

FACT SHEET

THE PRE-DEPARTURE PHASE AND THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS: A REFLECTION BASED ON THE ITALIAN CONTEXT¹

KEY POINTS

Interviews underscore the profound, if not critical significance of the assessment process² phase for those supported by Italian Humanitarian Corridors. This phase is one of the most meaningful in shaping the expectations of the individuals involved as to their own future and migratory project.

The vulnerability criterion, fundamental from the outset of the assessment processes of programme applications, has grown increasingly complex and diversified over time, making it difficult for researchers to understand the specific **criteria** employed in these processes. Interviews undertaken reveal that, in the initial stages of implementing this mechanism, a narrow focus on an assessment criterion based on levels of vulnerability—which is highly interpretable—led to identifying individuals with severe health conditions. These conditions significantly impacted reception pathways, making it particularly challenging for these individuals to transition out of the program after sometimes spending many years in reception.

Faced with the inevitable limits of resources dedicated to reception and accompaniment—resources that the implementing organizations in Italy bear alone — assessment criteria were subsequently revised. The goal was to balance vulnerability and the economic and temporal sustainability of accompaniment pathways in host countries. As a result, other factors, such as the individual's degree of *integrability* and the potential effectiveness of available reception pathways were woven into the formal criterion of specific vulnerabilities.

This lack of clarity inevitably puts considerable pressure on field operators, who report being perceived as omnipotent figures in selection contexts—an image that is neither desired nor professionally manageable, particularly given the psychological and moral burden which “the choice” carries.

While the absence of clear and shared criteria is understandable given the diversity of contexts and the lack of a unified legal framework, it is crucial to recognize that this ambiguity can sometimes be difficult to understand and to manage for all parties involved, be they staff or beneficiaries.

For those applying to participate in the program, this framework can amplify the perceived pressure to be “sufficiently good/vulnerable/motivated” in the eyes of the assessment team member, who is often seen as a kind of referee on whom their destiny depends. Applicants may feel compelled to meet the expectations of the “Other”, resulting in an informal marketplace of information—circulated through word-of-mouth or social media—about how to appear as suitable candidates to those with the power to decide. This, in turn, fosters a sense among the assessment team that they are being manipulated.

What is described recalls the notion of ‘optimal vulnerability’ and its relationship to a workfare device (Wacquant, 2006). It suggests, that is, that candidates learn, within and through this same device, to use and manage the language of suffering in the manner required by the device itself. This fact will inevitably also have a consequence on the self-perception of the person himself, an issue that cannot be ignored if we focus on the ambivalence within which, in this process, the person ends up being bound. If on the one hand, in fact, in order to be selected, it is necessary to show oneself, and therefore also to perceive oneself, as vulnerable, in the reception project this position will end up being a source of contradictions with respect to a request for autonomy, which does not fit in with the idea of fragility within which the person has presented and recognised him/herself. The subject risks therefore, during the unfolding of the device, to be stuck between two opposing demands, but both fundamental for the success of the migratory project. From this initial phase, the negotiation of one's migratory process with the “Other” begins. This is where the identity of the migrant as an “entitled,” desirable, privileged individual starts to take shape—a status for which people train themselves to translate their personal stories “into a Eurocentric legal language and to perform the role” (Khosravi, 2010).

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 nonetheless 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 Selection Process to Accompaniment towards Autonomy. An analysis of experiences and expectations*, Debora Boaglio, Eleonora Voli, Associazione Frantz Fanon.

2 The term ‘assessment process’ refers to the phase that begins with the initial contact with the person identified as suitable to be included in the specific Humanitarian Corridor and ends with the assignment to the reception and accompaniment project that best responds to the individual's specificities.

These categories accompany individuals accepted through Humanitarian Corridors throughout their journey until they exit the reception project. These categories shape the relationship between staff and beneficiaries, forming a field defined (or undefined) by constant shifts and overlaps between rights, aid, and merit.

