based projects are challenging. Relying solely on private resources and adopting a more family-oriented reception model is difficult to replicate for significant numbers of people due to sustainability concerns, particularly as the indefinite timelines of individual support often extend to many years of assistance. Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that entrusting accompaniment to volunteers without adequate professional training to address the complexities of relationships in reception contexts can expose these projects to numerous difficulties. On the other hand, while large-scale projects managed under governmental reception models may seem more vulnerable to becoming predetermined pathways with limited flexibility beyond what is established by reception contracts, it is essential to recognize that the attempt to systematize this mechanism reflects a desire to create a concrete, sustainable alternative to sea crossings. Additionally, the humanitarian corridors model inspires hope that it could be extended to more people. It is crucial to

highlight the importance and value brought to these efforts by involving professionals with academic backgrounds and field experience. These skills are essential for implementing reception projects sensitive to the beneficiaries' needs. Involving professionals in managing reception means engaging individuals, focusing more on reflecting on their interventions' implicit aspects. They bring greater competence and awareness to managing complex situations, particularly those involving personal engagement. This approach may include using tools such as supervision and training where necessary.

Interviews revealed that reception professionals' **working conditions** are a critical factor directly affecting the pathways' quality. Specifically, reciprocal mirroring with beneficiaries who aspire to pathways aligned with their expectations intensifies the emotional burden on operators. This increases the need for these professionals to create emotional distance from the individuals they assist. High turnover among reception professionals, in addition to reflecting stress, precarious employment, and frustration from direct exposure to complex situations, contributes to a negative perception of these roles, as noted by some beneficiaries. Operators are often seen not as stable reference points, but as mere executors of policies defined at higher decision-making levels, undermining trust in their role.

In contexts where reception is managed by volunteer networks, free from the dynamics of professionalization, the ambivalence of **personal involvement** becomes evident. On the one hand, the fluidity of relational boundaries facilitates the creation of informal support networks, which sometimes evolve into friendships. These connections can aid inclusion processes, foster relationships with the local community, and help develop weak ties supporting beneficiaries after the reception pathway ends. On the other hand, this relational fluidity can lead to significant challenges, especially during conflicts. Often unforeseen by those offering support, these moments may be interpreted through a personal or relational lens, overlooking the dimension of difference and the non-belonging of the Other. A notable example is the complex situation of "secondary movements." According to the interviews, volunteer groups often experience such situations with great disappointment, feeling they have failed in some way. This can make it harder to recognize these events as expressions of individual autonomy and as part of a personal project different from the one proposed and shared by the group.

Another challenge within volunteer networks relates to maintaining **sustained and continuous participant engagement**. In professional contexts, despite turnover challenges, one operator can be replaced by another, ensuring operational continuity. However, this is only sometimes feasible within volunteer networks, where participation and motivation can fluctuate over time, sometimes abruptly. This variability can significantly alter the structure of the reception project itself. Moreover, it is typical for a network engaged in a multi-year reception project to be reluctant to undertake another project immediately afterward. This dynamic further underscores the issue of the sustainability of such initiatives on a larger scale, highlighting the need for long-term strategies to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of reception efforts.

A distinctive feature across the different contexts analyzed is the ability to implement practical and effective support measures tailored to the specific needs of the individuals being received. These measures include access to housing, employment opportunities, professional or academic training programs, and pathways for recognizing academic qualifications. In these areas, collaborative **networks involving public and private services** play a crucial role, serving as a decisive factor in devising and executing concrete solutions. Building and maintaining these networks requires years of work and constant commitment. At the same time, the time-limited nature of reception pathways makes it essential to have, ideally in advance of specific needs arising, a network of contacts capable of addressing individuals' diverse and complex requirements. While the nature of geographically distributed reception systems leads to inherent variability in the strength and effectiveness of such networks, which can differ significantly across territories, it remains essential to carefully evaluate the resources and actual capacities of the areas involved in reception projects. Ongoing efforts should focus on expanding and maintaining this support network to ensure its functionality and effectiveness.

Among the areas with the greatest need for intervention are housing solutions, recognition of academic qualifications, enrollment in professional training programs, and access to the labour market. To address these challenges, it is recommended that local reception teams be supported in establishing and strengthening effective collaborations with public services and private social entities. It is vital to maintain, consolidate, and expand these networks over time through continuous efforts to ensure increasingly structured and sustainable reception initiatives.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The reflections outlined above emphasize the importance of providing **staff training, supervision, and broader opportunities for reflection** to foster a conception of reception that critically challenges traditional perceptions of “the immigrant.” There is a clear need for staff to acquire tools and skills to engage effectively with a user base that feels empowered and capable of articulating requests, expectations, desires, and needs in ways that differ significantly from those typically encountered in other settings.

Enhancing the tools and competencies of staff helps prevent frustration when it is not possible to meet the expectations of those they interact with. Furthermore, it would challenge the perception of subordination that traps both the individuals being received and the staff themselves. Providing more targeted training would also enable a reimagining of approaches to migration, allowing for responses that deviate from the norms established in government-run reception systems. In this context, Humanitarian Corridors offer a valuable opportunity to correct the European approach to the challenges of migration phenomena and interrogate the current reception system. By experimenting with new theories and methods, they can provide genuine alternatives that acknowledge the agency and complete subjectivity of the individuals being received.

Network collaboration is key. Based on findings from the interviews, the presence of formal and informal networks of organizations and entities capable of supporting the desired paths of individuals is a critical factor in challenging and mitigating the reproduction of power dynamics in reception. Interviewees often relied on informal networks to address system gaps, such as navigating bureaucratic hurdles or providing financial support when the formal system could not. Establishing synergy between these realms would aggregate economic resources and create a space to recognize individuals’ abilities, relational skills, and self-determination. Better reception experiences are observed where solid networks with local citizens, the surrounding area, and the relevant community are in place. In such projects, beneficiaries report a stronger sense of belonging and a better perception of safety and support. They emphasize the importance of maintaining consistent social relationships—especially with the Italian community—during their integration process. These networks are also vital in sustaining individuals once their reception path has ended.

Ensuring **more favourable working conditions for reception staff** is essential. These staff members are often the only reference point for those they support. However, in some contexts, beneficiaries report that limited staff availability—due to budget and time constraints—and high staff turnover creates challenges in their integration pathways. Many individuals describe feeling profound loneliness during and after their reception experience.

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