

BEST PRACTICE PAPER

Strengthen #Integration, Building #Hospitality: individual paths of social, working and housing inclusion for international protection holders in Rome¹

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss Centro Astalli Rome's project "Strengthen #Integration, Building #Hospitality: individual paths of social, working and housing inclusion for international protection holders in Rome" (RICO²) as a good practice in a national framework of AMIF funding system. In this perspective, RICO is an example of cooperation in a local community between social and institutional stakeholders finalized in the enhancement of the reception system and in social, housing and working inclusion of international protection holders. The paper has been conceived within the framework of ECRE/PICUM project *Deploying Good Practice: increasing EU funding for inclusion* - to assess experiences of projects funded under AMIF Multi-Annual Framework 2014-2020, to draw lessons and provide recommendations for the new AMIF under the Multi-Annual Framework 2021-2027 on the importance to fund actions that promote social inclusion and integration.

1. Relevance and aim of the project

Background and overview

For a beneficiary of international protection, integration means to have the opportunity to building a new life in the hosting country. This implies to support every single forced migrant to develop and implement an individual project focused on social, working and housing inclusion thus re-calling the second specific objective of AMIF about "effective integration of non-EU nationals"³ in the hosting societies. In this perspective, Centro Astalli Rome⁴ in partnership with Caritas-Cooperativa Roma Solidarietà⁵ (CRS, project leader) and the municipality of Rome⁶ started in 2017 the project RICO, as a peculiar way to strength the path towards autonomy for refugees in Rome. It was conceived and developed as a strong and fruitful alliance between public services and institutions, social private services, small companies and the involvement of the local communities in Rome (the different municipalities, volunteers, parishes and religious congregations). From this point of view, it is possible to look at RICO as an example of virtuous circle with beneficial effects

¹ Funded under AMIF Specific Objective "1. Asylum", National Objective "Reception/Asylum - let. C) System enhancement for First and Second level reception" (Prog-256).

² From the Italian acronym of the first part of project title: "Rafforzare #Integrazione, Costruire #Ospitalità".

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/financing/fundings/migration-asylum-borders/asylum-migration-integration-fund_en (seen and tested on January 2021 as every source taken from the web and quoted in this paper).

⁴ <https://centroastalli.it/>.

⁵ <http://www.caritasroma.it/caritas-roma/cooperativa-roma-solidarieta/>.

⁶ Department of Social policies, Subsidiarity and Health of Roma Capitale.

firstly on the target group but also for Rome as a whole, strengthening its cohesion and ability to integration. RICO was funded in 2017⁷ under the call n. 19738/2015, published on 24th December 2015, concerning the strengthening of the first and second reception systems.

The project was granted for 600.514,02 €⁸, with a 10% of co-financing by the applicants. It involved 109 recipients, overcoming the number provided for in the approved proposal, 18 of which were families⁹ (61 people, included those ones born during the project) and 48 single adults - 38 males and 10 females - and received more than 210 applications from international protection holders coming from 27 different Countries of origin. The main part of the recipients were young adult¹⁰ (31% born between 1990 and 2000). When RICO ended in 2018, 73 recipients had found a fully autonomy housing solution¹¹ and 31 had improved their working position¹².

RICO was a sort of indispensable connecting ring, between institutional reception system in Italy and the goal of a full autonomy of international protection holders, supporting them in their path towards inclusion following the dramatic changes introduced in the reception system in 2018. Indeed, the reduction of services in the centers for asylum seekers (CAS) and the short length of stay in the centers for holders of international protection (SIPROIMI)¹³ lead to a strong demand and need of projects such RICO to support the successful achievement of their inclusion in Italy. As one of the project's recipient stated, it "helps me to be free, autonomous and independent from aid; I like to ask nothing to anyone, and now I'm able to go on alone"¹⁴.

