



Community Matching is a programme that involves a number of different actors, because integration and social cohesion are everyone's responsibility, special thanks to:

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all refugees and volunteers who chose to participate in the programme.

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Learn more:

[Community Matching: find your Buddy! \(unhcr.it\)](https://www.unhcr.it)

Contact details:

UNHCR

Jasmine Mittendorf:

mittendo@unhcr.org

RWI

Fabiana Musicco:

fabiana.musicco@refugees-welcome.it

Giorgio Baracco:

giorgio.baracco@refugees-welcome.it

CIAC

Chiara Marchetti:

chiara.marchetti@ciaconlus.org

Michele Rossi:

michele.rossi@ciaconlus.org

Community Matching Programme

Interim Report 2022



con il supporto di



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Introduction: creating bonds in intercultural communities

Integration prospects for refugees remain one of the biggest shortcomings of the Italian asylum system. In line with the Strategic Directions 2021-2024 of UNHCR Italy "A Solution-focused Approach to Mixed Movements", with a stress on integration and solidarity, the Community Matching programme was launched by UNHCR in order to influence public opinion, asylum policies and national funding programmes and put refugees' and host communities' capacities at the centre.

Promoting the integration of refugees by enabling accompanying relationships between refugees and volunteers: this is the aim of the [Community Matching](#) project, started by the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)) - together with [Refugees Welcome Italia](#) and Centro Immigrazione Asilo Cooperazione Internazionale ([CIAC](#)), with the support of the [Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai](#) - with 8x1000 funds. It's an experience that began in October 2021, and this report describes its first few months of trial¹, specifically analysing the approximately 100 matches launched so far and how they are working in six cities: Milan, Rome, Turin, Naples, Bari and Palermo, municipalities that have endorsed the [Charter for Integration](#) promoted by UNHCR Italy.

¹ data as of the end of May 2022

The impact of the Ukrainian emergency



*Although partial, the collected data confirm how **the bonds created through the project** (relationships otherwise hard for refugees to establish) **are decisive in strengthening the sense of belonging to the community and facilitating the path to integration in Italy.***

While evidence confirms that the difficulties in integration in Italy are linked to a number of interdependent factors (including access to housing, job opportunities, documentation, etc.), the most crucial aspect remains **building meaningful personal and social relationships** through which refugees can truly become part of a community, and which constitute powerful antidotes to marginalisation and racism.

With its roots in the "Whole of Society" and "Community-based" approaches, the Community Matching programme aims to develop a strategy for implementing tailored measures such as social protection and inclusion, taking gender, age and diversity into account. This basic methodological work is summarised in the [Community Matching ToolKit](#).

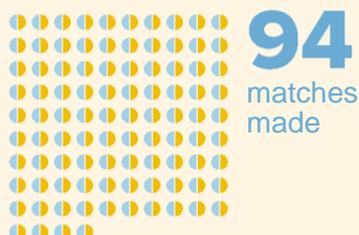
Since the end of February 2022, more than 145,000 people fleeing Ukraine have arrived in Italy. More than 85% of these are, as of today, left out of any official reception, considering that 12,568 are housed in emergency reception centres, 1,095 in the SAI, and about 9,000 people in hotel facilities managed by Civil Protection. There are 140,000 people who have applied for temporary protection under Directive 55/2001². While Ukrainian men and women, mostly single women or with children, had their status acknowledged right away and easy access to related services, on the other hand they have relied almost entirely on the spontaneity and informality of their reception.

The Community Matching project has tried to adapt and provide solutions in this totally unexpected situation, by applying - with some necessary adaptations - the developed method to matching the Ukrainian citizens with the Italian\Ukrainian buddies willing to escort them. The extension of Community Matching to Ukrainian citizens started in June, but Italian citizens had been willing to cooperate since earlier. **The greatest challenge will be adapting the escorting experience** so that it is productive in different social contexts - e.g. people arriving in our country with uncertain life plans - and, at the same time, preventing the current emergency from monopolising the attention, empathy and availability of possible buddy volunteers.

