



NEWLY ARRIVED IN A COMMON HOME

**BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF DIASPORA
STAKEHOLDERS AS COMMUNITY AGENTS
FOR THE INCLUSION OF NEWLY-ARRIVED
MIGRANTS**

Italian report (Milan)

ISMU

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Forewords

NEAR (NEwly ARrived in a common home) is a European project that aims at fostering social orientation of newly arrived migrants during their settlement in the receiving countries. Funded under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), NEAR activates a process of mutual trust, knowledge and cross-cultural transfer between migrants and local communities, building a sense of belonging of “a new common home”.

The project is highly context-specific and offers a unique approach towards integration at local level in four target areas (Lisbon, Nicosia, Perugia, Milan) that cater to different groups of migrant beneficiaries and combines multiple strands of activities: building the capacity of and empowering diaspora stakeholders, facilitating access to services and labour market entry for asylum seekers and international protection holders, strengthening inclusion levels of newly arrived children, and enhancing orientation and opportunities for newly arrived university students.

NEAR is coordinated by Fondazione ISMU (Italy) and is implemented in partnership with Tamat NGO (Italy), CARDET NGO (Cyprus), AIDGLOBAL (Portugal) and the Catholic University of Milan (Italy).

Capacity building and empowerment of diaspora stakeholders (named “Community Agents, CAs”) plays a central role in the NEAR approach. Since the early start of the project, partners mapped diaspora and other migrant stakeholders in the four cities to identify the most suitable neighbourhood. After setting up an outreach campaign, they organised consultation meetings with interested diaspora stakeholders to identify the knowledge gaps and needs and co-design training programmes on relevant public, private and non-profit integration services by also partnering up with key service providers at local level.

This report takes stock of a year-long outreach, training and engagement of diaspora stakeholders. In doing so, it aims to facilitate the transfer of experiences, tools, knowledge and practices for organizations, practitioners and other interested groups to build the capacity of and empower diaspora communities as actors in the integration of newly-arrived migrants at local level.

1. Taking into account diaspora communities in selecting target areas

Working on inclusion programmes requires to adopt an approach that fosters the creation of social capital by activating networks of different types of relationships. The core idea is that the relational-social aspect can hold together the factors that help reaching independence and personal satisfaction. For this to happen it is essential to work with proximity networks in order to:

- initiate exchanges among actors who are close to one another and identify concrete needs;
- listen to the needs of people who are close to you and ensure their onboarding and engagement;
- build solid relationships that last over time.

With this in mind, when starting to involve Community Agents (CAs) ISMU had to identify the area in the city of Milan where migrants were significantly present and, therefore, more likely to welcome and orient newcomers into the hosting community. ISMU started by looking at data on the presence of foreign citizens in the nine administrative districts (*"municipi"*) of Milan and taking into consideration the three with the highest percentage on the total resident population (*municipio 2, 8 and 9* where over 1/5 of the residents are foreign-born).

Starting from this data ISMU conducted a preliminary mapping of existing private social institutions and stakeholders that could be included in the NEAR project, namely for the reception of newly-arrived migrants. This mapping led to choosing *municipio 2* as the intervention area in light of the share of foreign-born population (30%) and the presence of some of the most renowned districts in terms of number and heterogeneity of foreign presence (via Padova, piazzale Loreto and Central Station). Out of these three districts, ISMU finally selected the area along the rails of the Central Station as a symbolic place of transit and movement for migrants who arrive to Milan and, consequently, as an area very rich in reception services.

ISMU then mapped public offices and local institutions, volunteer and local organisations, diaspora organisations, reception centres for asylum seekers and refugees, schools and informal local groups. This step was key to identifying and building a network of stakeholders in the area that were actively supporting those coming to a new city. ISMU contacted them directly in order to outline the project and ask for their collaboration in identifying potential CAs. ISMU collected names and contacts from both diaspora organisations and people with a migrant background who were not members of any organisation but who were individually supporting their community. After getting in touch with them over the phone ISMU sent information on the project to ask for their cooperation. ISMU decided to foresee a large number of CAs as a more diversified the group composition meant bigger impact of their work considering there is great heterogeneity of nationalities, age, gender, profiles and migratory history among newly-arrived migrants.

