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Co-funded by the
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
of the European Union

REPORT

HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS: FROM THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS TO SUPPORT TOWARDS AUTONOMY: AN ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2015 Humanitarian Corridors have represented an invaluable opportunity for those who intend to apply for international protection to enter Europe safely. Therefore, this framework carries a transformative potential, offering an alternative to the dangers and violence that characterise sea or land migratory routes. In addition, it provides an opportunity to re-think the way migration and reception systems are conceived, by placing individuals at the centre and by promoting a solidarity and inclusion-based model which overcomes emergency logics.

Besides enabling safe entry to European territory for many people, the "COMET - COMplementary pathways nETwork" project has promoted new international reflections on the framework itself, aiming to foster a critical and in-depth analysis of its operational models. Such an approach paves the way for developing new forms and strategies aimed at improving current available tools, making them more suitable and in line with the needs and the specific requests of those involved, of refugee support workers[1] and volunteers directly engaged with Humanitarian Corridors. This process is aimed not only at improving the efficiency of practices, but also at contributing to a greater adherence to the protection of human rights and dignity.

It is within this framework that *Associazione Frantz Fanon* conducted research leading to the drafting of this report, with the aim of initiating in-depth reflections on Humanitarian Corridors, based on the testimonies of the refugee support workers and beneficiaries[2] who were involved in this initiative over the years. Through these testimonies, the research seeks to identify the strengths and challenges recognised by beneficiaries and refugee support workers. The aim is to develop reflections that can make the framework more efficient and suitable to meeting the needs and challenges it faces.

Semi-structured interviews with the refugee support workers who have worked in the field over the years enabled the history of the framework to its current development to be retraced. On the other hand, the opportunity to give a voice to some of the people who, over the years, have benefited from Humanitarian Corridors to reach Italy has made it possible to more precisely identify the main challenges they encountered during their journey, as well as the aspects that proved most meaningful and supportive for them.

It was with the intention of analysing the work implemented since 2015 retrospectively that the interviewees were mostly selected from among those involved in the first - albeit still relevant as as ever - Corridor from Lebanon promoted by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy and other civil society actors. Similarly, through the work done within the COMET network and the opportunity to conduct focus groups with partners and beneficiaries involved in the project in other European countries, the challenges encountered in this Corridor have been contextualised within a broader continuum, aligning with those identified in other regions and at different times. This approach aimed to foster further cross-cutting reflections on the framework itself, building a comprehensive picture of the work accomplished over the years.

This contribution analyses the framework as its unfolds, from the assessment process phase to support towards autonomy and project conclusion, aiming to identify the major thematic issues emerging from the testimonies collected. In this regard, the authors believe it is important to foster reflections from the theoretical framework of critical migration ethnopsychiatry. Particular emphasis is placed on the complex topic of expectations, which emerge among all the parties involved in the different phases of the framework. Such expectations have been addressed by the partners from the inception of the COMET project, when they committed to identifying challenges and implications. Building on the recognised importance of such a topical issue - difficult to manage yet crucial in shaping the relationships that characterise support relationships that are at the core of the intervention analysed - a willingness emerged to understand in-depth how such expectations are formed and their role in outlining the support paths for those involved.

This perspective is adopted throughout the report, with the aim of guiding reflections not in order to provide

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1 For brevity, the term *support workers* may be used throughout the text instead of the more comprehensive expression *refugee support workers*."

2 In this report, the term 'beneficiary' is used for clarity, while acknowledging its implications. As highlighted later in the report, this terminology can reinforce a narrative of passivity and subordination, overlooking the active role and capabilities of the individuals involved. However, in the absence of a widely accepted alternative, the term is retained with due caution.

definitive solutions, but rather to foster and sustain a debate on the current challenges that emerge from the data collected. We hope that such reflections will serve a starting point for future implementation and enhancement of the framework itself.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS[3] AND ITS GUIDING CRITERIA

The interviews conducted clearly show that the assessment process phase is a meaningful yet critical experience for the individuals supported by Humanitarian Corridors. It is also one of the most poignant in the process of the formation of the individuals' expectations about their future and their migratory project. The process is managed differently depending on the context, the protocols implemented by the different realities and the individual procedures of the promoting entity.

From the start, vulnerability has been the key criterion for the Humanitarian Corridors' assessment processes. Over time, it has become more complex and diversified, thus complexifying - in the eyes of the researcher - the specific criteria used for the procedures. When the framework was first initiated, the evaluation criterion was based, for instance, on the severity of specific vulnerabilities, which left a lot to interpretation. At the time, the individuals involved were primarily those with severe health conditions, whose prognoses affected their reception pathways, leading to prolonged and challenging exits from the programme.

Faced with the inevitable limitation of resources available for reception and support pathways - which in Italy are fully funded by the organisations implementing the framework - evaluation criteria were subsequently reviewed with the aim of balancing vulnerability and the time and economic sustainability of the support pathways in the host country. Other factors were subsequently added to the existence of specific vulnerabilities, including the level of "integrability" of the person, and the potential of the available reception programmes. The challenging search for and evaluation of a balance among these factors places the refugee support workers involved in the assessment process within a complex and difficult-to-justify dilemma. Hence, they report being perceived in evaluation contexts as possessing an undesired image of omnipotence, which is exceptionally difficult to manage professionally, especially given the psychological and moral burden that the act of "choosing" entails.

The lack of clear and shared criteria is understandable in the light of the different contexts and lack of a single juridical framework. However, it is important to note that this may be difficult to understand and manage for the individuals involved, be they support workers or beneficiaries.

For applicants, this framework may amplify the perceived pressure of having to be "sufficiently" vulnerable or motivated when being assessed by the support worker responsible for the assessment process. Often, the latter is seen as a sort of referee who possesses the ability to affect the fate of others. Therefore, responding to the Other's expectations creates an information market - information circulates via word-of-mouth, and social media - and is used by individuals when they meet those who hold the power to decide which of the candidates are suitable. In support workers, this factor fuels the feeling of being manipulated.

The process described can be better understood by the notion of "optimal vulnerability" proposed by Loïc Wacquant (2006) and its relations to a workfare framework. The author suggests that the framework creates a determined way of talking about and defining vulnerability. Consequently, candidates learn within and through the framework itself to use and manage the language of suffering in the required modality. Applicants for Humanitarian Corridors learn to define and self-perceive themselves based on the norms they believe are required and welcome by the framework itself. In this sense, the authors observed how, since its initial phases, the framework has outlined new subjectivities, which can respond to the tools made available by the destination country.

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3 The term "assessment process" refers to the phase that begins with the initial contact with an individual identified as potentially eligible to participate in a specific Humanitarian Corridor and concludes with their placement in the reception and support program best suited to their needs.