² <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>

Highlights

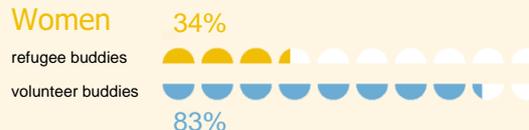
Community Matching at a glance



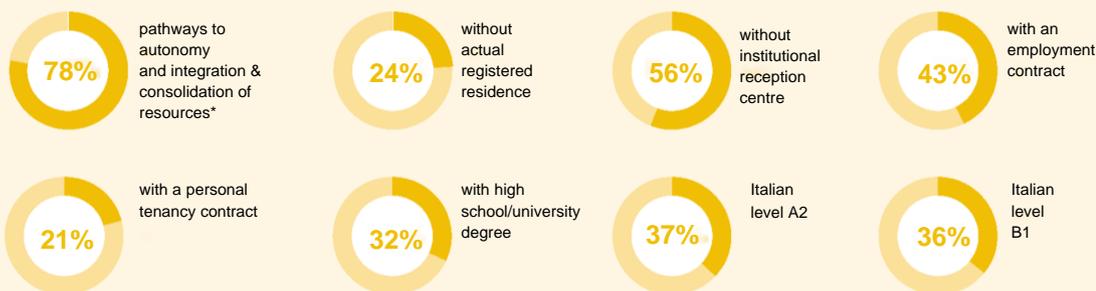
Under 40



Women

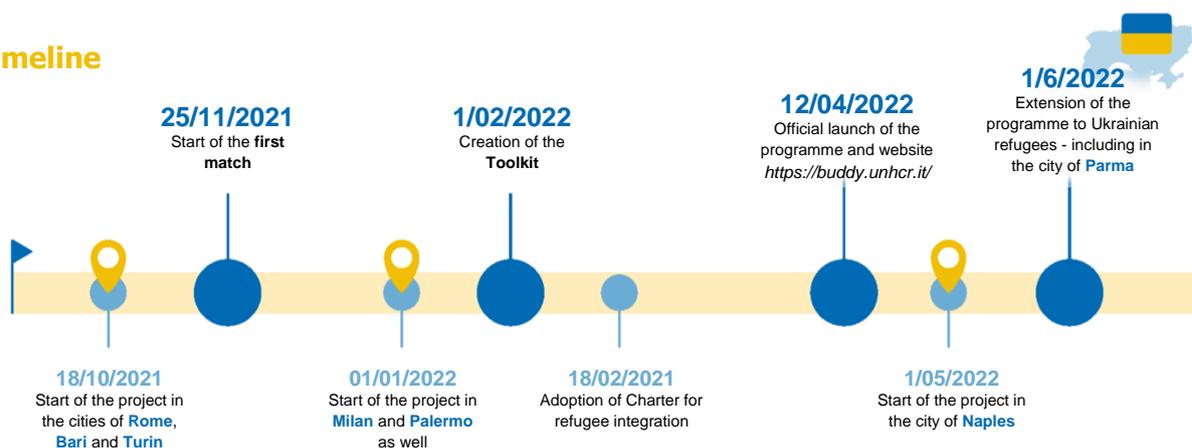


Refugees



*see page 7 for more on target paths

Timeline



The buddies and the communities involved

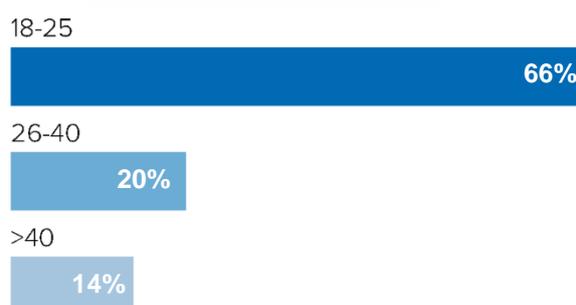
Since the first match in the city of Turin on 25 November 2021 until the end of May 2022, 94 buddy matches have started their journey together in the five cities involved in the programme³. More specifically: **25 in Turin, 23 in Milan, 30 in Rome, 5 in Bari, 11 in Palermo**⁴.

The demographic profiles of the **volunteer buddies - all Italians except for three foreigners** from El Salvador, Mali and Spain – consist of 83% women, mostly over 40.