Strengths:

- Easy access to data on foreign resident population. Data on resident foreigners is easily accessible on the website of the Municipality of Milan, is regularly updated and can be broken down by individual districts, gender and nationality.
- Strong presence of reception services for newly arrived migrants. Milan is one of the main Italian cities in terms of the number of foreigners and has a long history of hospitality. It was not difficult to identify the services on the territory of *municipio 2*, that has always been an

entry point and a crossroad for many migrants thanks to a dense network of public and private institutions hosting and orientating people coming to the city;

- Presence of associations and informal local groups. The area of *municipio 2* and the Central Station are particularly lively, with citizens actively participating in renovating the neighbourhood, using its spaces and enhancing its history, especially by creating organisations and local groups and promoting activities and opportunities for exchange;
- Collaboration between public and private, formal and informal institutions contacted when identifying potential CAs. All the institutions contacted immediately saw the potential of involving CAs in enhancing reception and inclusion programmes for newly-arrived migrants at local level but also for themselves;

Criticalities:

- Identification of specific institutions/services useful for newly-arrived migrants in the target neighborhood. To create and activate a network in a large city like Milan it is important to work as much as possible at local level. However, this is not possible in the case of bodies and institutions that work on reception and inclusion on a wider territorial scale – often in the entire city. When building the map of local services for the inclusion of newly-arrived migrants it is therefore necessary to consider actors that cater to the entire city area rather than excluding them from the network;
- Identification of CAs in the target territory. CAs often operate according to the needs of fellow nationals and regardless of the neighborhood of residence. In identifying the CAs it became impossible to focus on people living and/or operating exclusively in *municipio 2*. However, ISMU prioritised people who were already operating or knew the target district very well. This limitation has not compromised the onboarding and engagement of CAs in any ways thanks to their ability to provide support beyond their geographical. While there were initially concerns that this would be an obstacle, in fact the flexibility and ability of CAs to move on the territory was a resource and an added value in their role. Among CAs ISMU saw both a community bond that allowed to create relations outside the neighborhood and the ability and willingness to embed their actions within a specific territory (for different reasons – housing, work, activism etc).

2. Outreach and early engagement

Starting from the contacts provided by the local stakeholders ISMU tried to identify the CAs both within groups and organisations that were had already been formed and formalized. ISMU gathered profiles of very active people – i.e. individuals who due to their personality, personal interests and professional background related to integration played a key role among their migrant community. To select CAs ISMU considered both men and women as ISMU were aware that the gender variable is important for migrant reception and orientation to local services. The country of origin was also an important and ISMU tried to reach out to the main communities in Milan. ISMU contacted organisations and informal groups based on nationality, world region area, language and culture. ISMU finally took age into consideration, trying to involve both first generation adults and second generation youth who were active in their community in the Milan area.

Once ISMU had identified people with key roles in their communities ISMU created informal opportunities to get to know them. ISMU organised both one-to-one interviews (in-person and remotely) and group sessions with the entire team of the target organisation. At that stage ISMU made clear that in order to formally join the project as CA they would have to react to and disseminate the call for participants among interested fellow nationals.

The call for participants was characterized by a very clear language and provided concise information on the characteristics sought for the project (“Are you a person of foreign origin who works for his community?”; “Do you know well the area along the rails of the Central Station and up to the Martesana? Would you like to receive a short training to get the right tools to orient and support members of your community?”. The invitation was sent only to direct contacts and people who had already been contacted and had expressed their interest. It was not disseminated on a large scale on the Internet or on social networks. Prospective participants were required to complete an online with their personal and contact data as well as their availability to participate to a preliminary co-design feedback meeting. Assuming that people would have a job, ISMU proposed one training on evenings and one training on weekends. The call also provided contacts of staff in charge of the training for more information on the project and the involvement of CAs along the way.