If, on the one hand, vulnerability is the key to access safe migration, on the other it outlines future possibilities. In such a performative environment, individuals are not only required to strike the perfect level of vulnerability. After they arrive, their autonomy will have to be equally optimal. Indeed, those being received will be required to have a drive towards initiative and building a programme-independent future. This needs to happen within the outlines defined by the framework itself, in a circular process of disciplining and self-disciplining. This process is not exempt from challenges and contradictions pertaining to the tension between the individual's pursuit of autonomy, and the limitations imposed by the pre-defined reception pathways to which they need to adapt. The subjectivities of those in reception pathways are slowly built over time by the framework itself and within the social, cultural, political and economic norms that designed it. As the framework unfolds, individuals may be stuck between opposite requests - vulnerability and autonomy - that are both key for successful migratory projects.

Assessment processes initiate a series of steps in which the migrant's identity is negotiated. Throughout the different phases of the framework, this process contributes to the construction of a subject who is entitled to rights, desired, and privileged - having been chosen among many - yet disciplined and governable. In order to obtain this identity, people rehearse the translation of their story into a juridical and Eurocentric language and learn to play the part (Khosravi, 2010). This will influence the entire path of the person, inside and outside reception, and will underpin the whole negotiation of the individual's migratory process with the *Other*. The above-mentioned are some of the categories that appear to accompany the pathways of those received by Humanitarian Corridors until they exit the reception programme. Around these categories, the relationship between beneficiaries and support workers is shaped as a field (un)defined by continuous shifts and overlaps between the concepts of rights, assistance, and merit.

If the point of view of support workers is considered, interviews show that performing the tasks of the assessment process involves carrying a huge **responsibility** and managing imposing expectations from the applicants; in addition to being constantly and personally exposed to the personal stories, requests and hopes of the applicants. Refugee support workers reported that, over time, they have developed **self-protection** strategies to be able to be in a listening position. These "distancing" attempts can relieve support workers from the solitude and responsibility of individual choices, however, in our view, they risk leading to standardised and procedural relationships with the people they meet, which undermines the listening process itself. Below are described two of the distancing tactics applied in the assessment process that some refugee support workers shared during the interviews. The first procedure is involving a third-party organisation in the decisional process. Thus, the support worker becomes part of a network that collaboratively carries out the process. Hence, the moral and emotional impact of and on the individual is reduced. This model of sharing decisional responsibilities risks rendering evaluation criteria even more elusive. The rationale and history of the process become opaque and difficult to convey, both to the applicants and the teams involved in subsequent reception phases. Expanding responsibility may compromise the overall consistency and efficacy of the process. The second strategy is requesting those who are already in the host country to identify and suggest new candidates in the countries of departure. This approach is based on the idea that the person who will be selected - and later received - will have a support network in the host country and will therefore be facilitated in their inclusion process. However, it is important to bear in mind that this task may put the person who has already been received in a position of considerable power, yet also one of ambivalence in relation to their family of origin or network. This may negatively impact the management of this process, on a social, moral and psychological level.

The cloudy knowledge of the evaluation criteria used, the difficulties in clearly explaining the different steps of the assessment process and the information shared expose refugee support workers to triangulations in the relationship with the persons in reception pathways. This may hinder the consolidation of mutually trust-based relations during the whole reception pathways.

The issue of evaluation criteria therefore seems to be an extremely delicate matter for all those involved. The very existence of an assessment process inevitably places one in relation with the Other (the refugee support worker, the host country, institutions...), the negotiation of individual migratory and life projects, thus triggering a new technology of the self (Foucault, 1992) aimed at crafting new subjectivities. In this regard, the COMET - COMplementary pathways nETwork[4] project has provided an opportunity for shared reflections on the European level and for engaging strategic actors. Such opportunities can enhance dialogue between different stakeholders, and provide a platform for sharing advocacy strategies for the organisations responsible for the implementation of the inter-governmental protocols that enable the intervention.

4 https://www.cometnetwork.eu/

Pre-departure preparation activities

The experience acquired over the past years has led implementing partners to an in-depth reflection on **Pre-departure orientation**. This is the phase when candidates are prepared to depart. The data collected shows that often information on departure modalities and reception procedures has only been shared after the assessment process has ended. Only those who have been selected for a specific Corridor and are awaiting the bureaucratic pre-departure procedures received such information.

Interviews highlighted that individuals in reception programmes were often informed of their final destination within the country only upon departure or even when they were already at the airport. While ensuring a safe travel and reception place remains vital and is the distinctive feature and strength of the framework being examined - it is necessary to question how this procedure ultimately perpetuates a condition of existential stand-by, loss of autonomy and self-determination for the selected candidates. Furthermore, it is necessary to assess how, and to what extent, these dynamics generate insecurity and a sense of arbitrariness, outlining a hierarchy of power between those who provide assistance and those who receive it.

By stating, as Abdelmalek Sayad (2002) argues, that migration is a "*conditional choice*" in which the migrant acts subjectively but always in response to pressures that place them in a challenging balance between necessity and desire, the moment when a person gains access to information about what lies ahead becomes particularly important. This ensures that the principle of free and informed choice can be reaffirmed and that this choice is made with the highest possible degree of awareness, based on clear and consistent information about what the person will encounter in the destination country.

The analysis of the interviewees' narratives underscored that entering the new social context is often marked by a stark dissonance between the ideal representations constructed in the past, on which the person projects their migratory project, and the actual reality they face. It strongly highlights that such misalignment between expectations and experiences may have significant repercussions on a person's pathway and general level of wellbeing.

Migrants' imagery is shaped by projections of success from their family networks in the country of origin, information filtered through success narratives shared by acquaintances in Europe (Sayad, 2002), and the perception of a "democratic West" - a view rooted in ongoing colonial[5] geopolitical relations in different contexts. However, much like reception pathways, pre-departure work represents a fundamental step, serving as an opportunity to acknowledge, deconstruct, revise, or enhance individual expectations.

In this regard, it is important to underline that as soon as a person is identified as the ideal candidate, the imagery of the "*chosen, privileged and desired one*" may be triggered, along with that of a successful migratory pathway which firstly materialises with the opportunity of having access to a safe travel to Europe.

Hence, the evaluation process and preparation for departure play a vital role in determining the collective imagery of individual migratory projects and in defining the relational dynamics that regulate them. These are crafted as the different phases of the framework unfold, but often find initial room for action and reflection only during reception. Often, the main conflicts and tensions emerge for the first time only upon the arrival in the European country.

The interviews conducted highlighted that, in daily life, such difficulties may translate into **requests perceived as "unacceptable**" and incomprehensible by refugee support workers. An example is the fairly common request of having a bigger house or one closer to the city centre; or prolonging the reception pathway to obtain further or new job opportunities more in line with the person's skills or with the path started in the country of origin. In this regard, the authors wish to draw attention to the fact that, although these requests may be perceived as dissonant by those who work in the *humanitarian* field (Fassin, 2018) and that it may be expected that people may willingly accept the

5 The adjective "colonial" refers to the persisting dynamics of dominion, exploitation and subordination between former colonisers and former colonies, despite the formal end of colonialism. This notion highlights that the colonial logics of control have been reformulated into new economic, cultural and political structures which perpetuate global hierarchies. Frantz Fanon, in "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961) described how colonialism left deep scars in the relationships between the global centre and periphery, with the West maintaining a dominating position through economic and cultural control. Fanon underlines that this subordination perpetuates dependence for former colonies. Edward Said in "Orientalism" (1978) analysed how the West depicts the East and other cultural otherness as "inferior" or "backward". Such a narrative, born in the colonial era, continues to justify geopolitical dynamics of exploitation and control, sustaining asymmetrical relations between the West and the global South. Therefore, the notion of "ongoing colonial geopolitical relations" refers to the colonial heritage which continues to shape the contemporary world, not only in terms of economic relationships, but also of cultural imagery and policies of exclusion and control.

help offered, regardless of its form, these requests are nothing other than the expression of the attempts to re-negotiate the balance of powers between support workers and those in reception paths.