The involved **refugees appear to have profiles for the most opposite to their volunteer buddies**, although they are generally in line with the profiles of those accepted into the Reception and Integration System (SAI: latest available data 2020⁵). In terms of gender, however, there is a greater representation of women (34% of the total compared to 21% of hosted by SAI) and a slightly higher age group (in particular, the 26-40 range is highly represented, with 61% compared to 42% of SAI guests, while there are fewer people between 18 and 25, 19% compared to 52% of SAI guests).

The number of nationalities involved is high: as many as 35, with significant percentages of Malian refugees (13%), Afghans (11%), Libyans, Somalis (5%), Congolese, Ivorians, Eritreans, Nigerians and Syrians (4%). The other refugees come from as far as Benin, Cameroon, Morocco, Pakistan, Venezuela, Chad, El Salvador, Iran, Niger, Senegal, Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Jordan, Guinea, Guinea Conakry, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia and Ukraine.

Refugee age



Volunteer age



The number of nationalities involved is as high as 35

³ Naples started in the same month of May and therefore the first matches have not been made yet.

⁴ The data presented here have been collected by the local teams through some methodological tools included in the [Community Matching Toolkit](#), in particular the Start-up Matching Agreement and the Individualised Territorial Integration Plan (PIIT).

⁵ Ministry of the Interior (2021), SIPROIMI/SAI Annual Report 2020, Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rapporto-SIPROIMI_SAI_leggero.pdf.

Further reviewing the characteristics of the refugees involved in the programme, it may be useful to highlight some aspects about situation at the time of the start of the matches, against which it will be interesting to assess the impact of the programme after six months. It is worth mentioning that **a system of indicators⁶ has been developed**, and that **within the Community Matching programme there is a double survey: at the start of the match (T1) and six months later, at the end of the match or its evolution into a normal friendly relationship (T2)**. First of all, we note the distribution among the 4 different target paths, which enable the orientation of the activities and objectives of the individual match and help to overcome the subjective evaluations of the operators. It should be noted that the target paths are identified by the caseworkers (the project's local teams' operators) after strengthening the relationships with the individual refugees and collecting the Individualised Territorial Integration Plan (PIIT). The target path is therefore defined at the beginning of the match, but it remains flexible and subject to change during the course of the match, as it will be crucial to check for any changes at the end of the path⁷.

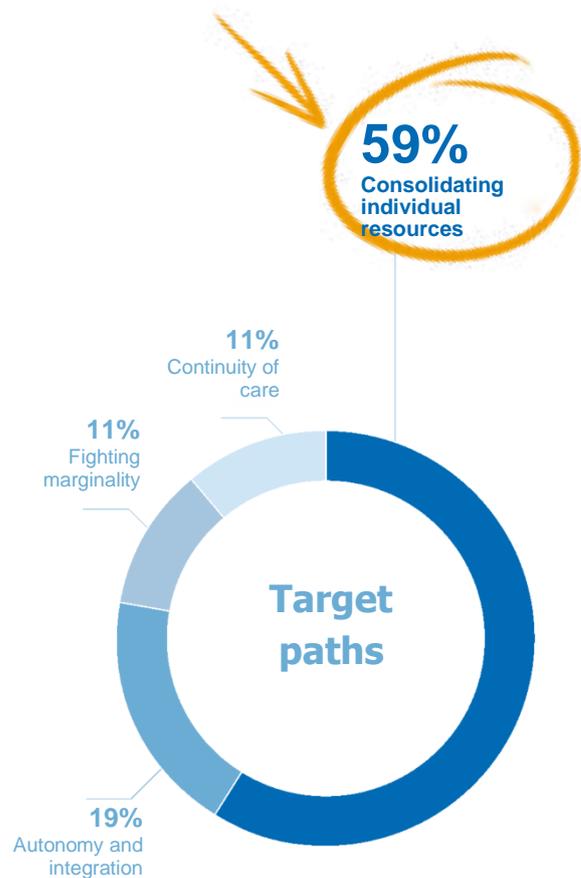
When the matches were started, the clearly prevailing target pathway was the **Consolidation of Individual Resources (59%)** which, when added to the *Autonomy and Integration* target pathway (19%), makes the *Contrast to Marginality* and *Continuity of Care* target pathways (both with 11% of cases) drastically residual.

This target path distribution should be viewed in conjunction with other characteristics of the refugees involved, such as **access to and actual enjoyment of rights and services that are the basis of any real integration path**.

