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REPORT

SOCIAL MEDIATION FOR 360-DEGREE SUPPORT



MOSAICO
Azioni per i Rifugiati

PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION: UNDERSTANDING ITS CRITICAL ROLE

Interviews with refugees, refugee support workers and others involved in the framework of Italian humanitarian corridors clearly and repeatedly highlighted that ensuring an effective pre-departure preparation is key. Many refugees are often confused due to the contradictory information they receive from friends or family members who already live in Italy or in other European countries. This can lead to confusion, and can hinder the pre-departure preparation process.

Refugee support workers underscored such difficulties during their first contact with refugees. In some cases, refugees showed a limited knowledge of the reality in Italy, which led to disorientation, emotional distress and difficulties in their social inclusion path.

Refugee support workers highlighted that it would have been beneficial for them to participate in orientation meetings, to receive more information on their reception facility in Italy, the city and what it means to start a social inclusion process. Those who did not have adequate pre-departure orientation face significant challenges in understanding and navigating the Italian system. Some refugees wished they had received more in-depth information before their departure, in order to feel safer and more prepared when they arrived in Italy.

Undoubtedly, a comprehensive pre-departure orientation is a key step for the success of the migratory pathways of the refugees selected through the framework of Italian humanitarian corridors. This process facilitates not only individual integration, but also the efficacy and sustainability of the reception system as a whole.

Given the practical and cultural challenges refugees face, pre-departure orientation must be multi-dimensional. It should provide a clear and realistic understanding of the opportunities and services available in Italy. This helps reduce culture shock, manage unrealistic expectations, and prevent frustration and emotional distress. Additionally, it requires proper training for refugee support workers to effectively guide individuals as they navigate this new environment.

Through practical tools like information on transportation, the healthcare system and the bureaucracy, orientation promotes the personal autonomy of refugees. This makes them more independent and able to face daily life in Italy with confidence. Additionally, it enables them to understand their rights and duties, and to familiarise with social and cultural norms in the host country. Information helps to prevent misunderstandings and conflict, thus facilitating positive interactions with local communities and improving the integration process.

Support in the collaboration between the institutions in the countries of origin and Italian institutions would ensure consistency and continuity in the support provided to refugees. With a view to ensuring an efficient spread of support, involving diasporas may create a precious network of informal support, contributing to reducing the feeling of isolation and providing concrete examples of successful integration.

Hence, not only does a well-structured pre-departure orientation facilitate the integration of refugees, it also contributes to creating a more efficient, sustainable and inclusive reception system, strengthening confidence in institutions and promoting a sense of mutual belonging.

Podcasts in the pre-departure orientation step: structure, topics, and challenges

As part of the pre-departure orientation provided during the COMET project, multimedia materials in the form of podcasts were developed, given their ease of use, the ability to reduce language barriers through linguistic and thematic adaptability. Narratives from different categories of refugees already integrated in Italy have been included, as first-person stories are highly engaging and make the information more understandable, memorable, and, consequently, provide emotional and psychological support. The objective is to provide vital information for a realistic approach, to prevent unrealistic expectations as well as kickstarting an inclusion process, and above all, enabling the selected refugees to make informed choices about their future life in Italy.

However, the analysis of interviews highlighted that:

- Some of the refugees who had access to the material showed little interest or curiosity in asking further questions during the subsequent pre-departure meeting.
- Unfortunately, in some departure contexts, difficulty in accessing the internet has prevented many from being able to use the podcasts.

As social mediators, we questioned the impact that receiving multimedia material would have had. Indeed, the lack of adequate tools to measure the efficacy of the podcasts raises some key questions for improving this tool in the future, including developing a deeper reflection at different levels, such as:

- Refugees may not understand the message if a difficult language or a highly technical content is used.
- Additionally, if too many details are provided in a single podcast, this may create confusion and demotivate.
- Given the generally high expectations of people recorded during the interviews, if the content does not adequately balance challenges and opportunities, this may lead to either unrealistic expectations or unjustified fear.
- As mentioned above, a different set of tools in addition to the podcasts should be designed for those with lack of access to the Internet or who are not familiar with technological tools.