Information deemed important by the interviewees includes: details on the concrete aspects of reception pathways such as the duration and the support process, the types of activities that can be designed and supported within the pathway, the location of the reception programme and the type of facility to which the person will be assigned. At the same time, support workers perceive sharing this kind of information in the selection stage as forcing the *humanitarian* nature of the framework (Fassin, 2018). Indeed, faced with the opportunity of "*being saved*", sharing information on where and how they will be received may be dissonant compared to the common narrative in the humanitarian sector that considers being taken to a new place to start *living* again as the true emergency. However, in alignment with those involved in reception pathways, the authors emphasise the importance of maintaining a strong focus on the fact that individuals engaging with the framework cannot and should not be disconnected from their personal histories.

Although these people may be living in refugee camps, in a tent and in appalling sanitary conditions, or in situations of extreme danger or fragility, the fact that they may have had a past filled with ambitions, networks, knowledge and negotiation abilities cannot be forgotten, even for a moment. Hence, they can have a migratory project whereby the framework of the Humanitarian Corridors is a driver for the implementation of the project itself. In this sense, the person perceives themselves as a chosen and privileged actor, expecting - precisely because they were selected among many - to find exactly what they need most, what best aligns with their personal history and self-perception, including in terms of housing arrangements upon their arrival in Europe.

Within this framework, and with the awareness that the need of beneficiaries to receive information may differ on a case-by-case basis, producing transparent, simple and accessible information is a responsibility for the organisations implementing the framework. This enables each person involved to self-imagine and position themselves with respect to their choice and their future imaginary adhering to the possible reality.

The COMET project network reflected on developing suitable pre-departure activities to meet this need. Podcasts were identified as a tool to convey accessible and always-available information on reception programmes. However, this tool still has its shortcomings; firstly, it is conceived for individual use and lacks reciprocity and dialogue: this makes it impossible for the listener to act as an interlocutor, ask questions and expect answers. This feature, therefore, risks placing the individual once again in the passive role of someone who is being informed and simultaneously shaped for the role they will have to assume in the host country. It is also worth asking whether the recipient listens to all the content and understands it. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the information broadcast through the podcast is formulated through a Eurocentric language, knowledge and epistemology. It cannot be taken for granted that the other will be able to contextualise and use them at a later stage.

Consider, for instance, the distinction between physical and mental health and their related diagnostic categories. Despite their importance in the biomedical context, they do not always mirror the epistemology of suffering and care in other cultures.

Despite these limitations, it is important to highlight the positive potential of this tool, as well as the attention placed by the working group on trying to initiate practices to dismantle or at least consider the limitations of the tool itself. After podcasts were disseminated before departures from Niger in October 2024, online sessions were organised to provide a platform to discuss the information provided, encourage questions from those about to depart and clarify doubts or other inquiries arising directly from listening.

The reflections that emerged in the working group after the trial show that podcasts are an effective tool to ensure transparent and accessible information for all those involved in the different phases of the Corridor. This contributes to ensuring continuity between teams, in addition to dilating the space and time available for reflections for those being received through the Humanitarian Corridors, thus enabling them to ask questions and take the time necessary for analysis and dialogue. At the same time, the transmissible nature of the podcast facilitates the interchange of refugee support workers, thus creating contiguity in the process. This enables each of the support workers to effectively take action at any phase of the framework, ensuring consistency with the activities implemented by colleagues in different phases.

What has just been argued seems all the more important in the light of the data that emerged from the interviews with many **refugee support workers**. Indeed, while they fully trust the teams and organisations involved in the assessment process, they shared being partially unaware of the initial steps of the pathways, of how the relationship between the project and those selected started and developed over the course of the evaluation steps, and of what kind of information had been shared and how. Such a distance becomes particularly problematic when support workers and beneficiaries find themselves confronting, within their relationship, the traces of previous phases - traces that are not always clear and are therefore easily subject to manipulation by both parties. This often leads to conflictual relational dynamics, which, at times, result in the failure of reception projects and cause suffering for the persons involved.

Connecting the support workers involved in the different phases of the framework therefore appears as a particularly important issue, given its influence in creating the relationship between support workers and beneficiaries.

Conclusion on the assessment processes

Within the framework Humanitarian Corridors - unlike other contexts and migratory frameworks - the fact that access to travel is only ensured after an assessment process and pre-departure preparation inevitably renders the project shared and negotiated with the other person, who outlines what is acceptable and desirable, and what is not. From the outset, this tension between the individual pathway and the desire of the Other establishes a **debit-credit relationship** between beneficiaries and receiving countries - regardless of who their representatives are. Such a relationship where each party does something for the other is difficult to leave. The expectations of both parties involved before and after the travel define a desirable migratory project; and the relational field of reception is defined within this articulated network of meanings. Although it is challenging to retrace, the thread of the creation of **mutual expectations** within the path of Humanitarian Corridors seems to be one of the topical issues that are able to establish the form and quality of the relationship among the actors involved in the framework.

To promote the most equitable relationship possible between the actors involved and to deconstruct the experiences described above by both support workers and selected candidates, it is essential to uphold the principles of transparency and to prioritise the sharing of procedures and information from the **earliest stages of the assessment process**, and to do so as comprehensively as possible. While the authors acknowledge that more transparency and sharing may make the preparation process and the interaction between beneficiaries and receiving teams more demanding, such an approach would promote the awareness and involvement of candidates about the decision-making process regarding their departure (or the lack thereof) from the early stages. It would also encourage their active engagement in co-designing their migratory project alongside the support system.

Interviews emphasised the importance of sharing **concrete, clear and in-depth information** on reception pathways: location, duration and support procedures. Sharing information between evaluation teams, receiving teams and beneficiaries is vital to manage expectations and to enable the co-design of the pathways. It could be beneficial to include dedicated opportunities for connecting support workers, as well as to establish platforms for dialogue between the support workers and the selected candidates where the information shared can be discussed further. When possible, promoting encounters between those selected and support workers in destination countries - including online - would help to build a relationship and to reduce the sense of alienation upon arrival in the new country. In addition, it is beneficial to provide information on rights and duties in the receiving countries, in order to prevent idealised representations. These steps should be carefully scheduled before departure, providing room for reflections and questions, to facilitate the negotiation of the pathway. Despite the costs, investing more in pre-departure planning would improve the outcomes of the pathways in the long term.