Strengths:

- Heterogeneous composition of the group. Thanks to the contacts activated in the beginning ISMU were able to reach a good number of people, with very different characteristics in terms of gender, age and origin, which is ideal for building capacity among CAs to respond to a broader spectrum of needs through more constructive and reflective exchanges.
- Direct contact with each of the CAs candidates. The preliminary one-to-one interview with each CA candidate helped to get to know each other and express respective expectations on participation in the training and the expected outcome, and made it possible to identify topics of greatest interest.
- Interest in getting a follow-up, individual training. People who joined the project as CAs showed great interest in the proposal, also due its applicability to the professional sphere. As such, they asked whether ISMU could organise additional training sessions for them in the future.
- Sensitivity to the time constraints of people. Both for the one-to-one interviews and the co-design feedback meeting ISMU fully took into account the people’s personal needs, especially days and times, to accommodate their professional and personal schedule.

Criticalities:

- Excessive time commitment. People who were already very busy with their activities and the activities of their association/community did not want to spend additional time on issues with which they felt they were familiar.
- Lack of financial reward. Some good profiles for CAs refused to participate due to the absence of a financial reward. These were people who would have struggled to find free time to dedicate to the project or that were willing to be involved but not as volunteers.

3. Identification of needs and final selection

Starting from the availability inquired through the call for participants, ISMU created the definitive group of 15 CAs and scheduled the preliminary co-design feedback meeting for the first co-planning table on a Saturday – a day where everyone said they could commit their time. Despite the restrictions resulting from COVID-19 pandemic, ISMU opted for an in-person meeting – with all due precaution – to guarantee an effective exchange between the people involved. As a location ISMU chose the ISMU headquarter, a place located near the Central Station that could be easily accessed by everyone thanks to various lines intersecting. This helped to immediately delve into the project's territorial setting of reference for the project's activities. ISMU chose ISMU's largest and most suitable room that was equipped for presentations (PC station, projector, microphone, blackboard) and allowed for an interactive meeting. From the very beginning ISMU tried to create a welcoming and friendly environment, for instance by providing snacks, gadgets and working documents. During the meeting ISMU used a Power Point presentation that, in addition to providing information, provided the timing of the meeting and input for the debate.

At the beginning of the meeting participants were invited to introduce themselves and, if they were members of an association, to present its activities (*"Let's get to know each other! 3 minutes per person: name and country of origin; what does your association do? If you are not part of any association, what do you do for your community? How do you think you can be a Community Agent as part of the NEAR project?"*). ISMU then briefly presented the project focusing namely on the role of CAs. The rest of the meeting consisted of a brainstorming guided by specific questions to identify the knowledge of each participant as well as their needs for additional training and up-to-date information (*"Brainstorming, 45 minutes: What information do the members of your community ask you the most often? Out of these topics, on which do you feel the most confident? Out of these topics, on which do you feel you need more details?"*).

Gathering of needs were gathered during the conversation without following a specific structure. Each participant reported their own topics of interest and the main current needs of their community. These indications and proposals were displayed in random order on a blackboard, in order to group them by topic at a later stage and inform the programme of the CA trainings. Several topics came up from the brainstorming, some more specific and related to very concrete situations, others more general.

Considering that the training course would be organized over 24 hours – with 8 hours dedicated to the project activity, the construction of an unconventional map – ISMU asked the CAs to try rearrange all the issues emerged in two modules of 8 hours each (*"Let's discuss together on the training modules: what themes to cover? What learning approach to use?"*). At the end of the debate a training programme was drafted following this structure:

- First module (8 hours): visas; family reunion; request for international protection; conversion of residence permits (study/work, asylum/subsidiary/special/long-term residence permit); citizenship; residence; reception system.
- Second module (8 hours): basic services; work (orientation, internship, employment grants, civil service); housing; education and training (enrolment, required documents, educational system, extra-curricular courses, identity and multilingualism); health (TBC, pregnancy, prevention, nutrition, disability certificates).