In the trial phase of podcasts for refugees selected to participate in Italian humanitarian corridors within the COMET project, the following themes were addressed:

- An introductory podcast that explains to refugees the goal of the COMET "COMplementary pathways nETwork" project and the reason for creating a series of podcasts; it offers refugees encouragement not to give up on reaching their goal of building a new life.
- A podcast on work, providing practical information for integration into the Italian job market. It highlights the importance of learning Italian through classes and daily practice, having a clear professional objective and adapting to local requirements. This includes accepting traineeships to gain experience and accepting initial positions that may not be in line with their skills to acquire work experience and gradually adapt to the new environment, understanding and overcoming cultural and bureaucratic differences at the workplace. The podcast also explains that for women, work life balance is crucial, given the high economic needs.
- A podcast on legal procedures, describing the main steps for refugees once they arrive in Italy. Upon arrival in Rome, they will be identified and registered through fingerprints and photos, and will then receive temporary documents after declaring their intention to apply for international protection. In addition, within 10 days from arrival, they will need to apply for international protection at the "Questura" (designated police station) to receive a temporary permit of stay. After, refugees need to prepare for the interview with the Territorial Commission, explaining the grounds for their application. When asylum is granted, they will receive a travel document to travel legally in Europe (up to three months), highlighting that travelling without this document is not permitted and can lead to forced deportation to Italy. The podcast covers refugees' rights and restrictions, such as the fact that they cannot return to their country of origin without losing their refugee status. After five years of residency, refugees can apply for a long-term residency permit or Italian citizenship. They will not be alone; they will be supported by the refugee support workers during the entire process.
- A podcast on healthcare explains how the Italian national healthcare system works, starting with the registration process and access to the public system, which provides medical care at low or no cost. It also covers how to create a file to obtain the "tessera sanitaria" (healthcare card), which is required for medical care. The podcast explains the role of a general practitioner for primary care and specialised care prescriptions, which are available through public facilities at a reduced cost. In case of emergency or surgery, care is provided free of charge. For mental health issues, it is advised to start psychological care to deal with challenging experiences, migration stress and to improve their general wellbeing. It is highlighted that psychological care for parents also helps children grow up peacefully.
- A podcast on LGBTQ+ rights in Italy, covering the rights to express sexual orientation and gender identity. Those facing discrimination or violence in their country of origin on the grounds of their gender identity or sexual orientation can apply for international protection and live in Italy. Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is prohibited by law, but there may still be incidents of hostility. Same sex couples

can get married through “civil unions”, and transgender individuals can start a transition process with the support of the national healthcare system. Additionally, Italy guarantees access to medical care, including for sexually transmitted diseases.

Podcasts were listened to by individuals, groups and families, and other audiovisual material was published on YouTube; therefore, this material was easily accessible to those with an internet connection. As already mentioned, podcasts represent a promising tool for pre-departure orientation, but it is essential to address the challenges that have emerged in order to make them more effective and inclusive in the future. Above all, it is important to design, together with the individuals, the ideal pathway for them to tackle pre-departure issues, knowing that each person has different dreams, goals, and challenges - whether as an individual, a couple, or a family.

Starting from the need to reach all the refugees involved:

- It is vital to offer podcasts on free platforms that can be easily accessed offline, or stored on a USB device, or that can be downloaded and then listened to on different devices such as Mp4 readers or computers.
- It is important to assess which format is most efficient, given that audio material has advantages – being easy to distribute and it being possible to be listened to while doing other things - requiring less technological resources and reducing visual distractions. Videos, on the other hand, are more engaging, accompanied by visual explanations that are useful to explain complex processes. A hybrid solution, combining visual content and podcasts for more in-depth knowledge, could be the most efficient strategy to maintain attention.
- Additionally, it is important to support understanding with complementary materials, such as written summaries, flyers, and infographics, to which refugees can later refer to reinforce what they have heard. The content should be engaging, including success stories of refugees integrated in Italy, and interviews with experts (such as cultural mediators, former refugees, and refugee support workers) to create authentic and motivating content. Providing a space for dialogue, such as online sessions with refugee support workers or in-person meetings with evaluation workers, will help clarify any doubts and allow for a deeper exploration of the topic, ensuring that the experience is not one-sided.

During the online orientation sessions, some participants showed signs of shyness or fear in talking in front of a group. Therefore, it would be good to organise individual online or in-person meetings to discuss critical issues.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVELY ENGAGING INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS IN RECEPTION PATHWAYS

Actively involving institutional networks is a vital element for refugee reception paths, especially for those arriving through Italian humanitarian corridors, as it guarantees consistency throughout the process. This institutional synergy ensures coordination among services, prevents the dissipation of resources and facilitates the process from pre-departure to integration. Thanks to close cooperation between international and local institutions, vital documents are obtained more easily, thus making access to territorial services - healthcare, education and work - more efficient.