SUPPORT PROCESSES TOWARDS AUTONOMY: A REFLECTION FROM THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

The lack of a shared national and international juridical framework for Humanitarian Corridors provides implementing actors with the opportunity to define reception according to differentiated logics and regulations.

In Italy, two major types of programmes are identified:

- reception programmes designed building on the experience of governmental projects *(Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* - Temporary Reception Centres - and *Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione* - Reception and Integration System) that envisage the involvement of professionals (refugee support workers, educators, social workers, psychologists and others), sometimes supported by volunteers and with predefined steps;
- reception programmes initiated and managed by groups of volunteers, often in the faith-based environment, which do not generally, have predefined steps for support and where the duration of pathways may vary according to the needs of the person and to the resources available in that context.

The duration of the pathways, services and support procedures offered, the presence of support workers and/or volunteers in the programme (or lack thereof) and the economic benefits vary greatly according to the situation, and depend not only on the type of reception, but also on the approach of the single implementing organisation. It was found that, in addition to changing over the years during the implementation of the different projects, they can still vary significantly also on the grounds of the local contexts where they are implemented.

Providing the funds for reception is the sole responsibility of the organisations implementing the protocols with government and depends on the resources that they can autonomously collect through donations and specific funds or, in the case of some churches, through funds of the Otto per Mille tax scheme.[6] In fact, a real financial support by the governments which haave ratified the protocols has not been achieved despite the pivotal nature of this initiative.[7]

Duration and reception contract

Among the features that characterise the different contexts, some are more meaningful than others, both in terms of defining the type of reception provided, and for the impact that they seem to have had on the inclusion pathways of those being received.

Defining the **duration of reception pathways** represents one of the major factors. In reception pathways implemented by professionals, the duration is mostly defined from the start and is communicated to the person, who needs to sign a **contract**. This contract is signed in the first days of the pathway, and defines not only the timing of the support offered, but it also specifies the circumstances in which the pathway can be interrupted beforehand, the services included in the programme and a detailed description of the benefits for the person. These can include economic support for daily expenses, health expenses, transportation or other vital support. In some more structured programmes, the benefits offered and the involvement of the support workers in support activities are regularly reduced over time, normally quarterly. The aim - according to the workers - is to accompany the person to exit the project, having experienced, at least in part, full autonomy in dealing with territorial services and in their financial independence in the host country. On average, reception pathways unfold for an overall duration of between 12 and 24 months, except for particular cases where they lasted up to 4 years - due primarily to severe health conditions, or in the case of families with a high number of minors.

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6 Translator's note: In Italy the state provides to selected faith-based organisations eight euros per thousand based on the income tax of members or supporters

7 Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS. *Dossier statistico immigrazione 2024*. IDOS, 2024, p.125.

The professionals involved in these projects, while aware of the limitations of the system and of the importance of making the best of every day for effective accompaniment, consider the reception contract as a precious resource. From the start, this tool enables a clearer framework to be outlined to guide the work with the person received; additionally, it is a vital tool to establish a relational framework serving to set boundaries for the personal involvement of support workers. This prevents issues that could be difficult to manage professionally and could also affect the psychological wellbeing of the support workers themselves. On the other hand, for those in reception programmes, the contract embodies an important shift in paradigm: the relationship with reception coordinators shifts from being based on mutual trust, to being based on a bureaucratic framework.

The signing of the reception contract is promoted by programmes as a good practice for both sides, formalising the beginning of the inclusion pathways of the person being received. However, this tool has significant implicit meanings that may greatly affect the relationship between the person received and the support workers that can be traced to two elements. Firstly, the signing of a contract determines a substantial change at the relational level. Referring to Weber (1925), this marks the transition from a charismatic level, based on trust, to one founded on legal-rational power. In this regard, this act outlines the shift from a direct human relationship to a formally regulated one. Hence, the nature of the relationship is modified and bureaucratised. Secondly, introducing an administrative framework such as the contract tends to shift attention from a relational dimension to a normative one. This approach may influence expectations both in the beneficiary and the support worker, thus shaping interactions in which respecting the rules prevails over empathy and personalisation. In line with the juridical system that regulates migration, this means limited possibilities for those in reception programmes to actively participate in defining the conditions of their reception and, therefore, to build their own pathway in accordance with such conditions. Thus, this contributes to creating the image of the person being received as disciplined and disciplinable, and ready to conform to the pre-defined conditions for their reception. Hence, for support workers, the contract formalises rights and duties, while for those being received, the contract may hinder the construction of a relationship based on listening and on mutual trust. Such considerations carry even more weight if we consider that many among those in reception programmes come from contexts where the State is absent, weak, or characterised by highly corruptible bureaucracy. This difference in experience may amplify the risk of misunderstandings around the reception contract and can transform it not only into a regulatory framework, but also into a relational challenge for the individuals being received. For those unfamiliar with the idea of bureaucracy in Western societies[8] the contract may appear as a distant or even hostile tool, amplifying a sense of alienation towards refugee support workers. This makes the role of refugee support workers even more crucial in facilitating the understanding and acceptance of the contractual conditions while maintaining a dimension of trust and openness to compensate for the bureaucratic rigour.

Therefore, the contract ultimately results in being a tool that officially establishes the system of power regulating the relationship and reception, whereby the person being received is inevitably placed in a subordinate position. Within this dynamic, a historical repetition mirroring the powers among States is established, where support workers and beneficiaries are the representatives of the current context. Many people in reception programmes explained that, in their eyes, support workers are not just simply persons providing support, but also interlocutors that directly represent the State and the system of historical, social, political and cultural powers. Even if they have successfully implemented a safe pathway to Europe, refugee support workers are complicit in the factors that contributed to their condition of need and desire to flee.

Similarly, the dialogue and interactions with refugee support workers showed a tension that they experience daily, between authentic attempts to support those in reception programmes, and the structural contradictions of a system of which they are, in part, a cause.

Refugee support workers are fully aware of the serious shortcomings of the context in which reception pathways are implemented. In fact, the system of reference tends to place those who are received in a socially, politically and economically racialised (Mbembe, 2011) context and to force them to adapt to a framework that is often discriminatory and limiting.

This double perspective - on one hand, those in reception programmes who see professionals as governmental employees, and on the other, the support workers moved by humanitarian intentions and, in a way, torn by the systemic

8 This expression refers to bureaucracy in its Western form, where it has become a state framework: formalised practices that regulate the relationship between citizens and governing institutions.

contradiction in the receiving context - fully permeates the relationship between those in reception programmes and support services. It is the signing of the contract itself, which seals the collision between these different dimensions in a formal document, to confirm once again a power setup that is as poignant as it is difficult to dismantle.

