



Centro Astalli Association Annual Report 2015

Points to emphasise

The number of applications for asylum in Italy is increasing, but many are not staying here.

For the first time since the Second World War, the number of people forced to flee their homes in the world has largely surpassed the threshold of 50 million (by mid-2014, they already numbered over 56.7 million.) Serious humanitarian crises underway, most notably in Syria, have increased the number of people seeking protection in Europe. There were 64,886 applications in Italy, a 143% increase since last year. Among the most-represented nationalities were not Syrians nor Eritreans, even though they comprised the largest percentage of the 170,757 migrants who arrived to Italy by sea (39,651 and 33,559 respectively).

Thus, in 2014, many forced migrants did not stay in Italy, but continued their journeys to other countries in northern Europe. A significant number of those who sought help from the clinic were refugees “in transit”, who stayed in Rome for only a few weeks, living in temporary shelters or in makeshift homes in the train stations. The total number of meals distributed at the soup kitchen in 2014 (91,550) was roughly the same as the number recorded in 2013, with the daily average of meals offered between 300 and 350. Malians comprised the largest group (about 30% of the people) at the soup kitchen; this has been the case and an increasing trend since 2013.

☐ See sections *Clinic, Soup kitchen*

The reception system is growing, but integration remains problematic.

Throughout 2014, Italy had to cope with a high number of arrivals, finding many places in a short amount of time, once again using extraordinary measures. However, it should be highlighted that a great effort was made by the state to organize a reception system with the number of places proportionate to the number of arrivals, based on the averages of recent years past: SPRAR (Protection Services for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) was expanded to 20,000 spots and is expected to reach 40,000 this year. Hopefully, in the near future it will reach 60,000 spots to meet the actual needs. Only

by ceasing to resort to emergency measures will be possible to have a transparent, well-monitored system with acceptable standards.

However, nothing new has been done regarding measures to accompany and integrate international protection seekers into the host society. There have been some positive trial attempts, but there has not yet been a determined effort to rethink the issue on the whole. The opportunities for job training, provided by SPRAR through contributions to specific projects, have been used by all of Centro Astalli's reception centres with positive results. These programmes can make a difference in the lives of individual refugees involved, but these cases are isolated events; they do not change the larger picture. The matter of introducing refugees into the workplace and actually enforcing social rights, especially during the initial period of stay in Italy, cannot be resolved by a third party; it requires the reflection and commitment of all relevant institutions who must coordinate their efforts to build concrete and accessible solutions.

At the end of the initial reception period, refugees find themselves having to face the harsh reality of procuring basic necessities such as finding work and a home, all the more difficult given the current economic crises and the virtually inaccessible housing market. Even people who can count on an income must resort to makeshift solutions: sublets or renting informally without a lease. A current trend among refugees in Rome is living in large occupied buildings, without proper hygienic or sanitary conditions, a concern that cannot be addressed with one-off interventions.

In 2014, Centro Astalli, through various accompaniment projects and the provision of financial assistance, has sought to provide practical support along the difficult path to autonomy to those receiving international protection.

☞ See sections *San Saba, Villa Giorgia, The Lighthouse, Pedro Arrupe Centre, Accompaniment to autonomy, Projects completed in 2014 (Step by Step, F-Actors, Without exception, Challenges to autonomy)*

Refugee families are even more exhausted.

If the path to autonomy is difficult for a single person, having children to care for only multiplies the challenges. Particularly critical is the situation of large families and single-parent households. In general, families stay at the centre for a long time (at least 12 months), but after leaving, insecurity remains a problem for those who cannot count on informal, family or friend support networks. Similarly, those who receive international protection face many issues regarding procedures for family reunification. At the end of the long and costly procedures, the reunified families find themselves in completely new situations, not only economically, but psychologically. Furthermore, social services provided by the municipalities, whose resources have now been largely reduced, fail to intervene effectively in these situations that require complex planning and must take into account variety of factors.

☞ See sections *Accompaniment to autonomy, Pedro Arrupe Centre – Centre for refugee families, Centro Astalli Trento*

The needs of the most vulnerable are at risk falling through the cracks.

