



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

VULNER

VULNER POLICY BRIEF: ITALY

Towards a reception system that recognizes, addresses and reduces the situations of vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy

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KEY MESSAGES

1. **Accommodation.** Small-sized accommodation options should be chosen, preferably located in socially mixed areas with public transport links. Reception centers' regulations should promote the independence and personal agency of all hosted migrants.
2. **Information.** Information should be made accessible to refugees, asylum seekers and potential asylum seekers on their rights, obligations, opportunities, and the asylum procedure.
3. **Flexibility and individualization.** A flexible and individualized approach should be used when responding to migrants' diverse needs, taking into account intersectional perspectives.
4. **Integration.** Measures for social and labor integration should be guaranteed to all asylum seekers and refugees during and after their reception, including access to sustainable housing and decent working conditions.
5. **Reception center workers.** Fair working conditions, a sustainable worker/resident rate, and adequate training should be guaranteed.
6. **Peers.** A peer methodology should be promoted, including through the recruitment of trained refugees.
7. **Beyond emergency.** The reception and integration system (SAI) should be expanded to cover all reception needs, while extraordinary reception centers (CAS) should be limited to time-bound situations in which a large number of asylum seekers suddenly arrive in the country.
8. **Transparency and assessment.** Reception services should be subjected to assessment, including by hosted migrants. The results should be publicly available.
9. **Collaboration.** Collaboration should be further encouraged between institutional actors, third-sector organizations and civil society.

In the current legal and policy discourse on asylum and migration, there is an increasing emphasis on the need to address the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. For example, the UN Global Compact on Refugees and the EU Directives on asylum require that the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees be addressed, and Objective 7 of the UN Global Compact for Migration calls on states to 'address and reduce' vulnerabilities in migration more broadly. Yet, there is no common understanding of what migrants' vulnerabilities are or of how they should be assessed and addressed. To produce scientific knowledge that assists policymakers in designing policies and implementation strategies that will contribute to reducing vulnerabilities among migrants seeking protection, the VULNER project conducted an extensive inquiry in eight countries – in Europe (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway), the Middle-East (Lebanon), Africa (Uganda and South Africa), and North America (Canada). The inquiry thus covered a variety of policy contexts, ranging from humanitarian responses in first countries of asylum (Lebanon and Uganda) to asylum and other related processes addressing the protection needs of migrants in Western countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway). The objective was to gain a better understanding of the multiple challenges, promises, and pitfalls of relying on 'vulnerability' as a conceptual tool to design and implement institutional responses to migrants' protection needs.

In the first research phase, the VULNER researchers documented the various legal and bureaucratic approaches to identifying and addressing 'vulnerabilities' among migrants seeking protection. They analyzed the relevant domestic regulations and case law, and conducted 216 interviews with public servants and social and aid workers¹. This resulted in policy recommendations for the policymakers of each country in the study, as well as for EU policymakers, which can be found here: www.vulner.eu/58198/policy-briefs

In the second research phase, the VULNER researchers met with migrants seeking protection to understand how they experience their vulnerabilities, and what they identify as their main life challenges. As part of this Italian research phase, in 2021, 37 asylum seekers and refugees were interviewed, along with 27 social and reception workers closely supporting migrants, and fieldwork was conducted in the regions of Veneto and Lazio, including ethnographic observations in reception centers, local third-sector organizations and help-desks supporting migrants². An ad hoc consultation workshop was also held in Venice on November 8 2022 with 11 stakeholders and experts on the asylum reception system in the regions of Veneto and Lazio³.

Based on the results of the second research phase, this policy brief proposes concrete policy recommendations on how to design migration and asylum policies in Italy, which effectively consider and address the vulnerabilities among refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

¹ For more on the case in Italy see Sabrina Marchetti and Letizia Palumbo (eds.) 2021 Vulnerability in the Asylum and Protection System in Italy: Legal and Policy Framework and Implementing Practices <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5518933>

² See Dany Carnassale and Sabrina Marchetti (2022), Vulnerabilities and the Italian Protection System: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Perspectives of Protection Seekers <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7123577>

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In Italy all asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to access the national health system, welfare services, schooling (when under 16 years old), and paid work (60 days after their application is submitted), and are allowed to move freely within the country. They have the right (and duty) to be registered in the municipality in which they live. They also have the right (but not the obligation) to access a reception program, including accommodation (if they do not have sufficient independent means).

