

AN UNEXPECTED FUTURE

Kawa is a young man. He belongs to the Kurdish community, a minority group that was severely persecuted under the Saddam regime. To escape persecution, he fled his country Iraq three years ago. His escape entailed travelling with a small group of Kurds, crossing the mountains, walking for hours at night. He didn't know where to go and then, finally, he arrived in Italy. But things did not immediately improve for him on his arrival. *"I was concerned about being viewed as a stranger, by being looked upon and judged by the people around me"*. Kawa received some help from a few associations dealing with asylum seekers; they offered him food, a place to sleep and even Italian courses. *"I found plenty of organisations but never hope"*. Kawa was planning on moving to another country to find better prospects, but his situation changed when a friend told him about Integ.r.a. Thanks to his project, Kawa decided to stay in Italy. He now has a job, a salary, a place to stay and he is an associate of a co-operative society. *"For me, Integ.r.a made a real change. Now I can imagine my future and ask myself what I really would like to do. It didn't just give me practical support, it showed me that I'm still a man"*.

Kawa's story is maybe the most striking example of what Integ.r.a achieved, but how were such results made possible? To answer this question, we need to explore the successful dynamic of the project itself: a comprehensive partnership structure coupled with an innovative attitude.

Integ.r.a involved many of the bodies responsible for asylum policy in Italy, ranging from central institutions, regional and local governments to social and private organisations all working together towards the same objective: the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. Some interesting examples are the National Association of Italian Communes (ANCI), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the NGO Caritas and the Italian Council for Refugees (CIR).

Operating within a complex legal framework, Integ.r.a's aim was to establish a clear support system for asylum seekers and refugees, taking advantage of the existing norms and implying local actors such as cities and regions, who, as a result of the decentralisation process, are becoming essential actors in the economic and political life of the country. One of the major problems in Italy is the long-lasting and "forced" inactivity of asylum seekers as they are not allowed to access any regular job while waiting for their application. In this context, Integ.r.a made use of national norms concerning vocational re-qualification and labour market reforms, which offered positive chances also for asylum seekers. The laws set out the conditions for accessing flexible and short-term forms of work, which were easily applicable to the precarious situation of asylum seekers, although the latter were not their main target group. Through these temporary work experiences, asylum seekers could get to know the labour market and, even more positively, turn their temporary positions into permanent employment once they were granted the refugee status.

A TERRITORIAL PARTNERSHIP WITH A GROUND-BREAKING MIND



The success of Integ.r.a can be explained in words, but also in numbers - and the numbers speak volumes! From 2002 to 2004, a total of 895 beneficiaries (asylum seekers and refugees) were helped by the project, receiving information and orientation services. 454 asylum seekers and refugees were directly supported by the municipalities at local level. 269 persons benefited from orientation and information sessions concerning their rights, current legislation and labour opportunities on the ground. 278 beneficiaries were able to assess their competences and the

experience gained in their country. Finally, 115 asylum seekers and refugees benefited from vocational training, and 23 of these are now regularly employed and integrated in the labour market.

How can these numbers be explained?

The most outstanding success factor was the number and range of the partners involved, and the innovative attitude of the project they carried out. Integ.r.a. included seven cities and towns and 29 partners, including associations working in the social field, academic institutions dealing with human rights, employer associations, trade unions and temporary work agencies. These all worked together to create what can be called an all-embracing “integration path” for asylum seekers arriving in Italy.

The concept of “integration path” goes beyond reception services and material assistance, which are already provided by other institutions and the “Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees” (which is the national system for reception and assistance of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy)¹. It aims to ensure, step by step, the real socio-economic integration of asylum seekers and refugees. This involves giving them the possibility of drawing a career plan through an assessment of their competences, new language skills and training, as well as a portfolio, which includes their experiences and background which can be used as a CV. The aim of this process is to establish a “road map” from the initial, reception phase to the socio-economic integration of the beneficiaries.

The main strength of this partnership was the participation of actors, both at national and regional/local level. The development of two national and seven local Steering Groups (called local integration tables) created new cooperation synergies and dynamics, and set up a working system which guaranteed a clear distribution of the tasks and an effective communication flow between the two levels. The local integration tables acted as territorial pacts for local growth and employment, developing common strategies and adapting them to the social and economic reality of the area. The national structure acted as a coordinator of the local initiatives, providing guidance and assistance and influencing national policies and practices.

The strategy of Integ.r.a was long-term oriented as it wanted to produce sustainable and lasting results. Setting up a clear framework for the support and integration of asylum seekers was intended to replace short-term and interim actions, which had produced poor results.

The involvement of the partners and their commitment to the development of a new system for asylum seekers led to the creation of a strong network, which now continues to exist and works outside the framework of the project. As Marilisa Fantacci, coordinator of the central project office, stated: *“Many of the bodies, corporations and associations involved at national and local level have understood that asylum seekers represent a human resource that can bring true added value, not only to companies but also to the Italian labour market. The challenge of Integ.r.a was to change the attitude and mentality of these actors towards asylum seekers and involve them in a way that could go far beyond the limits of the project”*.