From the staff perspective, the interviews reveal the enormous **responsibility** involved in conducting the complex assessment task. Staff must navigate immense expectations from those applying for the program while being directly exposed to the candidates' personal stories, needs, and hopes. In response to these complexities, staff report having developed **self-protection** strategies over time to continue working in the field. These 'distancing' attempts, can relieve the operator of the isolation and weight of individual responsibility. However, they may risk reducing the relationship with the people encountered to one that could be more procedural or standardized. Two of these distancing strategies shared by staff during interviews are highlighted here.

One of the distancing strategies involves involving third-party organizations in the decision-making process. By taking this approach, operators become part of a network where the assessment process is conducted collaboratively, thereby reducing the individual impact and burden borne by any single professional. These third-party organizations, such as other humanitarian agencies, local community groups, or even governmental bodies, can provide additional perspectives and expertise, making the process more robust. However, this strategy can make the assessment criteria even more challenging. Their underlying logic and historical basis may become inaccessible, complicating communication with candidates and the teams involved in subsequent reception phases. Moreover, the fragmentation of responsibilities can compromise the overall coherence and effectiveness of the process.

A second strategy lies in asking individuals in the host country to identify and recommend new candidates from the countries of departure. This approach is based on the idea that the individual selected, already connected to a reference network in the host country, will find the integration process more accessible. However, this task can place the already-accepted individual in a position of considerable power and ambivalence regarding their family or reference network in the country of departure. Managing this role can be challenging, both relationally and psychologically.

For staff in the host country, a vague understanding of assessment criteria, difficulty in obtaining clear feedback about the various steps of the selection process, and the information shared during it often expose them to triangulations in their relationships with the beneficiaries. This dynamic can sometimes hinder the establishment of trust within the reception process.

Another critical aspect is so-called **Pre-departure Orientation**. This phase involves preparing candidates for departure. The data collected indicate that information about departure procedures and specific reception arrangements is often shared only after the assessment process has been completed. This means it is provided solely to those who have already been selected for a specific Corridor and are awaiting completion of pre-departure bureaucratic procedures.

Interviews also reveal that welcomed individuals are sometimes informed of their destination within the host country only at the time of departure or at the airport. While it remains of utmost importance that a safe journey and place of reception—strengths of the Humanitarian Corridors program—are guaranteed, it is necessary to reflect on how this procedure perpetuates the suspension of these individuals' lives and reinforces the sense of lacking control over their destinies. This raises the question of whether, and to what extent, this process fosters feelings of insecurity and arbitrariness, establishing a clear power hierarchy between the host and those hosted.

As Abdelmalek Sayad (2002) argues, migration is a "*conditional choice*", where the migrant acts subjectively but always in response to pressures, balancing necessity and desire. The moment individuals receive information about what awaits them becomes particularly significant, as it reaffirms the principle of free and informed choice. To achieve this, it is crucial to ensure the decision is made with the highest possible level of awareness based on clear and consistent information about what they will encounter in the host country. Analysis of narratives from individuals in reception programs, or those who have completed them, reveals that entering the new social context is often marked by a significant dissonance between the idealized representations constructed beforehand—on which their migratory project was based—and the reality they encounter. This misalignment between expectations and lived experiences can significantly affect individuals' pathways and psychosocial well-being.

Although migrants' aspirations are often fuelled by success stories shared by family networks in their country of origin, filtered through the lens of acquaintances' narratives of achievement in Europe (Sayad, 2002), and shaped

by the perception of a “democratic West”—a view rooted in ongoing colonial³ geopolitical relationships—pre-departure preparation plays a critical role. Like the reception process, this phase is essential for raising awareness, deconstructing, revising, or expanding individuals’ expectations. The research team reflects on just how important it is to recognize that at the moment when a person is identified as an ideal candidate, the image of being “chosen, privileged, desired” can strongly take hold. This, in turn, may reinforce an expectation of success, which initially materializes through the opportunity to embark on a safe journey to Europe.

The assessment process thus contributes to shaping the collective imagination surrounding individuals’ migratory projects and the dynamics governing them. These dynamics are passed from one phase to the next but often find their first space for action and reflection only during the reception phase. During reception, these dynamics are enacted and, at times, challenged, revealing critical issues and tensions.