A dialogue between institutions, NGOs and associations can lead to personalised paths that meet the specific needs of refugees, promoting a type of support that considers their vulnerabilities. Additionally, involving institutions ensures cultural and social inclusion, by promoting intercultural dialogue and reducing tensions with local communities, which have often surfaced in different cities when local citizens found out that migrants were moving to their neighbourhood. Ensuring stable resources and monitoring integration pathways are additional benefits of a strong institutional network, which strengthens refugees' trust and facilitates mediation with other social actors.

A virtuous example is the “*Spazio Comune*” project in Turin, that shows how local institutions, cultural mediators and associations can collaborate effectively to provide integrated and cohesive support to refugees.

Indeed, a participatory and synergic approach that fully involves institutions improves not only the efficiency of reception paths, but also contributes to building a more resilient system which is able to adapt to the complex challenges of refugee integration.

Synergies and coordination for effective support

Successful refugee support is highly dependent on the ability to create and maintain synergies between local and international institutions, as well as the social private sector. In the evaluation process, involving international institutions such as governments, embassies, and NGOs is vital to ensure a regular and organised flow of refugees to Italy. However, this strong coordination seems to diminish once the refugees arrive in the country. While reception in Italy is mostly funded by private individuals, the Otto per Mille tax allocation scheme and other funds from specific projects, the integration step may not have a similarly strong institutional continuity.

Successful support depends on the ability to maintain coordination among different entities, both public and private, that operate in the local areas. Reception projects are mostly managed by private organisations that work in different ways and with a strong focus on creating collaboration networks. Such organisations actively collaborate with local institutions to facilitate refugee integration, introducing good practices, shared resources and concrete support experiences.

A meaningful example of this integrated approach is *Mosaico's* own experience. The organisation is composed of a multicultural team of refugees with different migratory experiences. Through the "*Spazio Comune*" project, for which Mosaico became an implementing partner of UNHCR² In May 2022, a concrete model of collaboration was established between local institutions and organizations in the social private sector. The project aims to create or establish social relations between refugees and the local community, by facilitating communication among refugees and different services, such as local authorities, welfare and health care services. *Spazio Comune* is a point of reference where refugees can receive clear information, orientation and support, and contributes to reducing the disorientation that often characterises the first months in the country.

Inter-institutional synergies are therefore vital to ensure an approach to support that is not only limited to administrative support, but promotes a veritable individual care management. Public-private coordination enables us to face the challenges of integration, including language barriers, bureaucratic uncertainties and social isolation. Through continuous dialogue between the various stakeholders involved, it is possible to implement swift and targeted responses that address the specific needs of refugees, ensuring that reception is not formal, but really inclusive and sustainable.

In addition, the efficient coordination of resources and the creation of solid networks between institutions and the private social sector, is essential so that support can promote autonomy, social inclusion and refugees' stability. Only an integrated and collaborative system can ensure that refugees are accompanied in a safe way that takes account of their integration path, facing challenges in a shared and coordinated way.

1 http://comune.torino.it/stranieri-nomadi/box-spazio_comune.shtml

2 <https://mosaicorefugees.org/progetto-spazio-comune/>

APPROACHES AND SUPPORT METHODOLOGIES: A REFUGEE-CENTERED ANALYSIS

Direct experiences: success stories and challenges

Identifying a uniform model of support for refugees is challenging, as different approaches have emerged among professionals, workers, and volunteers. However, involving refugees themselves in designing integration paths is vital, since only those with lived migration experience can fully understand the difficulties.

The Association *"Mosaico Azioni per i Rifugiati"* is a fundamental point of reference for asylum seekers and refugees in their social, economic and cultural integration in Italy. The approach adopted by its social mediators, all with lived migration experience, is based on deep empathy and direct experience of the challenges that refugees face. In this way, personalised support is not only a service, but a bridge of trust between refugees and institutions.

An example of Mosaico's approach is the *"Mbongui"* drop-in service, where refugees can meet mediators, express their concerns, receive orientation and support. This service reduces the stress caused by having to navigate different bureaucratic services and prevents the risk of frustration and disorientation.

The most common challenges that refugees face include obtaining fundamental documents such as the permit of stay or the identity card. A significant example is that of a young refugee from Mali whose asylum application was rejected due to communication errors during the hearing. Thanks to the intervention of Mosaico's mediators, the case was carefully managed; the young man was accompanied to a new hearing, supported in collecting additional documentation and guided in the interaction with the competent authorities. This support led to the recognition of international protection, and prevented the refugee from being undocumented and vulnerable.

