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THE HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS EXPERIENCE

Ilaria Schnyder vW

Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2017, when the first airplane landed in Fiumicino airport on November 30th, 500 refugees from the “African horn” have safely reached Italy. 45 dioceses and parishes, some 11 local Sant’Egidio communities, and other Catholic organisations have been hosting refugees in 18 regions, from the very north of Italy—near the Austrian and Swiss borders— to the southern Sicilian coasts, where the dangerous ships carrying asylum seekers dock after crossing the Mediterranean.

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

On December 15, 2015, the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Italian Federation of Protestant Churches signed the first protocol with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officially opening the Humanitarian Corridors initiative, a safe and legal way to let asylum seekers reach Italy. In that legal framework, a two-years long project was established in order to bring in Italy 1000 Syrian asylum seekers, who had previously fled their homeland to be sheltered in different refugee camps in Lebanon. The program was launched in 2015 after the a ship carrying 500 migrants from Libya to Italy sank near the Italian island of Lampedusa on October 2013. It was reported that the boat had sailed from Misrata, Libya, and that many of the migrants were originally from Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana. The event became the bloodiest shipwreck in the history of immigration to Italy when 368 deaths were officially reported. Some of those who perished still had their documents in their pocket. If they had reached Italy, they could have been granted the political asylum, which is frequently granted to Eritrean and Somali refugees. This tragedy sparked a political and social debate about the lack of a pathway for asylum seekers to legally enter Italy and the European Union. On January 12, 2017 a new protocol was signed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI), Caritas Italy, Migrantes and the Community of Sant'Egidio. This protocol seeks to bring 500 vulnerable refugees—mostly Eritreans, but also South Sudanese, and Somali—from Ethiopia to Italy. Ethiopia is one of the so- called “transit countries” in which a million of African refugees live in various refugee camps and in the capital city, Addis Ababa. The Humanitarian Corridor is a private program that is established and completely financed by the Catholic Church. The program provides asylum seekers with a safe and legal pathway of

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migration toward Italy, which prevents the exploitation of human traffickers and the dangerous travels across the Mediterranean. Upon arrival, the program also seeks to integrate the newly welcomed refugees into Italian society.

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1. ORIGIN AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

On September 6, 2015, two years after the bloodiest shipwreck of the Italian history, Pope Francis asked every parish and every local religious community to host a refugee family, during the Sunday Angelus.

Following his statement, some Christian-based communities launched the so-called “humanitarian corridors” project. These projects aim to provide refugees not only a safe and legal way to enter Italy, and thus Europe, but also a local host community that is willing to grant them twelve months of financial support. These host communities help to integrate the refugees into the Italian society, which includes programming aimed towards helping refugees to find employment, to learn the Italian language, and to attend school.

The legal basis is art. 25 of the Visa Regulation no. 810/2009- approved on July 13, 2009, which established the “Community code on visas”.

Based on that article, it is possible for any Member State to issue visas for humanitarian reasons. The humanitarian visa is constituted of criteria that define various personal vulnerabilities, under the definition of “humanitarian reasons” given by the United Nations. Notwithstanding the current EU regulations on political asylum and on the visa system for non-EU citizens, this kind of visa has a territorial limitation: it confines the recipient to the boundaries of the state which granted the visa.

This territorially limited visa based on “humanitarian reasons” is a partial derogation to the current EU rules. Since 1990, EU member states agreed to partially place the right of political asylum and the visa system under

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the European competence. To enforce this, the EU passed the Dublin Regulation, which entered into force in 1997. The aim of the Dublin Regulation was to ensure a shared European system for the examination of asylum requests.

Two newest versions of the Dublin Regulation were adopted by the majority of EU member States in 2003 and 2013. The Dublin III Regulation (No. 604/2013) came into force on 19 July 2013. Its core legal principle is the same as the previous two regulations: asylum seekers must claim asylum and international protection in the EU member state in which they first arrive, and that state has to store his/her finger prints and it is responsible for the examination of such asylum claim procedures. The so-called “first state” criteria was established to prevent the phenomenon in which no member state takes responsibility of an individual asylum seeker. Further, it seeks to prevent an asylum seeker from submitting multiple requests for asylum. Nevertheless such procedure has been placed under a crescent criticism since 2015. Geopolitical events, such as the Arab Springs, the related war in Syria, the Gaddafi regime’s collapse, and the endemic political and economic crisis throughout sub- Saharan African countries, have contributed to a dramatic increase in both asylum requests and deadly shipwrecks. Since 2013, as EU members’ political and governmental actions seemed to fail to find a solution that will successfully prevent and avoid tragic shipwrecks, art. 25 of the Visa Regulation no. 810/2009 seemed to be the only officially permitted way to grant asylum seekers a safe and legal arrival in Italy.