With regard to the contract, the beneficiaries interviewed emphasised that this tool was experienced as unexpected, and not anticipated in their expectations, Typically, these expectations are more oriented towards receiving a warm, open reception in the context of arrival, one that is ready to support the person in addressing all needs without limitations, as will be explored further in the text. These expectations are more in line with the self-mirroring idea of the chosen one that took shape during the assessment process. Additionally, the manner in which the contract is introduced to the person being received seems to play a pivotal role. Normally, the contract is signed during a meeting that occurs a few days after the person arrives. This meeting sees the participation of the coordinator of the reception programme and of a cultural and linguistic mediator, to ensure that the contract is understood in full.

In this regard, it is important to share a series of elements that can help promote in-depth reflections on the methodology of implementation of this tool. The first question that arises is timing the signing of the contract in the first days of the reception programme. This is not without its challenges, considering the particular fragility to which people are exposed during a time of significant disorientation and relocation within the new context and their personal history. In this condition, the person is involved in a completely unfamiliar context at a formal meeting with the support worker and mediator who formalise the programming of the reception pathway, with no room to intervene on the conditions set. This inevitably reinforces the sense of being forced to sign the contract, without having had the time to understand its meaning, despite the presumed reassuring presence of the cultural mediation framework. In addition, contracts that are periodically renewed, changed or that adapt the kind of support offered further confirm an unequal power distribution between refugee support workers and beneficiaries, and risk reducing the person to the condition of a mere *beneficiary* of the activities offered. These may vary, but are pre-determined by the reception system and the person will only gain full awareness over time.

The italicised use of the term "beneficiary" in this context, as widely employed in Italian in areas related to reception and welfare, warrants a critical reflection on the implicit meanings it carries. Although it appears neutral and descriptive, this term has a connotation that establishes a specific emphasis in the relationship between the refugee support worker or and the beneficiary. Such a relationship revolves around the notions of "gift" and "debt". According to Marcel Mauss's (2022) theory of the gift, the gift is never fully free, since it implies an implicit expectation of reciprocity. However, many of those in reception programmes find themselves in the condition of not being able to return the "gift" received, as the dynamics of the system do not allow room for veritable reciprocity, and given the intrinsic asymmetry of their relationship with refugee support workers. This imbalance leads to a condition of dependence and vulnerability, which can exacerbate the sense of inferiority and the lack of autonomy perceived by the people in reception programmes.

Barbara Harrel-Bond (2005) investigated these aspects, underscoring that the use of terms such as *gift* or *beneficiary* contributes to creating psychological discomfort in those who are driven to consider themselves as beneficiaries. These terms, in fact, implicitly refer to a hierarchical relationship where the receiver is placed in a subordinate position towards the giver, thus reinforcing an imagery of passiveness and impotence.

In the framework of reception, using the term "beneficiary "risks reinforcing this narrative, losing sight of the fact that those being received are not just passive recipients of support, but possess experience, skills and aspirations that may enrich the relationship. Further, it is necessary to highlight that international protection is a subjective right (and not a privilege or a benefit in a wider sense) and it is important to keep this focus to prevent distorting the fundamental principles underlying national and international law. Overcoming this terminology requires a change of language and practice, in order to implicitly favour a more equal and respectful relationship that enhances the ability of individuals to actively contribute to their autonomy and inclusion path.

In reception centres managed by volunteer groups, where the number of people received is lower to ensure sustainability, greater flexibility in the duration of the pathways was recorded. Although, in practice, an indicative timeline is often shared, reception in these contexts may last for several years. The time necessary to reach full autonomy can be re-negotiated, provided that each pathway bases its economic sustainability on limited resources.

The duration of reception programmes greatly affects placement pathways and the reachable level of autonomy. While the meaning of setting a deadline for the duration of reception - depending on the limited financial and environmental

resources - is understood, many reported challenges in facing set timelines, as it is the case for more structured programmes. Some interviewees mentioned challenges in dealing with all the activities that they were required to attend as part of the programme, especially in the first period after arrival (Italian classes, job search, bureaucratic procedures, etc...). For many, this step translates into acquiring awareness of being safe for the first time in a long time - sometimes years - and at the same time it means being elsewhere, away from their families and in a desired - yet unknown contexts, where they first need to take the time to "arrive". Interviews showed how this stand-by time, along with the challenges for many of being immediately active and proactive after their arrival, often quickly led to tensions with support workers. If, on one hand, the latter tend to interpret this behaviour as a sign of lack of motivation, on the other, such dynamics often create a deep sense of loneliness and abandonment from the programme.

Similarly, in some recorded cases, a more flexible timeline accompanied by timely and effective placement pathways - in the work, education or other spheres - would have been the prerequisite to imagine a path in line with the profile, the history and expectations of the person. Such prospects have often had to be adjusted due to the tight timelines of reception pathways and/or the ineffectiveness of the support activities implemented.

Support toward autonomy

Refugee support workers often find themselves working on what is known as "support toward autonomy" interacting within a social, cultural, political, and economic context that is, in fact, rejecting. In Italy, it is crucial to emphasise the significant impact of the Refugee Gap (IRES Piemonte, 2021) on the labour market. Also, on the topic of employment, professional training pathways often lead to outcomes characterised by underemployment and "ethnicisation of labour"[9], and general lack of resources on different fronts (housing, recognition of qualifications, etc...).

The 2024 *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* (Migration Statistics Report) reported that in 2023 too, the Italian labour market saw foreigners mostly employed in manual or unskilled labour. Among employed foreigners, more than 6 out of 10 are in unskilled or manual labour roles (61.6%, compared to 29.5% of Italians), while just under 9 out of 100 hold qualified positions (38.6% among Italians). This condition does not significantly improve as the years spent in the country increase nor with seniority and shows only partial improvement for those with educational qualifications: 15% of employed graduate foreigners are in unskilled positions and 13.6% hold manual labour roles, compared to 0.8% and 1.6% of Italians. Confirming a restricted labour market, 50% of foreigners are employed in 19 professions (47 for Italians). This figure is drastically lower for women: half of them hold a position in only 4 roles (domestic cleaners, carers for the elderly, cleaners in office buildings or businesses, waitresses), compared to 19 for Italian women. In addition, 35.5% of foreigners are over-educated and hold a position that would require a lower education, against 26.2% of Italians. Among women, the share is 43.8%, compared to 27.8% of Italian women, while among men, the figures are 29.4% and 24.9%, respectively. Foreign graduates see the biggest gap; 63% of them are overeducated, compared to 32.3% of Italians.[10]

The interviews conducted confirm the data collected in the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione:* almost all of the interviewees maintained that they were under-employed compared to their professional profile, or - still - that their current position is much worse compared to their country of origin. Support workers stated that it is difficult, if not impossible to meet the employment expectations of the people received.

According to refugee support workers, the whole national system is not able to meet the needs of a suitable job placement, mostly for reasons related to intertwined factors. Firstly, learning Italian is an issue: as well-organised as the programmes can be to ensure Italian language classes from the start of the reception pathway, these classes are not sufficient, the reasons being both the timeframe of reception, and the lack of resources outside the programme to complement and strengthen the language learning pathways funded by reception centres themselves, especially for those arriving in summertime, when the *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (Local Adult Education Centres) normally significantly reduce their activities.