Interviews highlight how these difficulties often manifest in everyday life, sometimes as **requests perceived by staff as “unacceptable”** or incomprehensible. For example, individuals might request a larger home or one closer to the city centre or seek an extension of their reception period to access job opportunities better aligned with their skills or previous career paths in their country of origin. The authors stress that, while such requests might appear dissonant to those working in the humanitarian sector (Fassin, 2018), who may expect individuals to be grateful for the assistance provided in any form, these requests represent attempts to renegotiate the balance of power between staff and those being welcomed.

Among the most valuable **information** identified by interviewees are details about the practical aspects of the reception process: its duration, the forms of support provided, the types of sustainable and planned assistance, the location of reception, and the type of accommodation in which the individual will be placed. At the same time, staff have noted that providing such information during the selection process can sometimes be seen as distorting the humanitarian nature of the program (Fassin, 2018). When the possibility of being “rescued” is at stake, sharing information about the location and conditions of reception may seem discordant with the prevailing narrative in the humanitarian sector, which frames the core emergency as simply bringing individuals to a place where they can begin to rebuild their lives.

However, as reported by those being received, it is crucial to recognize that individuals identified for this program cannot and should not be seen as disconnected from their personal histories. Even if they are currently living in refugee camps, in tents under precarious sanitary conditions, or extreme danger and vulnerability, they often come from pasts shaped by ambition, networks, knowledge, and influence. For some, the Humanitarian Corridors program may represent merely a springboard for a broader migratory project. In this sense, they see themselves as chosen and privileged actors, expecting—precisely because they were identified from among many—to find conditions that best align with their needs and histories, including appropriate accommodation upon their arrival in Europe. Given this context and understanding that individuals’ informational needs can vary case by case, it becomes the responsibility of the organizations activating the program to provide transparent, simple, and accessible information. This ensures that each participant can envision and situate themselves in terms of their choice and future expectations in a way that is as closely aligned with reality as possible.

While expressing complete trust in the teams or organizations managing the assessment processes, many **reception staff** admit to not fully understanding how the initial phases of these pathways were developed, how the relationship between the program and individuals was established and evolved during the assessment process, or what information was shared. This lack of clarity becomes particularly problematic when staff and beneficiaries must navigate the remnants of earlier phases in their interactions. These unclear elements can be easily manipulated by either party, often leading to relational conflicts that may result in the failure of the reception project and cause emotional distress for those involved.

3 The term ‘colonial’ refers to the persistence of dynamics of domination, exploitation and subordination between ex-colonizing and ex-colonized countries, despite the formal end of colonialism. This concept highlights how the control logics of the colonial era have been reformulated into new economic, cultural and political structures that perpetuate global hierarchies. Frantz Fanon, in *The Damned of the Earth* (1961), describes how colonialism has left deep scars on relations between the centre and periphery of the world, with the West continuing to maintain a dominant position through economic and cultural control. Fanon points out that this subordination perpetuates conditions of dependency for the former colonized countries. Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), analyses the ways in which the West represents the East and other cultural othernesses as ‘inferior’ or ‘backward’. This discursive construction, born in colonial times, persists in justifying geopolitical practices of exploitation and control, maintaining asymmetrical relations between the West and the countries of the global South. Therefore, the concept of ‘geopolitical relations that are still colonial’ refers to colonial legacies, which continue to structure the contemporary world, not only in economic relations, but also in cultural representations and policies of exclusion and control.

In the framework of Humanitarian Corridors, unlike other migratory programs, the fact that access to travel is granted only after completion of the assessment process and pre-departure preparation inherently makes the project a negotiated agreement from the outset. This agreement involves the individual and, more importantly, the host country, which sets the boundaries between what is acceptable and desirable. This tension between the individual's journey and the host's expectations creates a debtor-creditor dynamic in the relationship between those hosted and the host country—regardless of its representatives. Each party is seen as doing something for the other, a challenging dynamic to escape. The expectations of both parties, before and after the journey, shape what constitutes a desirable migratory project.