As for the approaches, it was decided that the entire training course would take place on Saturday mornings and/or afternoon.

Strengths:

- Group heterogeneity. the meeting worked very well especially because the CAs had very different backgrounds in terms of gender, age, nationality and work, which allowed for a very effective reflection.
- Possibility for each participant to express their skills and training needs. CAs immediately felt protagonists, sharing their skills and experiences with others. The debate was not steered in a top-down manner but resulted from a free exchange where everyone expressed their needs, thus essentially co-creating the training.

4. Organization of content for the training programme

In order to organise the training programme ISMU decided to address the topics that had emerged in the feedback meeting as similar thematic sessions, giving priority to the pressing topics and leaving out the less salient ones due to especially the limited time available. In terms of trainers and trainers ISMU have decided to hire people who worked in public services and/or in the non-profit sector. The aim was to provide CAs not only with legal/policy updates but with feedback and answers to concrete problems by trainers who usually deal with them in their daily work. This logic also inspired the choice of the venue for the sessions as ISMU organised the meetings in the offices of some key services in the target area with the aim of creating an opportunity for exchanging with and getting to know the operators and their services. All meetings included an informal moment – either a coffee break or a lunch together – allowing participants and trainers to interact with each other and get to know each other better. As initially foreseen, all the meetings were held on Saturdays to ensure the presence of CAs. More specifically, two full days and two half-days were organized.

In order to ensure correct and timely communication on days, times and venues of training sessions to all participants, a WhatsApp group was created gathering all CAs.

The first module of the training was entirely implemented during the first 8-hour session. In the morning ISMU focused on theoretical fundamentals on national immigration legislation. The speaker, a lawyer from an organisation counselling migrants, tried to provide the CAs with general and updated information on the difference between entry and stay, the procedures for regular entry (family reunification, international protection and entry for work reasons), the conversion of residence permits and the unlimited (long-term) residence permit. The afternoon session was organised according to the topics covered earlier on and involved the visit to an office of the Municipality of Milan where all integration services are centralized (family reunification, social and legal advice, school orientation, Italian as a second language and assisted voluntary returns).

The second module was split into two half-day sessions. On the first day ISMU went to a provincial education centre for adults where some adult education & training and career counselling services were presented by representatives of different training institutions in Milan. This session also focused on recognition of qualifications, a topic that was greatly demanded by CAs. The second session was organized at the headquarters of an organisation that ran a solidarity one-stop shop for the local community focusing on two major topics: health and housing. The module on health was conducted by a social worker from a cooperative that operates in several public hospitals in Milan and focused on maternal and child health and the main services for residents and undocumented migrants. The topic of housing was addressed by a representative of the tenant union and provided an in-depth presentation on the various types of housing and related contracts – public, private and subsidised housing as well as social housing.

The third module was an activity already defined under the project and out of the scope of the co-design with the CAs. However, it was implemented through interactive group work. Under the guidance of a communication agency and a local organisation ISMU conducted a guided tour of the Central Station, which led to the construction of an unconventional map of the neighbourhood together with the CAs.

Strengths:

- Organisation of sessions over weekends. Choosing the weekday in which the meetings would be held was fundamental to ensuring participation of all CAs, as they were all very busy during the week.
- Organisation of meetings at offices of key services. Choosing to run the sessions at offices of bodies and institutions helped CAs become familiar with such services and orient newly-arrived migrants.
- Creation of additional informal learning opportunities. Some of the topics not covered in the training programme could be addressed during informal moments (coffee breaks, lunch breaks or other moments of conviviality) with the trainers, who often made themselves available to giving extra information based on specific requests, but also among the CAs, who could exchange information and experience thanks to their different skills.
- Informal moments for group-building. The more convivial moments of the training were fundamental for creating cohesion within the CA group;
- WhatsApp Group. While this tool was designed only for organizational purposes, in fact it turned out to be a virtual space where the CAs began to interact, strengthening their relationship even further.
- Consistent participation. Although CAs were requested to commit four Saturdays, they were very interested actively involved in and appreciative of the training.