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9 This known expression from Wallerstein and Balibar was more recently investigated in the Italian context by Taliani, 2015

10 Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS. *Dossier statistico immigrazione 2024*. IDOS, 2024, p. 268

Secondly, the issue of recognising educational qualifications deserves particular attention. In Italy, the process is not harmonised, with only a few specialised bodies[11] able to provide adequate support to the many, often inaccessible steps of the process leading to the recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. The lack of support services, fragmentation among competent bodies and lack of standardised procedures hinder obtaining a quick and clear assessment, with a demanding bureaucratic burden requiring documentation, sworn translations and in-detail verification. Recognition is not guaranteed, especially for degrees, since universities adopt different and often restrictive criteria. This system, in addition to high costs, lack of information available and long waiting times, creates significant obstacles, discouraging many applicants and hindering their academic and professional inclusion process.

Language difficulties and lack of a system to recognise educational qualifications add to limited services in the fields of training, job orientation and support, which intertwine with stereotypes and prejudices in the reception context and further limit opportunities of access to regular and paid jobs. Finally, housing inclusion is not to be underestimated. Widespread housing discrimination[12] presents serious challenges for those in the exit stage of reception programmes. Besides the lack of available housing, often blatant discrimination incidents by real estate agencies happen (they don't rent to foreigners)[13]. The interviewees described the step of house-hunting as one of the harshest since their arrival in Italy. The also added that they were able to overcome such challenges only after a long time and thanks to the support of informal networks, and their spirit of adaptability. Focusing on this challenge is particularly important, as the lack of adequate housing and precarious living conditions in marginalised areas negatively affect the job market inclusion of foreigners.

The difficulties related to the rejecting approach of wider society, the labour market and the Italian cultural landscape inevitably reflect on the work of refugee support workers. These professionals are confronted daily with the challenge of cooperating with those in reception programmes to identify concrete and sustainable solutions, often in a context characterised by limited resources, intricate bureaucracy and a closed society.

The structural contradictions of the reception context are significantly affected by the emotional and professional fatigue of both the people being received and refugee support workers, who often find themselves overworked and feeling helpless towards larger structural issues. As a result, this condition of fatigue and frustration deeply affects the relationship with those in reception programmes, often jeopardising the effectiveness of support actions and the quality of the support provided. Such a dynamic - if not faced with adequate refugee support workers' training and support - risks transforming into a vicious circle that can undermine both parties in the relationship .

Helping relationships in reception contexts

Against this backdrop, the relationship between refugee support workers and the person in being received is the repository, the expression of and the field for many contradictions. These contradictions show that upon arrival on Italian territory, a significant twist in the meaning of the word "privileged" - often used by support workers to describe beneficiaries - occurs.

For many of those being received, having taken part in an evaluation process that justifies the right to arrive in Europe safely and to stay in the country has a significant impact on their expectations and on the way they perceive their migratory project and think about their future. Having been selected, in other words, "chosen" often triggers an imagery process that leads right holders to project themselves into a reality of reception that is able to realise their desires of success. The reception programme tends to be experienced as a venue to welcome future desired prospects, and support workers are regarded as the facilitators of this pathway, enabling individuals to reclaim their sense of freedom, safety, and success, and to resume their lives from where they were disrupted.

Simultaneously, according to the support workers interviewed, reception work within Humanitarian Corridors is characterised as a form of support for a user base that is considered "privileged" compared to those being received

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11 Among the few existing organisations, the Turin-based organisation " Pieno Titolo" is worth a mention. https://apienotitolo.org/

12 https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2023/12/17/news/affitto_casa_stranieri-13938022/

13 Associazione Frantz Fanon is a promoting organisation of the Rete Militante e Antirazzista dell'Abitare (Militant and Anti-Racist Housing Network) https://associazionefanon.it/news/una-proposta-politica-per-il-comune-di-torino/?fbclid=IwAR0KWnr_6PzgqNLy996oDs31V4JcX6vp8ZyJ3c81RMnE7etdkHGb_dI5apY

in governmental reception centres. This is due to the fact that selected candidates were able to arrive in Europe through safe pathways, avoiding the violence and trauma related to migratory routes.

It is perhaps precisely because of this privilege that a strong expectation of unconditional adherence to the proposed support pathway emerged in interviews with support workers, as well as the idea that reaching the level of autonomy necessary to exit reception programmes can occur in a relatively short period of time. This mostly emerges in most recent reception programmes, when the assessment criteria have increasingly shifted between the notion of "vulnerability" and "higher integrability" of the person.

Hence, the narrative of support workers shows that this vocabulary introduces a new meaning compared to the one given by the persons being received. The word "privileged" seems to mark, in those being received, the opening of a new phase of identity and migratory (re)negotiation. From that moment, an idea begins to take shape: since they already had the chance to arrive in Europe safely, and as *beneficiaries* of an "elite" reception programme, those received have a sort of debt that needs to be repaid with motivation and collaboration. These terms are often recurrent in support workers' testimonies, and introduce the notion of merit, as opposed to rights. The continuous oscillations between the semantics of the law, help and merit seem to play a significant role in shaping the relational field that is established between support workers and beneficiaries. This specific dynamic is particularly evident within the framework of Humanitarian Corridors, but is common in the field of social work and can affect the relationship with the individuals being received, regardless of the European context of implementation.

Therefore, the relationship between those in reception programmes and support workers becomes a tense and disputed field. In such a field, what Fassin (2015) defines as a tension between inequality and solidarity, as well as between relationships of domination and those of assistance, emerges. This tension characterises the dynamics that often take shape in the reception environment resulting in conflicts and suffering for both parties involved, and might lead to unsuccessful pathways. Indeed, as the framework of Humanitarian Corridors carries a strong solidarity message by ensuring a safe journey and recognises the *Other* as akin by eliminating a ground for inequality; in the implementation of reception, the limitations imposed by the system itself lead to mechanisms that see shrunken individual expectations, thus re-establishing a distance in the relationship with the beneficiary.

Interviews often highlight that support workers, and especially volunteers, tend to believe in a beneficiary who needs "saving", and imagine that they must feel profound gratitude towards the programme and the host country. However, this view is often contradicted, especially in cases where refugee support workers and volunteers interact with individuals who do not fit this image and who have profiles very similar to their own. Indeed, although the life trajectories of these individuals have been disrupted by conflicts or other severe circumstances, many of them previously led lives comparable to those in Europe in terms of socio-economic conditions.

This element leads those responsible for reception to direct and constant comparison, generating dynamics of mirroring with the users. In addition, as their migratory path evolves, individuals strongly and increasingly request collaboration on an equal ground. This factor seems to affect reception differently. The perception of this similarity, in fact, can lead to frustration among team members who, being aware of having limited time and resources, glimpse the risk of not being able to support the migratory project as the person would expect.

Referring again to Fassin (2015), it could be maintained that within this framework, what is known as "compassion fatigue" tends to emerge. This expression is used to convey the frustration of support workers in interacting with beneficiaries who do not seem to understand the system of which support workers are - at the same time and despite themselves - a victim, and an accomplice, and to which they do not want to conform. This fatigue often translates into more explicit and reactive attempts to control the person received.