Rationale

The roots and origin of RICO lie both in the serious housing situation in Rome in mid-2010, in the dramatic rise of arrivals by sea in 2016 and in the lacks of reception system in Italy. Despite many efforts have been made by civil society to give hospitality to forced migrants, the social and political framework strongly questioned values and principles of those humanitarian actions towards migrants, even if they are forced to flee their Country due to violence, torture, discrimination and climate change. The daily data of arrivals by the Department of Civic liberties and immigration¹⁵ clearly show that when the project started, arrivals were strongly decreasing. From 181.436 arrivals in 2016 to 119.369 in 2017 and, more abruptly, to 23.370 at the end of the project in December 2018 (from 2017 to 2018 the decrease was about 80%). Furthermore, Italy was not the only EU Country to be affected by the phenomenon of migration. With 198.000 applications in 2017, Germany registered 31%

⁷ Its activities started on June 2017 and ended in December 2018.

⁸ 1) EU contribution 300.257,01 €; 2) National public contribution, 240.205,65 €; 3) co-financing 60.051,36 €.

⁹ Thus, requiring working also on the side of support for motherhood and parenting not initially planned but crucial to mitigate the effects on their and their children inclusion path.

¹⁰ Only 14% were born before 1980.

¹¹ Representing the 67% instead of 25% planned in the project.

¹² Full data of the project are available in the final report, *Rapporto di valutazione finale*, Rome, 2018, pp. 32-34.

¹³ Furthermore, the so-called "Security Act" abolished the permit for humanitarian reasons: many forced migrants that had suffered violence and torture in Libya fell into this category that completed limits and regulatory gaps of official status of refugee. Thence, lives of forced migrants in Rome, and Italy as a whole, has worsened and become more precarious.

¹⁴ In *Rapporto di valutazione finale*, cit., p. 12.

¹⁵ http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2018_0.pdf.

of all first-time asylum seekers. Italy followed by 127.000 (20%), France and Greece¹⁶. This data confirms that there was not an emergency or a security issue thus the need to working hard on mutual knowledge and raise awareness.

In this context, the lack of housing and difficulty in finding accommodation in Rome got particularly exacerbated. Rome has more than the double of reception places compared to all other nine Italian metropolitan cities; furthermore, the proportion of refugees welcomed in the SIPROIMI system over the population of Rome, it is almost three times higher than in other metropolitan cities. Rome suffers of a relevant historical housing problem with a lot of informal settlement and housing occupations of abandoned buildings¹⁷, which is estimated to involve more than 12.000 people 1.800 of which at least are beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers.

High rents and a widespread mistrust of property owners towards third country nationals adds on to a particularly hard access to labour market, in a city with a high unemployment rate. This general difficulty represents two significant obstacles to achieve a full independence and to maintaining it in the long period: a simple reduction in working hours on the paycheck or the birth of a new child can fully upset lives of refugees, undermining their economic independence. Although the SIPROIMI system makes considerable efforts to create opportunities for training to improve the employability of refugees while promoting autonomous living and financial independence, the above-mentioned difficulties tend to prolong the permanence in the institutional reception system.

In 2015, following Pope Francis' vibrant call to open parishes and religious congregations to welcome refugees, Centro Astalli began a project called "Community of Hospitality"¹⁸ to support transition housing for refugees. An unprecedented effort of hospitality involved Roman parishes and religious congregations; in 2015, after the dramatic increase of arrivals, Pope Francis called again Christian communities "to be neighbors" of the smallest and the abandoned, and to give them concrete hope¹⁹. In this perspective, RICO was clearly a step forward of Community of Hospitality, improving that first good experience, enlarging and enhancing services and actions for recipients.

2. Design and implementation of the project

Project Design

RICO general goal was to strengthen social, working and housing inclusion for international protection holders leaving (or about to leave) from reception centres that had already started an integration path of linguistic and professional autonomy, but who needed an additional support towards full autonomy. Refugees' own skills and personal resources intended to be crucial to guarantee the sustainability of their autonomy after the project. RICO's specific objectives were:

¹⁶ Eurostat, Asylum Statistics, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics.

¹⁷

<https://www.comune.roma.it/PCR/resources/cms/documents/02.PopolazioneEdificiEdAbitazioniARoma.pdf> and <https://osservatoriocasaroma.com/2019/07/08/la-mappa-degli-immobili-occupati-liberati-e-sgomberati-a-roma-dagli-anni-90-ad-oggi/>.

¹⁸ For this project, please see the Annual Report of Centro Astalli (The last issue is fully available in Italian with a short report in English, https://centroastalli.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/astalli_RAPP_2020-completo-x-web.pdf).