Criticalities:

- Selection of the topics to be addressed in the course. The training course could not exceed the duration foreseen (24 hours in total) as participants, being all workers, had little time available. This had an impact on topics that ISMU chose to discuss and made it necessary to leave out some topics that had come up during the feedback meeting.

5. Training methods and tools

One of ISMU's objectives was to ensure that the training was structured as an exchange and that fostered group interaction. In other terms, ISMU did not want simply to provide individual CAs with updates, ISMU also wanted to build the capacity of CAs as a *group* to act as new, cross-cutting support actors within migrant communities. For this reason ISMU always prioritised meetings that could be in-person and using group work methods. This created added value to the individual training dimension, ensuring continuous and constructive exchange within the CA group and infusing knowledge that could be applied externally and sustainably beyond the project.

The fact of organising the meetings at the offices of service providers and liaising CAs directly with professionals allowed CAs to get first-hand experience of the settings where services are provided and to receive specific informative materials. In these cases ISMU ensured the necessary tools (PC, projector, blackboard and hand-outs).

Depending on the service and the topic addressed, different ways of conducting the meeting were used always trying to save some time for discussion among participants. In the first session on immigration legislation – which covered many sub-topics – ISMU started from a conceptual map to organise information and structure the debate. For the session on training for adults, health and housing ISMU used a more lecture-like approach, with the support of PowerPoint presentations that condensed useful information and were sent to the participants after the meeting. The meeting at the one-stop shop of the Municipality of Milan was organised through small working groups on different discussion points identified in a preliminary brainstorming session CAs. In all meetings the CAs proved to be very active regardless of the training method used. They interacted with each other and with the speakers themselves, bringing not only questions but also concrete cases related to their direct experience with fellow nationals.

The third module was set up by the communication agency and included a first part of a guided tour of the target district, namely stops in most significant places. ISMU had the opportunity to carry out this activity with the support of one representative of a major local organisation that had been active for years for the enhancement and redevelopment of the area. This allowed CAs to see known areas under a new light while also discovering new ones through history and anecdotes that took them into the "soul" of the district. The last part of the work took place at the ISMU headquarter and focused on systematising information and suggestions collected during the tour, including the more "emotional" experiences CAs had as migrants in a new city. The collaborative and interactive approach helped creating an unconventional map of the neighborhood that brought together emotions, beloved places, difficulties and contradictions related to the personal experience CAs had of the city. In this activity the flow of emotions was stimulated both by personal stories and by means of music associated to the places and experiences of each CA.

Strengths:

- Organisation of in-person meetings. Prioritising in-person training methodologies over remote ones has led to a easier transfer of information in more direct and interactive way.
- Applicability of information tools. Materials were provided in an electronic format and were sent by email to the CAs so that they could immediately use the information collected for their own field activities.

- Group work and interaction with the trainers. The activities proposed during the training were largely designed to be conducted through continuous reflection and exchange, which helped identify new issues that enriched the conversation and ultimately the training.
- Training as an opportunity to build a network. All meetings allowed CAs to expand the network and knowledge of both the CAs and the trainers. This is also true for the organizers (ISMU in this case), who could consolidate their network between different stakeholders in the target area.

Criticalities:

- Group heterogeneity. This aspect translated into a diverse range of needs specific to national or specific target groups that was not always possible to fully address.
- High number of participants. Given the limited time available, the high number of participants the possibility for everyone to take adequate space in the debate, rewarding the most charismatic personalities.

6. On-going engagement of CAs

The CAs immediately showed great interest in the training, were always present and contributed with ideas within the group. They were encouraged to always express their view in a spontaneous way, share their experience, mention the initiatives conducted for their compatriots, and provide input for the training and other project activities. Some were involved in other workshops foreseen under NEAR – with asylum seekers, international protection holders and minors in education – as a way to remain committed to the project. They played a key role in identifying some beneficiaries of these workshops, expanding partners’ and proposing joint initiatives with their organisations.