This is precisely the phase in which an ambivalence becomes most evident for those being received, as they experience both gratitude for the "gifts" they have received and defiance towards the demands of the support workers and the system they represent (Fassin, 2015). In the domain of subjectivity renegotiation in the context of reception, individuals highlight that migrants are not a temporary presence with requests, languages and different behaviours. As a consequence, they cannot remain a stranger - as a guest would - nor can they be confined within the asymmetric power dynamics that characterise the relationship between those who host and those who are hosted (Khosravi, 2010).

In volunteer-led contexts, the distance between the *expected* and *actual* beneficiary seems to inspire strong fears of the individual's ability to manage and welcome the request that the Other can bring. When volunteers perceive this difference, they question whether they will be able to offer suitable pathways to the beneficiaries, since the services provided depend on volunteers themselves, who feel the burden of responsibility for fulfilling the desires of the beneficiaries.

These ambivalent and diverging features risk passing an implicit request onto beneficiaries: gradually leave the status as rights holders to conform more to the status of "immigrants" (Sayad, 2002) This implicit request, that becomes more pressing as reception pathways come to an end, is formalised and enacted through defining protocols, signing contracts and more daily micro-practices, which in fact regulate the presence of those received, by outlining the borders of their subjectivity and of their path in the host country.

Based on the interviews collected, the risk of replicating these power dynamics and the regulation of the other's subjectivity seem to be smaller in volunteer-led contexts, where people are supported in a more flexible manner and with a personal involvement that promotes the establishment of more equal and long-lasting relationships.

Such programmes, however, are not devoid of challenges. Since they are solely based on the private resources of those responsible for their implementation and follow a more familiar reception approach, they are not easily upscaled to include a larger number of people, on account of sustainability: each pathway is open ended and often lasts for several years. Furthermore, it seems essential to emphasise that the choice to entrust support pathways to volunteers, who lack adequate professional training to face the complexity of relations in reception contexts can lead to several challenges.

In volunteer-led reception contexts that are not affected by the dynamics of professionalisation, the intrinsic ambivalent nature of **personal involvement** clearly emerges. On one hand, the blurred relational boundaries facilitate the creation of informal support networks that may develop into friendship. These are instrumental for the inclusion process, the creation of relationships on the territory and the development of otherwise weak relations, which can support those in reception programmes after their end. On the other hand, such relational blur can result in significant challenges, in particular in the case of conflicts. These events are often unexpected for those offering help and risk being interpreted through a personal or relational lens, thus obscuring the dimension of difference and even non-belonging of the Other. For example, consider the conditions under which "secondary movements" occur. These situations, according to the findings from the interviews, are often experienced by volunteer groups with great disappointment and a sense of having made a mistake, making it more challenging to interpret these events as an expression of individual will directed toward an alternative project to the one proposed and shared.

The lack of professional experiences challenges the ability of volunteers to recognise and manage the sensitive situations that characterise the experience of refugees, including signs of traumatic experiences, the need for legal help or intercultural mediation. The lack of an integrated and multidisciplinary approach can limit access to vital resources, such as legal help and healthcare, preventing refugees from adequately facing the daily challenges of their situation.

Further, another challenge for volunteer networks is the ability to ensure continuous and sustainable support by those involved. Changes may potentially happen overnight, with significant repercussions for the structure itself of the reception programme. To conclude, it is possible that a network engaged in a multi-annual programme may not want to participate in another one in the near future. This raises further sustainability issues for the implementation of similar initiatives on a larger scale, highlighting the need for long-term strategies to ensure continuity and the effectiveness of reception programmes.

However, while programmes implemented on a large scale, in line with the governmental model, may appear more vulnerable to the risk of becoming pre-established pathways with no room for flexibility beyond what is written in the reception contract, it is important to highlight that the attempt to systematise this framework is grounded in the willingness to establish a concrete and sustainable alternative to arrivals by sea. Furthermore, this fuels the hope that the model of Humanitarian Corridors may be expanded to an ever-increasing number of people. Similarly, it is worth underlining the importance and value brought in these realities by professionals with studies and professional experiences on the field. Their involvement is unavoidable in the implementation of sensitive and effective support pathways that are able to meet the needs of the users. Successfully involving professionals in the management of reception means engaging individuals who, typically, place greater emphasis on maintaining active reflections on the

implicit aspects of their actions. This enables them to bring greater expertise and awareness to managing particularly challenging situations or issues related to personal involvement.

The reflections presented so far regarding the work and commitment of professionals and volunteers underscore the importance of offering **training, supervision, and more in general, room for reflection**, aiming at prospecting an idea of reception that can significantly question the image of the "immigrant". For refugee support workers, a need seems to emerge: acquiring essential tools and skills to engage with users who feel empowered, and therefore express their requests, expectations, desires, and needs in a manner distinct from those encountered in other contexts. Strengthening the tools and skills available for refugee support workers will prevent frustration when it is not possible to meet the prospects desired and requested by those in the programmes; it will also challenge the concept of subordination, which ultimately confines both the beneficiaries and the support workers themselves. Providing more adequate training for engaging with individuals in reception programmes entails the ability to envision an alternative approach to migration, responding - where feasible - in ways that diverge from those typically available in government-run systems.

In this regard, Humanitarian Corridors are a precious opportunity not only to correct the European approach to the challenges posed by migratory flows, but also to challenge the current reception system by experimenting with new theories and approaches that are able to offer a genuine alternative, one that recognises the subjectivity and the full agency of the person being received.

Working conditions of refugee support workers as a risk factor

The **working conditions** of reception professionals are, in turn, a challenge that directly affects the quality of the programmes. The considerable turnover among support workers is an indicator of high stress, precarity and frustration caused by direct exposure to complex situations. Furthermore, it appears to contribute to the development of a negative perception of these professionals, as reflected in the testimonies of those being received. They described refugee support workers not as reliable points of reference but rather as the mere executors of policies defined at a higher decisional level, which entails the risks of undermining trust. As establishing long-term relationships is impossible, this jeopardises not only the quality of the support provided, but also its environment and, consequently, the ability of the person to serenely work on their inclusion pathway.

With regard to the professionals involved in reception activities, it is considered beneficial to share an observation stemming from the reception and migration sector as a whole. Ensuring more favourable **working conditions** for refugee support workers is essential. Indeed, these workers are often the only point of reference for those received. However, in some contexts, beneficiaries pinpointed that whenever the presence of support workers is limited by budgetary and time constraints - and perhaps therefore, there is a high turnover - this may lead to challenges in inclusion pathways. In fact, persons in reception programmes frequently reported experiences of severe loneliness, both during and after the reception pathways.