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Angelus 6 September 2015, Rome, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2015/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20150906.html.

- 1 **Making** the recipients as an active part of their social, working and housing inclusion from the start and accompanying them in consciously building their individual plan.
- 2 **Enhancing** integration and empowerment paths already started in the reception system, maximising the effectiveness of integration resources and avoiding their dispersion.
- 3 **Promoting** training and retraining of international protection holders to improve their employability, combatting the use of undeclared and irregular work and promoting economic independence as an indispensable step for housing autonomy.
- 4 **Strengthening** the culture of hospitality as the capacity of a civil society to act and get involved to overcome social inequalities and mutual prejudices.
- 5 **Stimulating** the urban fabric to bring out the resilience present thanks to the social participation of international protection holders in the life of the local community in which they are hosted, promoting the creation of a social capital capable of supporting them in the integration process²⁰.

Therefore, RICO has been built on three pillars: 1) **local network**; because social, working and housing inclusion means the need to activate, deal and cooperate with many different stakeholders and actors, proposing the project team as a buoy and a place to build something together. Without this involvement it is probably possible to develop some good activities and actions, but not with a long-term view and on solid ground; from this point of view, RICO was a step in the present thinking to the future; 2) **the focus on individual recipients**: providing an individual approach to each single recipient means multiplying the efforts and activities, as users are simply different in their paths; 3) activating **a strong multidisciplinary team** with different skills, able to deal with all aspects and issues of social, employment and housing inclusion and, at the same time, to reconnect together the different pieces in a general individual project and to undertake it with the single recipient accompanying them in developing it.

Project actions

RICO developed its actions along the three pillars described above to reach its goals. During its 12 months of activity, the main lines of action were:

The individual plans of intervention: they were adapted to the single recipient using and mixing different tools and measures of integration thanks to the work of the multidisciplinary team in guiding and accompanying them starting from a personal orienteering and counselling. The goal of this action was to keep the beneficiaries able to reach a full autonomy at the end of the project: in this perspective, RICO provided a flexible "integration pack", namely, direct economic support to build and realization of the inclusion path in the community. In this perspective, it was also activated a service of **Job orientation and personal counselling** to bring out skills and experiences of every single beneficiary in doing so to be able to better plan and project the peculiar path of integration starting from previous experiences and taking advantage of the resources already activated.

The integration pack was a flexible tool intended to adapt to each recipient needs along three main lines of actions: 1) to **promote education, training and retraining**, working inclusion (through the activation of internships) and to achieve new skills (e.g. driving and computer license); 2) to **promote social and health inclusion** in collaboration with social services of the local municipality with a particular focus on the school placement for children; 3) to promote **housing autonomy** through training courses (about specific lexicon of rental contracts; how to manage a house and living

²⁰ In *Rapporto di valutazione finale*, cit., pp. 5-6.

together in Italy) and direct support (to help beneficiaries to pay for bills, house rent, furniture). Language learning and professional skills were provided in synergy with other projects led by RICO partners, to ensure a holistic approach to refugees empowerment.

Local network. One of the main surplus value of RICO was the activation of a territorial and local network (more than 80 local realities involved) starting from the system of transition housing made available by parishes and religious congregations in Rome, which created a widespread system of a hospitality across the city. Refugees and local communities were invited to exchange and know each other thanks to the meetings, which raised awareness across local communities on the importance of housing inclusion in integration. The involvement of stakeholders at the local level proved to be crucial also both in employment, where the partnership with the employment centres lead to more than 12 internships activated²¹, and in healthcare with local health authority (ASL) and the specialised Centre for Health of Forced Migrant²², the guidance centres for family planning and the IOM to facilitate family reunifications²³.