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2. PRE-DEPARTURE

Shortly after the signature of the protocol, Caritas and Sant'Egidio representatives visited different Ethiopian refugees camps, in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff, the Agency for Refugee & Returnee Affairs (ARRA)—the Ethiopian government—and with a local grassroots organization, Ghandi Charity. Both UNHCR and Gandhi Charity work in different camps to support refugees. Since its foundation in 2003 the main focus of Ghandi Charity activities were established in Sudan and Ethiopia where it helps Eritreans who have escaped their country and have entered into refugees camps. The organization also works in the Sinai desert and in Libya to free Eritreans and other African migrants detained in illegal jails. Gandhi Charity focuses on minors without parents, teenagers, women and all victims of violence. In the Ethiopian refugee camp of Mai Aini, Ghandi Charity grants 850 children a daily meal, has built 50 houses for the elderly, and runs a mill.

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2.1 SELECTION: THE VULNERABILITY CRITERIA

The selection of program participants, or beneficiaries, is a key component of the Humanitarian Corridors initiative. It requires a multi-specialist team, including doctors, interpreters, and aid workers, in order to select the refugees that best match the characteristics of the program and host communities based on various criteria, which includes an individual's physical, psychological, and socio-political vulnerabilities.

According to the EU Regulation no. 810/2009 of July 13, 2009, and to the definition of "vulnerable person" given by UNHCR, beneficiaries have to be chosen based on: physical vulnerabilities, such as people with health problems and disabilities; family and personal difficulties, such as single mothers with minors, minors without parents, and political opponents.

Staff from Caritas and the Community of Sant'Egidio strictly cooperated with UNHCR and Gandhi Charity in order to select beneficiaries that match the required criteria. The teams spent time with the selected refugees and gave them information not only about their rights and duties as part of the humanitarian corridors project but also about Italy, its legal and social rules, and provided some geographical and social news about the place where they would soon live.

The UNHCR provides a list of possible candidates. Caritas and Community of Sant'Egidio plan at least three interviews with potential beneficiaries from

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the list. The first interview aims to meet people and to become aware of their personal and family situations. The second seeks to provide information on the Humanitarian Corridors program and to verify refugees' personal documents. Once the final list of refugees is made, Caritas and Sant'Egidio staff conduct a final interview with refugees to clarify any details about the Humanitarian Corridors' rules.

The Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) has to approve the list of selected refugees. When the list is officially approved by Ethiopian authorities, it is sent to the Italian authorities (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior) for further security checks. Accordingly, the Italian Embassy in Addis Ababa issues a temporary visa, which allows the selected refugees to legally travel to Italy. The flights are operated by Ethiopian Airlines. Once the plane lands at Fiumicino Airport, all refugees have to apply for international protection and such request must be formalized within a few days of their arrival in the different communities at the local police station (Questura). Refugees receive their C3 form and they have to wait to be heard by the territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection.

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2.2 HEALTH CHECKS AND TRAININGS

The pre-departure procedure consists also in health screenings, which are health assessments requested by the Italian Ministry of Health and based on the protocols adopted by the International Organization for Migration for Resettlement.

The pre-departure training is part of the selection procedure as it intends to make refugees as aware as possible of Italian legal, social, linguistic and economics context so that they are ready to deal with a new country and culture. To fulfil this hard goal, Italian host communities prepare and send pictures and videos about the host city and community in order to give beneficiaries a realistic vision of their new home.

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2.3 THE MATCHING

Caritas Italy matches the list of refugees with local Italian Diocesan host communities. The matching process takes the refugees' vulnerabilities and host communities' particular resources, abilities and opportunities into consideration. Sant'Egidio does not match refugees with host communities but the hosting procedure is based only on the availability of their communities .

Matching is the second key point of the project. The process grants asylum seekers not only a safe and legal pathway to Italy, but also a 1-year long path to integration. Such aim could be better fulfilled trying to do the best matching between beneficiaries' features and local Diocesan Caritas.

- In case of people with health problems, the host community should be next to specialized hospitals, especially in case of pediatric needs.
- If vulnerabilities are related to long-term disabilities, children could need specialized schools: for instance, those with a Deaf Italian Sign Language program in the case of deaf refugees.
- In case of physically disabled people, housing should be equipped with no architectural barriers.

Every host community then has to grant a proper apartment under the Italian rules.

Moreover, a good matching needs also a pre- arrival training for host communities, so that host communities are aware of refugees' culture, history, political problems, and to provide critical context about their former life and experience while in refugee camps. Subsequently, after the matching process is complete, personal information about the refugees are shared with Caritas social workers.

Supplementary to social workers and volunteers, Caritas Italy chose to

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recommend a third element in its program: a family tutor, which is given the leading role in the integration process once the refugees arrive to their host community. This family shares everyday life with beneficiaries and explains typical social and cultural that pertain to the refugee's particular community and city. The family tutor is not paid by national or Diocesan Caritas to hold this role because it supports the cultivation of a genuine relationship which is a key element that will best contribute to a refugees' human resources and social capital. Furthermore, volunteers are part of this element as well. They are prepared and trained by the Caritas local staff and help to cooperate with the family tutor. Alongside the family tutor, Caritas Italy strongly recommends that the local Caritas should enrol an inter-cultural mediator, who is a person designed to act as a bridge between the host community, Diocesan Caritas staff and the refugees. The inter-cultural mediator helps to solve cultural conflicts and misunderstandings.

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