In practice, asylum seekers and refugees are mostly accommodated in two kinds of centers, currently known as CAS and SAI (previously SPRAR/SIPROIMI)⁴, which our data demonstrate to be remarkably different in their capacity to address and reduce vulnerabilities. The 'extraordinary reception centers' (CAS) which host asylum seekers only, up until their asylum decision is finalised (usually from two to five years), are shown to be largely unable to recognize, address and reduce situations of vulnerability. Instead the 'system of reception and integration' (SAI) centers are generally more able to deal with situations of vulnerability. In fact a limited number of specialized SAI centers are also available for asylum seekers and refugees with vulnerabilities that are health-related. As a whole, SAI centers mostly host refugees, in addition to a number of asylum seekers, especially unaccompanied minors and others in situations of vulnerability⁵, for a minimum period of six months, renewable according to individual needs (for up to approximately two years). While CAS centers are usually larger (tending to have 40-50 residents, but in some cases up to 300), are situated in isolated or rural areas, and provide only meals and accommodation, SAI centers are usually small (typically they are apartments hosting 4-5 people), better connected to the rest of society, and able to offer services oriented to social and labor inclusion.

Within this extremely polarized situation, **the main problem identified by research participants was that there are a completely inadequate number of SAI places, and the Italian reception system relies disproportionately on the CAS centers, even though they should only be used in emergency situations such as when a large number of asylum seekers suddenly arrive in the country.** In the year 2021, 7 in 10 migrants that were part of the reception system were hosted in the extraordinary CAS system⁶. The scarcity of SAI centers is a result of the fact that local authorities are able to decide whether or not to open (or close) SAI centers in their area on a voluntary basis, and, for political reasons, only a minority choose to open them. Instead the opening (and closing) of CAS centers does not depend on 'good will' but is decided by the local unit of the Ministry of the Interior (the Prefecture). SAI centers also involve higher costs and more responsibility for public authorities, for they are managed directly by local public authorities under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior. The management and responsibility of CAS is instead passed onto third-sector organizations, through a system that reduces costs but also, very evidently, service quality⁷.

⁴ There are a small number of reception alternatives to SAI and CAS as part of humanitarian corridor initiatives and home-based reception (for instance Refugees Welcome Italy).

⁵ There were about 800 migrants with severe physical and mental disabilities hosted in special projects (i.e. 2% of all SAI beneficiaries), while there were about 6,700 unaccompanied minors (i.e. 19% of all 42,000 SAI beneficiaries). There were approximately 42,000 SAI beneficiaries in total (Rapporto Annuale SAI 2021 Atlante 2021 <https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Atlante-SAI-2021-online.pdf>).

⁶ Openpolis and ActionAid, 2022 Centri d'Italia. Le mappe dell'accoglienza. Report 2021. L'emergenza che non c'è. https://migrantidb.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/rapporti_pdf/centri_ditalia_lemergenzachenonce.pdf

⁷ A 2022 report by Openpolis and ActionAid showed that in 2022 the average per person/day cost in a CAS was approximately 25 euros (while in 2018 it was approximately 35 euros). Instead, the per person/day cost in an SAI remained between approximately 35 and 41 euros.

Based on their direct experience, interviewees indicated that the Italian reception system is often unable to adequately recognize, address and reduce the situations of vulnerability of protection seekers, offering standardized services that are unable to respond to their special needs, instead focusing on mere survival. This runs the risk of exacerbating vulnerabilities or even producing what some of our participants called **'induced vulnerabilities', as a result of the constraints inherent in the reception system itself, further amplifying the constraints inherent in the asylum and reception procedure.** The interplay of severe delays in asylum procedures and a lack of adequate hosting and protection mechanisms produces a condition of uncertainty and precariousness, which in turn creates or intensifies situations of vulnerability. In particular, being hosted in CAS centers often means migrants are separated from the rest of society with limited options for integration. All this exposes asylum seekers and refugees to dynamics of abuse and exploitation. For example, **some CAS reception centers have become a pool for the recruitment of cheap labor from easily exploitable migrants, especially in poorly protected sectors such as agriculture.**