Overall, registered residents are 76% and enrolment in the national health system is as high as 95%. Another interesting aspect is the impact of hospitality in SAI among refugee buddies.

As of the start of the matches, 24 people in SAI joined the project

At the start of the matches, the main path is Consolidation of Individual Resources



⁶ The adopted system is consistent with the integration framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008)

⁷ Please refer to the Toolkit for details on this tool

AUTONOMY AND INTEGRATION

The personalised pathway means escorting autonomy, through the services that guarantee independence from all forms of assistance, as the project is structured on local territories, fulfilling the preparation of all the social, economic and relational conditions, in order to keep such achieved condition.

CONSOLIDATION OF INDIVIDUAL RESOURCES

It is aimed at those cases with no particular elements of fragility, but who still do not have full access to their own resources and need a pathway that includes specific educational and interpersonal support, which strengthens orientation and works on motivation, resilience, self-esteem and the ability to develop adequate coping strategies.

CONTRAST TO MARGINALITY

In the case of established elements or risk indicators about trafficking, exploitation, deviance, substance abuse, the project strategy focuses on raising awareness, developing tools for self-defence from risks of marginalisation and preventing dropout from the project.

CONTINUITY OF CARE

If there are elements of social and socio-medical fragility needed to be shared with the network of public area services during and after the end of the project, its strategy aims to develop the person's orientation and the highest level of suitability in managing formal relations with the local territorial services.

Reception

The issue of **reception** is of crucial importance: while on one hand, the low number of cases placed in institutional reception could be explained by the **refugees' achieved autonomy** (supported by the data on target pathways), on the other hand, the relationship with the reception centres and the institutional system (at both national and local levels) must be investigated. That shows the **difficulty of building a stable and structured relationship** with the centres, in order to promote the programme among the people accommodated.

Home

The broader issue of **housing conditions** (directly related to hospitality), is an issue that is both central and extremely problematic in refugee integration pathways. **For example, we observe that**

at the beginning of the match only 21% of the buddy refugees have a contract in their name and 33% live in social housing or co-housing structures. More than half of the refugees (51%) show that they are looking for accommodation (significantly higher among refugees in Milan: 64%). This framework shows how aspects related to the housing rights are considered high priorities when it comes to developing relations with volunteers.

Work

Of course, another traditional theme related to integration pathways is **socio-economic integration and access to employment**. Overall, the employment situation of refugees involved in the programme is relatively better than the housing situation.

Actually, 43% of people have an employment contract, but many report a state of insecurity in terms of both income level and type of contract. Even higher is the percentage of refugees with work experience (79%) and with the tools for economic-work autonomy (68%). Therefore, the expected impact of Community Matching may not only concern access to any salary, but mostly the stabilisation of working conditions, with an indirect consequence also on other integration-related aspects (housing, first and foremost, but also on the sense of security and investment in relationship and affective dimensions).

Social relationships

According to the Community Matching approach, in addition to housing and work, **social relationships** are extremely important - not only to develop autonomy goals, but also as a goal in itself - as they develop links with various authorities, both formal (with services) and informal (with the community of origin and reception community). **At the start of the matches, the condition of the refugees involved was measured in relation to all these aspects, resulting in strong potentials for development thanks to the programme and the matching with volunteer buddies.**





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First evidence

Six months after the start of the programme, some initial hypotheses have been confirmed, while others need to be updated or modified.

In regards to the refugees, given the programme's overall objective of developing relationships that are as symmetrical and equal as possible with volunteers, the first area considered is that of institutional welcoming, and SAI in particular. That's because the system was considered to be a privileged intermediary, but also because the presence of multidisciplinary teams with operators responsible for managing (through the individualised planning mechanism) the other central dimensions in the refugees' path to autonomy, could allow the latter to experience the relationship with the volunteers more freely, releasing themselves from a possible overwhelming focus on aspects of need and assistance. For different reasons, this assumption has not been met, so that **only 24% of the refugees involved in the programme is accommodated in SAI facilities. Access to the centres has proved difficult; collaboration with the centre teams has so far been limited to the development (or maintenance) of privileged interpersonal relationships with individual operators;** the participation of the received ones has mostly been mediated by the operators themselves, thereby decreasing the potential for a real and spontaneous

interest and maintaining Community Matching within the proposed "services", with the related constraints resulting from codified care relationships, in which the individual does not participate on the basis of his or her own interest.