Training workshop and focus-groups. During the development of the project, RICO's implementing team realised the need to intervene on refugees' soft skills in order to strengthen different elements of inclusion: this led to the organisation of five training workshop for 31 beneficiaries, selected according to their employment and family situation, which focused on:

- **Skills for life**, focusing on soft skills for complex daily life situations (decision making and problem solving, critical sense, efficacious communication in relationships, empathy, stress and emotional management);
- **Active job search**, focusing on the personal skills needed for active job search (preparing a job application, writing an effective CV, managing job interviews, role playing activities);
- **Banking literacy and family budget**, focusing on how to manage a family budget, including practical exercises to get acquainted with basic banking operations (how to read an account balance, use of credit cards, loans and financial instruments, micro-credit);
- **Housing autonomy** (in two modules), aiming at providing attendees with practical skills on housing (renting contracts, screening flats announcements, rights and duties of tenants, relations with neighbours).

"The house keys". A digital and printed handbook²⁴ (65 pages) designed and conceived in the run of the project, after realising the need to accompany and support refugees in the complicated housing market of Rome. The publication, aiming at providing a useful tool to social workers and stakeholders in Rome who daily support migrants and refugees in finding adequate housing, included information on national and local legislation, housing policy and practical tips.

²¹ Nine of them were turned into regular job contracts.

²² SAMIFO is a centre specialized on forced migrant health managed in partnership by Centro Astalli and ASL Rome 1.

²³ Through RICO's budget, Centro Astalli managed to support some cases of family reunification: in this perspective IOM help as interface and facilitating communications and administrative procedures.

²⁴ Free available in Italian at <https://centroastalli.it/le-chiavi-di-casa-guida-allabitare-nella-citta-di-roma>.

Stakeholders involved

The wide, local network of stakeholders set up by RICO revealed to be one of its strong assets. RICO proved to be essential strengthening local cohesion by promoting mutual knowledge in local communities setting the ground for establishing practices that ensure the sustainability of the project itself. The greater effort was made mainly in the field of housing solutions: the opportunity to use transition housing²⁵ gave the chance to offer a housing solution from 6 up to 12 months without housing expenses for the tenants (rents, bills, condominium fees). Refugees could therefore overcome the obstacle of access to housing and focus on strengthening their employment and social position in the community, building on a firmer ground their housing independence. As already mentioned, the system of houses of transition was also central in promoting social inclusion and mutual knowledge between recipients of RICO and local community also thanks to the more than 40 awareness and information meetings held in the communities. Through these meetings, the socialization opportunities and volunteer activities, RICO invested in the spread of the culture of hospitality, overcoming of mistrust and mutual prejudice among refugees and locals. Furthermore, RICO involved in its activities stakeholders also in the fields of social and working inclusion and others in that one of housing - of course in addition to the system of transition houses.

RICO ensured a systematic and continuous involvement of the competent public services of the municipalities of Rome, in a kind of subsidiarity on the contrary, which sees the private sector becoming promoter of interventions to ensure the sustainability in the medium to long term of the inclusion paths activated. The relationships consolidated during RICO's activities are difficult to quantify, but they were one of the added values of the project and constitute the fertilizer capable of supporting the recipients in the path of autonomy and preparing the ground for further gestures of solidarity and reception that can take place even after the end of the project.

3. Sustainability

RICO was co-funded by 90% AMIF (the remaining 10% was provided through partners' co-financing). To ensure sustainability of the service after the end of the project, Centro Astalli has focused on two directions:

- finance separately those activities which did not respond to the focus of RICO's call for proposals but proved crucial to ensure holistic inclusion of recipients (for example linguistic strengthening and training courses);
- designing RICO's continuation as a whole.

Therefore, Centro Astalli acts through three lines of action:

1) searching for opportunities of funding separate areas of action (for example, through the project "TraIn"²⁶, Centro Astalli focuses its action to support working inclusion of women and young men forced migrants);

²⁵ Thanks to the experiences and relationships built through Community of Hospitality.

²⁶ Here for the abstract in Italian: <https://centroastalli.it/train-train-integration/>.

2) searching for opportunities to finance projects with the same holistic approach taken by RICO (as Centro Astalli did through "8perMille" calls for proposal in 2019 and 2020²⁷);

3) build on the good cooperation of RICO's partners, to respond jointly to new calls for proposals. In 2020, the AMIF national programme funded RICO2²⁸, by the same group of partners with the further involvement of Casa Scalabrini 634²⁹ - previously only indirectly involved. The new project started on September 2020 and will run until April 2022³⁰.