When asked in detail about the most problematic aspects of the reception system in terms of vulnerabilities, migrants – and social and reception center workers – primarily stressed the centrality of accommodation. Indeed, they reported that a significant number of asylum seekers and refugees do not access accommodation in CAS or SAI centers because of a lack of available places. In particular, places in SAI centers were insufficient. **The overcrowding in and size of CAS centers are particularly detrimental to residents, as it reduces the worker/resident ratio, lessening the chance of their creating a trusting relationship with trained social and reception center workers, which is essential to the recognition, addressing and reduction of vulnerabilities.** CAS centers that are in isolated and rural areas also create conditions of social isolation and segregation that exacerbate vulnerabilities and impede independent movement. **Migrants reported that center regulations often deny them agency and privacy, by imposing forms of excessive discipline or infantilizing them.** For instance, not being allowed to shop for and cook their own meals was experienced by migrants as highly disempowering. Positive alternative experiences were recounted in some SAI centers, as well as in family hosting programs, such as Refugees Welcome Italy, which foster independence and social inclusion.

Migrants who participated in the research also pointed to the lack of accessible information available on their rights, opportunities, obligations, and the asylum procedure. **This information, when accessible in their own language and from their first point of contact (at arrival or on application), could greatly impact the ability of asylum seekers and refugees to navigate the system and claim protection, especially when in situations of vulnerability.** Accessibility was reported to improve in contexts where third-sector organizations ran help desks collaborating with public authorities, and where (trained) former asylum seekers participated in services ('peer methodology').

A third theme migrants repeatedly raised was the inadequacy of integration measures, particularly regarding housing and employment. Resources dedicated to integration measures for asylum seekers were radically reduced following Decree Law 113/2018 (the so-called Security Decree or Salvini Decree, implemented by Law 132/2018). **Refugees highlighted how, once they were granted legal status and their reception program was over, they too often found themselves excluded from decent housing and labor opportunities, due mostly to the effects of racism, discrimination and exploitation.** This has a disproportionately negative impact on situations of vulnerability. These problems appear to be reduced where a system of publicly sponsored housing is in place, along with a system connecting 'fair' employers to reception programs. It is also crucial that both registrations with the local municipality and with the national health system are made as soon as the application is submitted.

The role played by reception center workers also emerged as a central element in migrants' accounts, and the conditions experienced by these workers were discussed by all participants. **The understaffing, underpayment and overwork of reception center workers were repeatedly identified as vulnerability-amplifying factors, and at times their lack of training was also mentioned.** Our data indicate that cuts in public funding had a profound impact on their working conditions. The issue of a lack of training was discussed with regards to vulnerabilities, but also in relation to improving understanding of the discrimination and racism experienced by migrants within the system. The good training practices that research participants identified included training provided by (trained) former asylum seekers and civil society organizations.

Insufficient collaboration between public institutions and third-sector organizations involved in the system at the local level was also identified as a problem by social and reception center workers, both in the case of CAS and in the case of SAI. **In line with this, cases in which there was close collaboration, including working together in the project design phase ('co-progettazione') or through so called 'referral mechanisms' (such as for trafficking and exploitation), were said to produce positive results in relation to recognizing, addressing and reducing situations of vulnerability. Research participants particularly stressed the necessity of further developing 'referral mechanisms' in cases of vulnerabilities connected to gender-based violence and psychological distress.**

A lack of transparency and adequate service assessment were identified as serious problems by all research participants in the case of CAS. **Civil society and academics are regularly denied access to data from CAS centers, and in many cases accurate data is not collected.** Also in the case of SAI, there was little attempt to gather feedback from hosted migrants. This was reported to be particularly problematic due to the numerous profit-making third-sector organizations that have increasingly entered the sector after the 2018 cuts to public funding, meaning that they currently dominate the service supply. **Many of these organizations are not qualified to provide adequate support for vulnerabilities, and some of them operate below legal standards,** failing to guarantee basic services such as access to food, electricity and water. In these contexts, asylum seekers may end up in situations of serious exploitation as they search for more dignified living conditions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings indicate that the following recommendations should be considered in order to improve the capacity of the reception system to recognize, address and reduce the situations of vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy.

1. **Accommodation.** Small-sized accommodation options should be favored, preferably located in socially mixed areas with public transport links. Reception center regulations should promote the independence and agency of all hosted migrants, including those in situations of vulnerability. In particular, hosted migrants should be given adequate privacy, mobility, and the possibility to cook for themselves.
2. **Information.** Information should be made accessible to refugees, asylum seekers and potential asylum seekers concerning their rights, obligations, and opportunities, including in relation to situations of vulnerability. Particular attention should be paid to clarifying the asylum procedure, the interview process, and the specific protections available to them in relation to vulnerable situations. Targeted information help-desks should be developed, with outreach services aimed at undocumented and homeless migrants.