This situation⁸ prompted the Community Matching teams to look for other areas in which to promote the programme, thus achieving a reasonable number of matches, but also leading to a partial redefinition of objectives and strategies. On the one hand, involving refugees accommodated in systems that are much more insecure than SAI and with reduced services (or not accommodated although still in very vulnerable conditions) has led to a strengthening of the role of the project caseworkers and **the need to more carefully define the buddy matching, in order to avoid the risk of delegation and replacement by volunteer figures and the potential imbalance of the relationship in terms of assistance.**

⁸ This paragraph was developed on the basis of what was revealed during the numerous planning and redesign meetings conducted by CIAC and RWI, as well as during two focus groups with the field teams carried out on 17 and 27 June 2022.



On the other hand, **refugees who are in a more stable situation** (related to the length of their stay in Italy and the achievement of the main objectives of autonomy and integration) were involved in the programme. Although sometimes more difficult to intercept, these refugees **have demonstrated to approach the programme with greater awareness and understanding about its socio-relational dimension**. We can therefore conclude that **in these first months of trial, 3 refugee profiles emerge among Community Matching participants:**

- ▶ **the vulnerable:** short stay in Italy, poor level of Italian language, target paths against marginality or continuity of care, difficulty in finding their way and having access to basic services/rights, excluded from the reception network or placed in emergency centres, risk of engagement strongly shifted to the needs level;
- ▶ **the guests:** average stay in Italy, prevalence of target paths resource Consolidation, access to services and opportunities in the area but with strong mediation/interposition by operators, risk of difficult direct interaction and tough negotiation of roles between the SAI team and the Community Matching team;
- ▶ **the citizens:** long stay in Italy, overcoming the main difficulties related to socio-economic integration (documents, work, housing), interest in relational, convivial, socio-affective grounding dimensions, risk of difficult identification of the individuals as they are excluded from the reception systems and dedicated services.

For all those people, notwithstanding differences in their starting points, the possibility of establishing friendly and mutually supportive relationships with members of the local communities is having a positive effect on their sense of belonging to the society in which they live and on the overall course of their integration.

Beneficial effects are also being felt within the local community, beyond the individual volunteers directly involved in the relationship⁹.

Volunteers have also very diverse profiles. According to the operators, **while the presence of adult female buddies is quite frequent,**

Refugees who are in a more stable situation were involved in the programme (...).

Although sometimes more difficult to reach, these refugees proved to be more conscious and understanding of the socio-relational dimension of the programme.