Another significant experience was that of a Syrian family who arrived in Italy without receiving information on the procedures required to access the healthcare system and school for the children. Thanks to the *"Spazio Comune"* project, mediators offered a comprehensive guide for registration in the national healthcare system and accompanied them to the local health centres. At the same time, the children were enrolled in a school program, thanks to the collaboration with local educational institutions. This case highlights the effectiveness of an integrated and synergy-based approach involving various institutional actors.

In fact, according to the testimonies of the refugees supported, the approach implemented by Mosaico is effective for different reasons:

- **Trust-based relationship:** with personalised support, refugees feel understood and supported, and the feeling of isolation that often characterises reception paths is reduced. Mediators with lived migration experience further strengthens the relationship, which is authentic and not judgemental.
- **Simplification of bureaucracy:** the complexity of the Italian bureaucracy often creates confusion. Thanks to the orientation and support offered by mediators, refugees can face such difficulties with increased awareness and peace of mind.
- **Promotion of Social Inclusion:** Mediators do not just solve immediate issues, they promote long-term integration processes, enhancing the individual skills and potential of refugees and promoting their participation in the local community.

Over time, the experience gained by Mosaico and the reflection on some cases are the grounds on which new strategies are grounded to improve refugee supported:

- **Personalised services and continuous monitoring:** offering targeted solutions that meet the specific needs of each refugee, while implementing regular monitoring to adapt the support to the developments.
- **Strengthening institutional networks:** promoting constant collaboration between mediators, institutions and the social private sector to ensure consistent and integrated actions.

- **Creation of socialisation spaces:** fostering intercultural dialogue and a sense of belonging through the creation of meeting places that reduce social isolation.

Finally, the work of *Mosaico's* mediators shows that an approach to support based on understanding and empathy can transform challenges into opportunities. Not only does this approach facilitate refugee integration, it also contributes to consolidating the social fabric, by promoting a more inclusive and cohesive society.

While emphasising the importance of the direct involvement of refugees in defining their integration pathways, there is a lack of recognition of the role of the social mediator. Their contribution should be structured, as their participation risks remaining limited or unorganised. In fact, although mediators are able to simplify bureaucratic complexities for refugees, the system itself is not fundamentally changed. This indicates a structural challenge, with a high bureaucratic burden that requires the constant intervention of mediators.

In addition, while the personalised approach is highly effective, it may not be suitable for upscaling given the limited resources available and the need for mediators with lived migration experiences.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIATION SUPPORT

Social mediation is a vital tool not only to promote refugee integration, but also to foster peaceful living together. Integrating refugees means embracing a different culture every day, an essential need in an increasingly globalised world. Succeeding in this endeavour means implementing social mediation practices.

In this context, *Mosaico* plays a fundamental bridging role between communities, refugees and local institutions. This approach to social mediation differs from the most traditional forms of cultural, linguistic and intercultural mediation, by facing the multiple dimensions of integration in a holistic and efficient way.

Facilitating Communication and Mutual Understanding

Mosaico's approach to Social Mediation enables to overcome not only the linguistic and cultural barriers that normally hinder efficient communication between refugees and institutions, but also to accompany people in their inclusion pathways in their community. In addition, it supports those facing complex issues that may jeopardise the life of the most vulnerable individuals.

Social mediators - thanks to their direct refugee experience and the knowledge of the languages and cultures involved - act as facilitators, preventing misunderstandings and conflicts. Their role is not limited to mere linguistic translation; they interpret the cultural codes and expectations of the parties involved, by promoting authentic and respectful communication.

Service Orientation and Navigating the System

One of the main goals of social mediation is guiding refugees through the complex system of the Italian services. Mediators support refugees in understanding often unclear bureaucratic procedures and facilitate access to fundamental rights such as healthcare, education, and employment. They also assist them in choosing the type of residence permit best suited to their situation.

This type of practical orientation is vital not only for those who arrive without knowing the Italian language or local norms, but also those with a higher education. In fact, among those interviewed some hold university degrees, but struggled to understand the procedures nonetheless. Often, during pre-departure sessions, incorrect beliefs that had developed over time would emerge. For those leaving without any educational background, the challenges are even greater, and it becomes more difficult to dismantle certain deep-seated beliefs.