In Italy, the working conditions of professional refugee support workers are critical. In general, their role is often underestimated, both in terms of social perception, and of contractual and economic enhancement, despite being generally perceived as fundamental in facilitating refugee inclusion pathways. Public recognition for this role is limited and also influenced by political and media narratives that tend to trivialise their work, sometimes reducing it to a mere bureaucratic function. This approach contributes to a scarce consideration of the composite nature of this work, often characterised by high levels of stress and responsibility. Refugee support workers implement activities that require wide-ranging and diversified skills, including legal knowledge in the field of asylum and migration law, skills in the field of social support and care, abilities in helping relationships, especially with individuals who have experienced trauma, ability to work in a network with public institutions, social private organisations, territorial services, etc.

Despite the high level of professionalism required, the contractual conditions are often inadequate. Precarious contracts are common, often short-term contracts or based on collaborations with social private organisations that limit pathways for professional growth. Remuneration is often inadequate compared to the commitment and skills required by the sector. Such precariousness negatively affects not only the psychological wellbeing of support workers, but also the quality of the service provided.

3.5 Networking

A distinctive element among the contexts analysed is the ability to initiate effective and adequate support action, in line with the specific needs of the persons received. Such actions include, for instance, access to housing, job placement, vocational or academic training pathways, as well as programmes for the recognition of educational qualifications. In these fields, **collaboration networks with public and private services** play a vital role. Networks are a key factor to design and implement concrete solutions.

Building and maintaining such networks require years of work; a constant effort. At the same time, time limitations in reception pathways demand a network of contacts with the ability to meet the articulated and diversified needs of individuals, ideally even before specific needs arise. While acknowledging that the very nature of reception systems distributed across vast geographical areas inherently creates variability in the strength and effectiveness of such networks - which can differ significantly between various territorial contexts - it remains essential to carefully assess the resources and actual potential of the territories involved in reception programmes. Continuous efforts must be made to both expand and ensure the operational effectiveness of this support network.

A greater need for intervention was recorded in the following fields: house-hunting, recognition of educational qualifications, access to vocational training and to the labour market. To address these challenges, it is desirable for local reception teams to receive support to initiate, strengthen, and maintain effective collaborations over time with public services and the private social sector.

Among the features that characterise the different contexts, some are more significant than others, both in terms of outlining the nature of the reception provided, and in relation to the impact that they appear to have had on the inclusion pathways of those being received. Interviewees often succeeded in facing the system's shortcomings by relying on both formal and informal networks, which supported them in overcoming bureaucratic obstacles even when support workers were not available, or provided financial support when the reception system could not. Creating synergies between the different fields would not only be a vital resource to pool financial resources, but it would also create room for recognition of the abilities of the individuals, and of their relational and self-determination capacities.

A better reception experience is observed in contexts where the **network with local citizens, the territory and/or the community of reference is strong**. In such programmes, beneficiaries report a greater sense of belonging and improved perception of safety and accompaniment, underscoring the importance of continuity in social relations - in particular with the Italian community - for the inclusion process. This network is crucial in supporting individuals once their reception pathway is over.

A further significant element in the Italian context is the connection with the *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione - SAI* (Reception and Integration System)[14] to continue the pathways towards autonomy that were started within the framework of the reception funded by the organisations implementing Humanitarian Corridors. In some territories, the transition to the *SAI* programme is an essential process, driven by the lack of adequate local resources to support pathways toward inclusion and autonomy, and is therefore automatically guaranteed to all individuals in reception programmes. For others, access to the *SAI* programme after a first step in a reception programme is an unknown, both for the challenges related to access to the system and for the uncertainty about the destination. In fact, in some cases, the *SAI* programme provides an opportunity to continue reception in areas far from the cities where the pathway was initiated, forcing the person to begin again their social and employment inclusion process. Finally, there are cases in which the *SAI* programme concretely enables individuals to consolidate their autonomy, allowing the person to remain in the same area where they have already established relationships and initiated inclusion pathways.

Access to the *SAI* programme may vary significantly depending on the territories, therefore, defining a structured collaboration agreement with the system itself is required. Such an agreement could have the following objectives: reducing inequalities between beneficiaries, in terms of access to a fundamental right, providing support workers with greater certainty about the resources and pathways available, and clarifying the level of governmental engagement in the framework of Humanitarian Corridors, including in terms of funding.

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14 Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione (SAI) in Italy is funded by the national fund for asylum, managed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. This fund taps into both national and, partially, European funds.

CONCLUSION

The research highlighted that the framework of Humanitarian Corridors is primarily a ***political* framework**. On one hand, it represents an initiative aimed at demonstrating that an alternative to migrations managed within the framework of a structural emergency (which becomes a political strategy for gathering support or opposition) is possible, thus preventing the violence, and often death, experienced by people on migratory routes by land or sea. On the other hand, it risks becoming the crowning achievement for various European governments, which - despite differing in their narratives across time and space in recent years - are inexorably steering, in more or less concealed ways, all migration policies towards strategies of exclusion, rejection, and structural violence (Farmer, 2004).

It is in this domain that the dynamics of the assessment process, and later reception, of the Humanitarian Corridors unfold. The historical, political and social awareness of the implicit meanings of these mechanisms by all the stakeholders involved can play a vital role in directing the actions implemented in the framework towards a strategy of reporting, raising awareness and changing migration policies in general. Thus, refugee support workers themselves, whether involved in the assessment process or reception steps, may feel part of a system which is not the mere execution of imposed pre-defined policies. Instead, they may be the protagonists of a critical system advocating against violent migration policies, through which some lives have already had the opportunity to step into new possibilities.

Support workers are at the forefront and they may become the pioneers of the experimentation of innovative assessment processes and support practices. This attempt will succeed and will be increasingly oriented towards welcoming and enhancing the subjectivity of the persons in reception programmes if the political involvement of refugee support workers is ensured, if they are prepared and trained, and if a clear and shared intervention logic is promoted. Such an approach would enable support workers to act not only as executors, but also as aware actors - the protagonists of a critical and innovative system.

Projects like COMET also underscore the importance of a shared European approach, as it is only through a common strategy that meaningful changes in the vision and approach to migration can be achieved. Such a shared approach needs to stem from critical and structured reflections involving all the stakeholders - institutions, civil society, academia and support workers - in dialogues to overcome fragmentation and to promote a really inclusive and sustainable model.

To conclude, it is vital to recognise and enhance the role played by Humanitarian Corridors as an advocacy tool. Using this framework to raise awareness in public opinion, report the structural violence of migration policies and offer viable alternatives is a crucial element in promoting systemic change, requiring a clear and firm political commitment, with the ability to overcome the emergency-based approach and to establish migration policies grounded in social justice, solidarity and on the respect for human rights.

Only through a critical and aware use of tools like the Humanitarian Corridors will it be possible not only to improve the living conditions of the direct beneficiaries, but also to generate a transformative impact on reception policies and culture, thus contributing to a long-lasting change within European societies.

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The report was edited by Associazione Frantz Fanon as part of the Complementary Pathways Network (COMET) project. The authors are Debora Boaglio and Eleonora Voli. Scientific review by Roberto Bertolino and Simona Taliani.

The COMET project received funding from the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the European Union. All project documents can be found on the COMET project website: www.cometnetwork.eu

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