SAME AMBITION, DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

The importance of sharing successful practices and mainstreaming good integration schemes between the partners was an important issue from the start. The socio-economic situation of the seven municipalities working in the Integ.r.a project are very different: some of them are small cities (like Bitonto, a little commune in the South), and others are large urban areas (like Rome). Each municipality however developed successful models for the integration of asylum seekers, taking into account their own strengths and weaknesses.

In the south of Italy, structures for asylum seekers were often missing and the funds available were always tight. However, the Southern regions have opportunities in tourism and activities associated with the third sector. Within Integ.r.a, the commune of Bitonto experimented with

¹ These services were assumed, prior to 2003, by the National Programme for Asylum (PNA).

vocational training courses for asylum seekers in order to integrate them into tourist services or structures such as hotels, bars and restaurants. A vocational portfolio was also developed for each person taking part in orientation sessions.



supply of housing.

The Bitonto commune was one of the most active partners involved in the development of a brand new tool for the inclusion and housing of asylum seekers: the “Housing Agency”. This organisation managed the whole process from reception to definitive permanent lodging by providing flats and houses to asylum seekers looking for a place to stay. Whilst this initiative was not fully completed under the Integ.r.a project, it is positive to note that the commune continues to make this idea a reality and match the demand of accommodation with the

Another important achievement for Bitonto was the creation of an “intercultural centre”, a place where asylum seekers and refugees could meet and discuss their problems in a friendly atmosphere. Meetings with older Italian emigrants gave unexpectedly good results, leading to the exchange of experience and views between the two generations and cultures on the issue of integration. The centre is still working and is now supported by the commune’s own funds. This clearly shows the sustainable achievement of Integ.ra beyond the life of the project itself.

“Experimenting with new approaches to integration was, at the beginning, a challenge for everyone. It was like going out on a limb but, in the end, we came out very well.” said Livia Cantore, responsible of the Integ.r.a project for the Bitonto commune.

Mobilising actors in a small town turned into a successful round of cooperation, but how did things look in a big city like Rome? Integ.r.a achieved impressive results even in the capital, where 537 refugees and asylum seekers benefited from the full range of services delivered by the municipality. A quarter of the 537 beneficiaries received not only counselling and help-desk services, but also services to facilitate professional integration such as vocational training and courses. In the first phase of the project, 40 people of different ages and ethnic origins received 120 hours of training, basic language skills, vocational guidance and information concerning their rights as asylum seekers. *“When we started with Integ.r.a, we had nothing, just a tutor, a small room with a table where we could gather the “students” around, and an iron will to continue with this dream”* said Maurizio Saggion, responsible for the Integ.r.a project in the Rome commune and a local policy maker.

In June 2004, a new and more extensive cooperation between the department of labour policies and the project was developed. This support not only allowed the enhancement of the target group, but also improved existing structures such as classrooms for training. The “initial cohort” was increased up to 160 asylum seekers selected from reception and social centres. 16 tutors, most of them coming from the “old forty group”, i.e. the first 40 people that received training in the starting phase of Integra like Kawa, provided them with training and counselling.

“The success of this project” stated Maurizio, *“was the way it combined a project-type logic with an administrative mentality. This allowed us to exploit resources and structures existing on the ground in order to develop a new approach and set up a new system for the integration of asylum seekers”*. In other words, linking the needs of the territory with the needs of the asylum seekers is a successful practice, which leads to a win-win situation irrespective of the geographical reality. This means that the socio-economic integration models proposed by Integ.r.a have an excellent mainstreaming potential.

A PATHWAY TOWARDS AUTONOMY

The most important aim of Integ.r.a was to *“open new perspectives for asylum seekers, supporting them until they become hired by making them autonomous individuals”* emphasised Nicola, the tutor responsible for the training of the “old forty group” in Rome. The integration process was to focus on the empowerment of the individual and on his independence from the

“pocket money” provided by the organisation. All the activities described before led, in some cases, to the hiring of the asylum seekers and their stable integration into the labour market. Some of the beneficiaries also found a job in other regions to their place of reception, as the internal mobility of the beneficiaries was encouraged by the partners during the overall duration of the project.



As Maurizio said *“we can’t become their mums and dads, even if there is sometimes a strong sense of affection. Our role has to change over time and become less and less intense in order to avoid dependency”*. Integ.r.a not only created pathways towards the autonomy of the beneficiaries, but also towards the autonomy of the institutions and organisations dealing with asylum seekers. As mentioned before, most of the bodies involved in Integ.r.a continue to cooperate even now that the project has finished. Some of them, such as the National Association of Italian Communes (ANCI), are involved in the Round Two project IntegRARsi, others work autonomously within the local networks previously established.

In conclusion, Integ.r.a set up a system for the support of the asylum seekers from the reception phase right through to socio-economic integration by creating sustainable networks and local models that can be reproduced and mainstreamed throughout Europe.

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