Over the course of the year, Centro Astalli accompanied people in particularly fragile situations – victims of torture, intentional violence or sexual abuse – by providing medical and legal services. A total of 556 people were served, equal numbers of men and women (52% and 48% respectively). The most difficult task is exposing these vulnerabilities, as their hardships are often silent and thus risk being belittled or altogether ignored. One hundred eighty-nine victims of torture, overwhelmingly male (75%) and mainly from Senegal, Mali and Mauritania, had appointments to receive legal-medical release forms to present to the Branch Commission.

Refugees' adversity is often very evident in reception centres: at Villa Giorgia a high number of guests were suffering from serious psychological problems, consequential of trauma and violence. The response of responsible parties has been insufficient, and we ironically witnessed that the most vulnerable people, caught in the painful back and forth, were most at risk of being cut off from assistance. The Ministry of Health is working on a set of guidelines to which we were called to contribute; we hope these guidelines help improve the situation.

☒ See sections *Accompaniment of vulnerable persons, SaMiFo Centre, Villa Giorgia*

Changing the attitude of fear, we need more knowledge and opportunities to meet.

Difficult situations internationally, constant warnings in the media, economic crises and worsening social tensions risk feeding prejudices, superficial judgments and unjustified weariness about forced migration, leading to very real discrimination against foreigners, Muslims in particular. Promoting greater awareness and encouraging calmness around these issues has always been the goal of the Centro Astalli's information, advocacy and communication activities, which have reached new heights in 2014. Over 24,000 students were involved in educational projects regarding asylum rights and interreligious dialogue in 13 Italian cities; many of the projects were designed to increase opportunities for encounter and to deepen understanding in Roma and Lazio.

In May 2014, more than 100 people participated in the training course *Impossible protection – access to asylum rights in Europe*. The course included three lessons talking about European asylum policies and the need to create humanitarian channels to allow those fleeing war and persecution to arrive safely in Europe. Today, in light of the continuing massacres in the Mediterranean, this theme remains an urgent issue. In addition to an emotional response, it is the duty of the European Union to implement concrete measures to save many innocent lives.

“True security can be based only on justice and reconciliation.” This was the central message of the colloquium 'Hospitality on the frontiers' with Adolfo Nicolás SJ, Father General of the Society of Jesus, and Federico Lombardi SJ, director of the Holy See press office. The event was organized for the 34th anniversary of the foundation of the Jesuit Refugee Service, in cooperation with the international office.

☒ See sections *School Projects, Media relations, Projects completed in 2014 (Commonplaces places in common, The other's reasons), International Reports, Appendix “Hospitality on the frontiers”*

Those seeking asylum are seeking help from you.

Centro Astalli firmly believes everyone has a personal obligation to positively transform society through very concrete gestures. The annual campaign, 'Those seeking asylum are seeking help from you', which was approved by diverse groups from various cultures, seeks to emphasize the importance of cultural shift to centre around the values of hospitality and solidarity, addressing individual citizens' behaviours as well as national and European politics.

Every day, for the whole year, we have seen first-hand there are always many people who choose to dedicate their time, energy, abilities and professionalism to asylum seekers and refugees. In 2014, in the eight cities in which Centro Astalli operates, (Rome, Palermo, Catania, Trento, Vicenza, Naples, Milan and Padova) 446 volunteers have made it possible, by their commitment, to deliver the services described in this report.

Very significant, also, are the 15 religious orders in Rome which turned to Centro Astalli this year to think up a project to help refugees. "Empty convents are not ours. They are for the flesh of Christ – the refugees. The Lord calls us to live with generosity and courage, welcoming them into the empty convents," said Pope Francis when he visited Centro Astalli in September 2013. In one year, around 20 men, women and families were welcomed in so-called 'hospitable communities' inside religious houses. These are second-reception projects, where refugees are constantly accompanied on the path to autonomy by a group of volunteers, who also work to facilitate relationships with the host community.

☞ See section *Campaigns, Training volunteers, Branch network, Hospitable communities*