3. **Flexibility and individualization.** In responding to the specific and diverse needs of asylum seekers and refugees, individualized rather than standardized provisions should be offered, taking into account an intersectional approach.
4. **Integration.** Social and labor integration measures should be offered during and after reception, including access to decent housing and working conditions. Special measures should be developed to tackle racism, discrimination and exploitation in the housing and labor market. An improvement in the recognition of educational and professional qualifications should be facilitated.
5. **Reception center workers.** Fair working conditions and a sustainable worker/resident rate should be guaranteed in order for reception workers to be able to offer qualified and professional services and address situations of vulnerability. Training should be provided on how to address situations of vulnerability and how to reduce instances of racism and discrimination within the reception system. This should include regular forms of sharing good practice across centers, as well as training provided by (trained) former asylum seekers and by civil society organizations.
6. **Peers.** A peer methodology should be promoted across the system, including the recruitment and training of former asylum seekers ('peers') as reception worker.
7. **Beyond emergency.** Sufficient places should be made available under the ordinary system (SAI) for all asylum seekers and refugees, and there should be a significant increase in SAI centers hosting people in situations of vulnerability. SAI centers should be established in every municipality according to their population size (for instance starting from 20,000 inhabitants) rather than on a voluntary basis, offering a number of places that is proportional to the local population. Extraordinary reception centers (CAS) should instead be limited to time-bound situations in which a large number of asylum seekers suddenly arrive in the country.
8. **Transparency and assessment.** Reception services should be subjected to assessment on a regular basis to ensure the respect of quality standards and human rights. Hosted migrants should be able to participate in the assessment, and results should be made publicly available.
9. **Collaboration.** Further collaboration between institutional and non-institutional actors, such as third-sector organizations and civil society, should be encouraged, namely through co-design (*co-progettazione*) and the development of new protocols and 'referral mechanisms' (similar to those used for victims of trafficking and exploitation), for instance, in connection to situations of gender-based violence and psychological distress.

THE VULNER RESEARCH PROJECT

This policy brief was issued by Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and Sabrina Marchetti on January 31 2023. It reflects the scientific data they obtained and analyses they developed within the framework of the VULNER research project.

The VULNER research project is an international research initiative aiming at gaining a deeper understanding how migrants applying for asylum and other humanitarian protection statuses experience vulnerabilities, and how they could best be addressed. It thus uses a twofold analysis, which compares the study of existing protection mechanisms for vulnerable migrants as they are defined, designed and implemented in various local bureaucratic contexts with an examination of migrants' experiences.

The VULNER research project is coordinated by Luc Leboeuf, from the Department of Law & Anthropology at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle a.d. Saale (Germany). It is being funded from February 2020 to June 2023 as part of the Horizon 2020 research program.

The views contained in this policy brief are those of the authors. The European Union and the project coordinator are not liable for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

For more information on the VULNER research project and its outputs and events, have a look at our website (www.vulner.eu) and follow us on Twitter (@VULNERproject).



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PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	VULNERABILITIES UNDER THE GLOBAL PROTECTION REGIME - How Does the Law Assess, Address, Shape and Produce the Vulnerabilities of the Protection Seekers? (VULNER)
COORDINATOR	Department of Law & Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, MPG, Halle a.d. Saale, Germany
CONSORTIUM	Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – MPG, Halle, Germany Ca’Foscari University of Venice – UNIVE, Venice, Italy Catholic University of Louvain – UCL, Louvain, Belgium Center for Lebanese Studies – CLS, Beirut, Lebanon Institute for Social Research – ISF, Oslo, Norway Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg – MLU, Halle, Germany Population Europe – PE, Berlin, Germany University of Ottawa – UOTTAWA, Ottawa, Canada
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FURTHER READING	Marchetti, S., Palumbo, L., (Eds.) <i>Vulnerability in the Asylum and Protection System in Italy: Legal and Policy Framework and Implementing Practices</i> . 2021. VULNER Research Report 1. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5518933 Carnassale, D., Marchetti, S., <i>Vulnerabilities and the Italian Protection System: An ethnographic exploration of the perspectives of protection seekers</i> . 2022. VULNER Research Report 2. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7123577 Marchetti, S., Palumbo, L. VULNER Policy Brief: Italy. 2021. https://www.vulner.eu/78597/VULNER_PB_Italy_20211.pdf