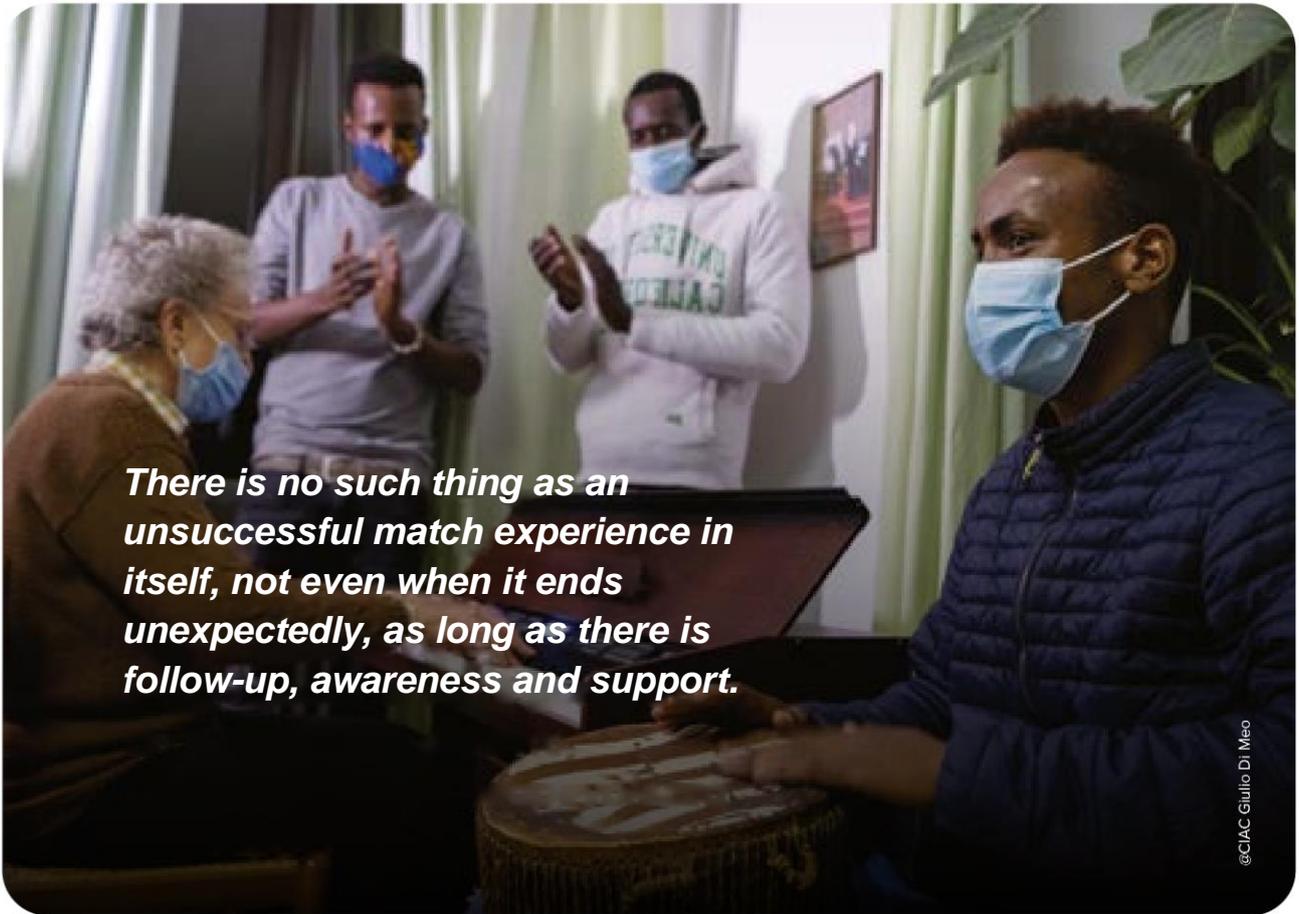
as they are also willing to put their families on the line, on the other hand, younger volunteers are also present, in some cases university students.

The issue of gender and/or age difference in matching refugees does not seem to be an obstacle. Actually, **according to operators, it is not so much the demographic characteristics of the buddies that give rise to particular concern or attention, but more the need for a careful examination of their motivations and expectations, with respect to their relationship with the refugee.**

This point is raised by several caseworkers describing initial difficulty for those approaching the project to understand its relational aspect, distancing themselves from the caring dimensions.

Some potential buddies may have even shied away, preferring experiences that were more immediately familiar and rewarding (in their opinion) because they were based on classic forms of help and response to basic needs. This seems to have happened most frequently in connection with the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, which has attracted considerable attention and mobilised large numbers of citizens in immediate "emergency" measures of solidarity.

⁹ The impact of the programme on the refugee component of the matches will be the focus of the final evaluation, expected in early 2023, while the precise analysis of the impact on local communities will be addressed in the second year.



There is no such thing as an unsuccessful match experience in itself, not even when it ends unexpectedly, as long as there is follow-up, awareness and support.

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On other occasions, however, the opposite happened, and the match had to be discontinued because the refugee had levels of need that were too complex, and different from what was found when the PIIT was defined.

"In two cases, both with female refugees, more time was needed, which the volunteer buddy did not have. We brought the match to an end and found more volunteers".

Refugees with difficult situations, of obvious vulnerability, with specific needs, where the reception system and/or local services are able to take charge, or can potentially be mobilised, are a different matter: in these cases, the involvement of the buddy can be positively integrated for a better definition of the path - if not of full autonomy - then at least of integrated care.