This intricate web of meanings, vividly depicted in interviewees' narratives, defines the relational field of reception. While tracing how **mutual expectations** are built throughout the Humanitarian Corridor process is difficult, this is a pivotal factor influencing the actors' relationships.

The assessment process and pre-departure preparation play a crucial role in shaping this dynamic field, making it essential to focus carefully on this stage to mitigate its potential impacts both on the integration pathways of those hosted and on the professional trajectories of staff involved in the reception process.

For the assessment process to serve as the starting point for a migratory project that concludes in the host country—or potentially another country chosen by the individual—it is necessary to consider its upstream implications and downstream effects. This includes the day-to-day relational dynamics between the host's perceived omnipotence and the selected individual's aspirations. Staff must know that their work within the reception framework operates within deeply rooted historical, social, cultural, and political dynamics and complex subjectivities. This awareness helps to avoid reducing reception pathways to the mere technical execution of social intervention, which would leave little room for individuals' potential agency. It also prevents the risk of replicating frontier dynamics within the host country.

Among the insights gathered from interviews, one stands out: the Humanitarian Corridors program is a **political tool**. On the one hand, it demonstrates the feasibility of alternatives to migration management rooted in structural emergencies—often used as political strategies to garner support or dissent—while avoiding the violence or loss of life commonly experienced along land or sea migration routes. On the other hand, the program risks becoming a showcase initiative for European governments, which, despite differing narratives across time and space, are increasingly steering migration policies towards strategies of exclusion, rejection, and structural violence (Farmer, 2004).

Within this framework, the dynamics of selection and reception under Humanitarian Corridors unfold. All stakeholders' comprehensive historical, political, and social awareness of these mechanisms can be decisive in steering the program toward strategies that advocate for, raise awareness of, and push for changes in general migration policies. This shift would empower staff to not see themselves as implementers of imposed policies but as central actors in a critical system to challenge violent migration policies. Meanwhile, these efforts offer some individuals a vital first step toward new possibilities.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Assessment criteria represent one of the most challenging aspects of the program to address. In this context, the international project COMET – Complementary Pathways Network – serves as an example and an opportunity for fostering shared reflection at the European level with the involvement of strategic actors. Such opportunities enable exchanges between different initiatives and the sharing of advocacy strategies targeting those involved in implementing intergovernmental protocols for intervention activation.

To foster more equitable relationships between stakeholders and deconstruct the experiences described earlier among operators and selected individuals, it is critical to ensure principles of transparency, and shared procedures and information, **from the earliest stages of the assessment process**. While greater transparency and sharing complicate preparation and dialogue between recipients and reception teams, this approach can lead to greater awareness and engagement among candidates regarding their decision to migrate and their co-design of a migratory pathway with support systems.

Concrete information regarding reception arrangements—such as location, duration, and support modes—is essential. This helps manage expectations and encourages individuals to co-design their reception pathways from the outset. Interviewees suggested creating points of connection between assessment teams and reception teams and, where possible, organizing (even online) meetings between selected individuals and operators in the destination country. Such interactions would foster relationship-building and reduce the sense of alienation individuals may experience upon arrival.

Beyond logistical details, sharing essential information about rights and responsibilities in host countries is important. However, a descriptive approach should be adopted, avoiding idealized representations of the destination context. These phases should be structured with a clear timeline leading up to departure, allowing for reflection between meetings. This structure should encourage individuals to ask questions or raise concerns, enabling the negotiation of their pathway. While mindful of human and time resources costs, investing more in pre-departure planning and evaluation can be expected to impact long-term outcomes positively.

A related issue is the **psychological well-being** of staff, particularly those heavily involved in the assessment process. As previously noted, they are often exposed to signs of distress and risk burnout. To address this, allocating sufficient time and resources to train the assessment team is recommended, focusing on developing the theory and approach underlying the selection process. Regular psychological supervision and support for teams are also critical, enabling strategies for managing responsibilities to be collectively structured at the team level.

RESOURCES/FURTHER READING:

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