4. Teaching received and lessons learned

First, RICO proved that spreading hospitality in the local community of a limited number of refugees through proximity actions encourages the creation of community ties, a prerequisite for a real and effective long-term integration. **Second**, the actions and measures activated have demonstrated their effectiveness in making the recipients reach their full autonomy. Identifying methods, tools and resources to systematize the housing transition and support model experienced proved crucial. **Last**, the collaborations and local network developed and implemented suggest that it is possible to replicate the intervention as a whole³¹. In 2020, the project was scaled up thanks to a partnership with organisations from two other Italian cities, Trento and Padua, where the resources produced by RICO are being used to train local social workers³².

As a first lesson learned, RICO³³ showed how synergies, relationships and partnerships in the local community are essential for a long-term inclusion process: the widespread hospitality network, the long period of collaborations between project partners and a consolidated experience in the field of AMIF funding are an important added value. **Second**, the focus on the single recipient is essential for successful long-term integration. This requires a flexible implementation of the project to answer to the different needs as well as a strong propensity to develop personal and interpersonal skills of recipients to favour their path towards independence and autonomy. **Third**, the involvement of volunteers proves crucial to provide support to RICO's beneficiaries after the end of the project. Additionally, the establishment of a multidisciplinary team made possible to carry out each integration path by resorting to the specific expertise of various professional figures attentive and targeted to the needs of the person taken in charge. **Finally**, in this team a key-role was played by the social worker for housing autonomy that has made it possible to carry out experimental actions (property research, training and information on the rights and

²⁷ It is an annual opportunity to apply funded by a percentage of 8 per 1.000 income taxes part of which is directly assigned by Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri through a public call. The evaluation process is still ongoing. Here the website: <http://www.governo.it/it/dipartimenti/dip-il-coordinamento-amministrativo/dica-att-8x1000-lineguida/9304>.

²⁸ Here the link to the call: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/amministrazione-trasparente/bandi-gara-e-contratti/fami-avviso-realizzazione-percorsi-individuali-lautonomia-socio-economica-titolari-protezione-internazionale>. The total amount of the project is 804.434,56 € (Prog-3241).

²⁹ <https://scalabrini634.it/>.

³⁰ The impact of pandemic lead to postponing its beginning and may influence its regular development of activities.

³¹ In *Rapporto di valutazione finale*, cit., p. 35.

³² The project (PASSI Avanti - Steps forward, Prog-3240) started in July 2020 with Centro Astalli Trento as project-leader and Popoli Insieme association in Padua, both of them part of the network of Astalli Centres in Italy.

³³ In *Rapporto di valutazione finale*, cit., pp. 36-37.

duties of living, support for the stipulation of contracts) aimed at the effective social-housing integration of the recipients, allowing making the model of intervention implemented sustainable also in the long term.

5. Challenges and recommendations

The national and local framework proved to be challenging. In the case of RICO, the precarious Italian socio-economic condition and the critical and complex housing situation of Rome were two great obstacles³⁴. Moreover, the continuous changing in the Italian reception system (2018 and then 2020) and the impact of pandemic are risk factors for the continuation of similar project and initiatives (RICO2).

Limited project life. A major criticality regards the limited length of activities allowed by the 18 months call, while more flexibility could have been desirable regarding the period of permanence in the transitional housing and the kind of support provided in the first period of residence in autonomous homes (the next, crucial step). This is particularly the case of families: it **would be appropriate to better invest in longer and more flexible paths** to meet the needs of minors who attend local schools and may suffer discomfort due to transfers carried out during the school year.

Length of housing autonomy support. Furthermore, if the position of a specific social worker for housing autonomy was particularly useful for the realization of a real independence of recipients. In the future, it would be important to plan for measures allocating more time to accompanying refugees in their first period of full autonomy. This would make it possible to strengthen beneficiaries' skills and secure good acceptance from their neighbours and communities.

RICO's achievements represent **a good practice to be further promoted.** Its implementation actions should further inspire policymaking in the area of housing, social and working inclusion for refugees.

³⁴ However, with a view to the possible dissemination of the project on a national and European scale, it can reasonably be assumed that in cities and communities where the starting conditions are more favourable for the entire population, the paths activated capable of achieving positive outcomes would be even greater.