This first analysis brings the role of caseworkers back into focus. There are no unsuccessful match experiences as such, not even when they end unexpectedly, as long as escorting is guaranteed, a path of awareness and support that helps both the refugee buddy and the volunteer buddy to work through their experiences and to learn useful lessons for their own path and future social life, even from difficulties and setbacks. According to the operators, the care needed to create the most suitable and positive matches "on paper" is certainly an essential part of the process, but at the same time the real challenge lies in guiding the relationship, calibrating the right amount of presence and distance. The caseworker plays a decisive role in supporting the volunteer-refugee relationship, in being a third element of assurance that does not end with the match, but instead becomes valuable in the course of the relationship, and in mobilising a community that becomes *de facto* a mutual support group. And it is this ongoing care, which increases along with the number of matches set up in each area, that makes the programme a true path of community-making and not just matching.

Recommendations *for better programme development*

Reaching out to refugees

Meetings in person, face-to-face, in formal and informal settings **are the best way to introduce refugees to Community Matching** and engage them in a process of learning. This means that it is essential to reach refugees where they are living, without intermediaries: it is therefore critical to have access to reception centres, to flats, to informal places where they can be found.

Nurturing relationships

Quality time is needed not only to "initiate" the pairing and the first meeting between buddies, but to **guide and offer the necessary support at every stage of the project**, ensuring a respectful, yet unobtrusive, constant presence. Nurturing relationships is crucial.

Involving volunteers and communities

It is important to value not only the individual contribution of individual volunteers, but also **the group dimension**. In many cases, the buddies already express a desire to go beyond a simple one-to-one relationship and are willing to engage more broadly and become part of a community. This willingness should certainly be valued, offering those who wish to do so the opportunity to take a more active role.

Enhancing the involvement of Reception Centres

There is a need to involve the reception centres' multidisciplinary teams in an integrated manner **in the programme's promotion and sharing of results**, also to enable the Community Matching operators to interact directly with the people received.



Data sheets: Buddy Stories

📍 Rome

Larissa and Benedetta

Larissa and Benedetta are two peers, the former born in Cameroon, the latter in Italy, who have crossed paths thanks to the Community Matching programme. What drove Benedetta to take part was the desire to do something positive to build a more inclusive and supportive society, where there is room for encounter and dialogue: "There are both physical and cultural barriers, which often create opposition, misunderstandings and even prejudice. The only way to break them down is through mutual knowledge. This project is a way to build a bridge between two worlds that would otherwise be unlikely to meet", she concludes. For Larissa, arrived in Italy a few years ago to start a new life in safety and now staying at a second reception centre, meeting Benedetta was mainly a way of overcoming her sense of isolation: "I have been living in Italy for more than two years, but apart from interactions with the operators of the facility where I live, I have not had many opportunities to get to know local people. It is the first time in Italy that I am building a relationship because I choose to and not because I have to".

📍 Turin

Lucia and Shamsa

First: to make new acquaintances; second: to discover the city of Turin; third: to get practical help. These are Shamsa's goals, a young mother from Somalia who arrived in Italy a few years ago. And on the other side, Lucia, a 30-year-old from Piedmont with experience in voluntary work, who wants to be an active part of society, and to help those who don't yet know the beauty of her area, to discover it. The match between them was almost effortless, given their many common interests. "I live in Turin, but I don't really know it, not least because there are so many daily problems to deal with: the lack of a job, rent and bills to pay, the little one's nursery", says Shamsa. Nevertheless, she has a desire for new experiences and decided to take part in the Community Matching project. Lucia, on the other hand, comes from a background of social activism. "I want to be an active part in establishing a new way of experiencing relationships and community as a means of bringing together people, diversity and different ways of living life".

📍 Bari

Laura and Shafiq

Shafiq lives alone in a cottage outside Bari, does not have many friends and spends his days often alone. He is very fond of nature and walking, and he practises gardening and some country work. He has been living in Italy since 2019 but his Italian is somewhat weak. "I would be happy to meet someone that I could have new experiences with, maybe connected to cultivation and improving my Italian". Laura is from Bitonto and is very active in the world of social work: only a few years ago she founded a cultural association for children that keeps her very busy, but despite everything, she has given her free time to be a buddy. She has a wide network of acquaintances, including a permaculture association. Exactly what Shafiq is enthusiastic about. Laura and Shafiq first met recently, but their match already seems to be on the path to success. The first step will be to speak better Italian, then they will think about agriculture.