Social and Cultural Integration

Mosaico's approach to Social Mediation goes beyond practical support and actively promotes cultural inclusion. Mediators help refugees understand the norms and values of Italian society, facilitating intercultural dialogue that reduces prejudice and stereotypes, while respecting the free choice of individuals to engage in the inclusion pathways.

At the same time, through various events, they raise awareness among local communities and institutions to foster support and coexistence between different cultures, thus contributing to building a more open and cohesive society.

Building Trust-Based Relations

A fundamental feature of social mediation is building trust-based relations between refugees and institutions. *Mosaico's* mediators, thanks to their lived refugee experience, act as credible and familiar points of reference for those experiencing vulnerabilities. For example, during orientation pathways, some refugees who were initially hesitant to use healthcare services felt more confident after being accompanied by a mediator who shared their personal experience of accessing Italian healthcare.

This shared experience helps reduce mistrust and dispel fears related to Italian institutions. In another case, a mediator facilitated the school enrolment of a refugee family's children by clearly explaining the educational system and addressing the parents' fears about the new school environment.

Such interventions enable constructive dialogue and foster a veritable social inclusion based on mutual trust and on the understanding of the needs and expectations of the people involved.

Promoting Autonomy and Empowerment

The path to inclusion does not end with immediate support, the ultimate goal of social mediation is to promote the autonomy of refugees. Through its territorial services, *Mosaico* supports the development of practical skills, such as job seeking, professional training and the management of personal resources. This approach aims to empower refugees as active protagonists of their integration, enhancing their skills and potential.

A concrete example of this mission is the story of the Congolese painter René Boukul. After passing through Turin, René encountered *Mosaico* that helped him find his bearings and receive the support needed to develop his artistic talent. Thanks to this experience, René was able to launch a crowdfunding campaign to finance his creative projects and to continue to nurture his passion for art. His story is an example of how social mediation can transform the initial support into a drive towards autonomy and personal success, helping refugees to become the active protagonists of their new life.

This type of intervention is not limited to meet immediate needs, but builds pathways of growth and fulfilment, enhancing each individual and their unique potential.

Preventing Isolation and Discrimination

Through awareness raising and community support, *Mosaico* is committed to preventing social isolation and combating discrimination. Mediators are keen to identify situations of exclusion and actively intervene to create support networks that promote social inclusion, thereby reducing the risk of marginalisation.

Mosaico's approach to Social Mediation offers a complete and personalised approach to refugee inclusion, addressing not only the practical aspects of integration, but also the emotional and social dimensions. This innovative approach aims to build a society where refugees are not only seen as people in need of help, but as individuals who participate with dignity and responsibility to the life of the community that received them.

Towards Autonomy: Personalised and Inclusive Pathways

Autonomy is the core goal of refugee integration paths, since it is the possibility to live life independently, making informed decisions and fully participating in society. To achieve this goal, it is vital to offer personalised and inclusive paths that meet the individual needs of each person selected for the humanitarian corridors scheme.

Every refugee has a unique story, with different skills, experiences and needs. Personalised pathways allow for an effective response to this diversity. For example, job orientation is crucial: support in job search, vocational training, and the recognition of qualifications earned in the country of origin enable refugees to more easily integrate into the labour market. Similarly, educational support facilitates school or university integration, while language classes improve language skills, which are vital for economic self-reliance.

Another essential aspect is legal and administrative support. Supporting refugees in regularisation processes and to obtain the necessary documents ensures access to public services, while psychological support helps to face trauma and emotional challenges, thus facilitating a positive transition to autonomy.

Inclusive integration pathways require actively involving refugees in the social and cultural life in the host community. Fostering participation in intercultural events, community activities and dialogue initiatives contributes to creating solid social networks and to reduce the feeling of isolation. At the same time, it is vital to promote the participation of refugees in the decisions that concern them, transforming them into the active protagonists of their integration path.

To ensure a sustainable autonomy over time, it is necessary to provide long-term support. Mentoring and tutoring programmes can accompany refugees in strengthening their independence, while the creation of community and professional support networks reinforces the pathway towards a full self-reliance.

Finally, the approach needs to be flexible and adaptable. Integration is a dynamic process requiring constant adjustments based on new challenges and opportunities. Personalised autonomy pathways, respectful of the refugees' dignity and experiences, enable to achieve veritable and long-lasting integration.

Investing in personalised and inclusive pathways not only facilitates refugee autonomy but also contributes to building a more equal and cohesive society that respects diversity.

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