The CAs indicated they considered all the training modules very useful and on several occasions expressed the immediate applicability of the knowledge and insights acquired. For example, during the session on housing a policy update on a more inclusive regional directive establishing the requirements for accessing public housing was immediately disseminated by some CAs who were catering to some families looking for a home. Likewise, the session on the education for adults provided key information on the courses promoted by public institutions not only in the target neighborhood but also at the city level that CAs quickly disseminated among fellow nationals who were looking for free or affordable training opportunities.

Getting direct knowledge on the services and operators was fundamental for CAs as migrants usually raise awareness on local services and ways to access them through word-of-mouth. Learning about offices and services where there is competent, helpful staff addressing migrants’ needs incentivise access and reduce the gap with citizens. At the same time, meeting with the CAs proved to be a great opportunity for service providers to gather suggestions on how to involve and interact with migrant users and with some national communities specifically.

In conclusion, a very positive element to highlight is the strong relationship between the CAs, which continued after the end of the training. For example, some took part in initiatives organised by others (or their organisations), using the WhatsApp group previously created as a tool for promotion and dissemination.

Strengths:

- Cohesive and interested group. The strong relationships created within the group allowed CAs to stay together and act in synergies during and beyond the training while creating opportunities for joint initiatives outside of the project.
- Applicability of knowledge. The contacts created through the training as well as the theoretical and practical knowledge could be applied immediately to orient fellow nationals in a more targeted manner.

Criticalities:

- Working as a Community Agent. For some CAs helping fellow nationals is a purely voluntary activity or is in line with the mission of the organisation to which they belong. Others, however, see it as a possible real job. It is therefore important to take into account the ambition of earning a living by being a CA.

7. Co-creation of communication campaigns and tools to best target newly-arrived migrants

The CAs play a key role not only in intercepting and orienting migrants asking for support within their community of origin upon arriving in Italy, but also in developing any tools for communication with and for newly arrived migrants.

As previously reported, a specific moment of the training was the collection of “emotional” experiences related to their experience as migrants in the city. The CAs participated in this activity with great enthusiasm and immediately showed curiosity, a desire to participate and a teamwork attitude, thus giving valuable input that underpinned the development of communication actions addressing newly arrived migrants in Milan.

The key aspect of this communicative approach was that CAs made themselves available to be at the core of the communication campaign, ensuring that their experience was transmitted to other people. The CAs indeed shared their beloved and significant places that were fundamental in their integration in the city. The most interesting aspect was discovering what emotions came up in relation to certain places in the city, often linked to memories of the country of origin.

Communication based on emotions and creating products (videos, photos, audio and interactive maps) starting from the CAs’ feelings and memories allowed to overcome the linguistic obstacle, which is almost always present upon arrival in a new country and city. Involving CAs directly in communication activities by letting them share their life stories helped to gather recommendations that could immediately be understood regardless of people’s native or second languages.

Strengths:

- CAs making themselves available as protagonists of communication activities. The experiences that the CAs brought to the workshop created the basis for the design of communication activities. Starting from their emotional experiences and their memories it was possible to create content making the new arrivals feel welcomed in the new setting and giving them points of reference at local level.
- Emotions as a direct language overcoming linguistic obstacles. When thinking about creating communication products for newly arrived migrants, the linguistic barrier immediately came up. However, this limit was easily overcome by focusing all communication on the emotions of people who had already firsthand experience in migrating and settling in the new context. The emotions reported in the form of picture, video or audio, allow to communicate with newly arrived migrants in a direct and welcoming way.

Criticalities:

- Low proficiency in writing in the local language. Some CAs struggle with or feel uncomfortable expressing themselves in written form in the local language, which can have an impact on how smoothly feedback is gathered for communication purposes as well as on how communication is received by target migrants. This barrier can be overcome by putting emotions at the core of such exchanges, using a limited vocabulary describing them and adopting unconventional tools for collecting and disseminating content (Whatsapp voice messages, songs etc.).