

## Street-Level Workers and the Temporalities of Waiting in the Italian Asylum System

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### Abstract

Immigration and asylum have become enormously contested in Italy over recent decades. Weak planning capacities and logics of emergency have typically permeated Italian policymaking on migration and, even more so, on asylum. Currently the Italian reception system implements a widespread framework managed by public authorities. It is characterized by policies of subsidiarity where different actors, public and private, are involved at various levels of government. Generally, public authorities subcontract third sector actors and NGOs to provide inclusion and integration services. The role of these agents is the focus of this article, particularly how they use their discretionary power to cope with the task of implementing a state mandate concerning the management of the condition of immobility that affects the temporality of refugees and asylum seekers, while waiting to obtain a permit or social and labour inclusion processes.

Drawing on ethnographic research realized in the realm of the project “SiforREF - Integrating Refugees in Society and Labour Market through Social Innovation”, founded by the Interreg Central Europe Program, this contribution shows how street-level workers use their discretionary power as a tactic that promotes their value and beliefs.

Keywords: street-level workers, asylum seekers/refugees, integration, street-level bureaucracy.

### 1. Introduction

In the last 20 years, Italy has faced the phenomenon of so-called ‘forced’ international migration. As a result of its geographic position in the Mediterranean, this country is, in many cases, the first one reached by persons

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looking for international protection (Ambrosini, 2018). The increasing numbers of asylum seekers have forced the Italian State to implement and organize a reception system characterized by emergency and exceptionality, which has led to the implementation of a public policy with much shadow, little light, and many negative consequences, especially for asylum seekers and refugees (Avallone, 2021).

In 2015 the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ pushed the Italian government to create a reception system for asylum seekers and refugees, which was realized through Law no.142/2015 and consisted of three phases: rescue and first aid, including identification of migrants; the first level of reception in centres led by the Ministry of the Interior (CARA, Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers or CDA, Reception Centre); and the second level of reception in SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which includes language courses, health, psychological and legal support, professional traineeship and an individualised project of integration and inclusion. Based on a holistic approach, and a dense network of collaborations between local authorities and bodies in the private sector, the services provided by the SPRAR system aim to support refugees along a path whose outcome should consist of full inclusion and integration.

Unanimously regarded as ‘best practice’ at European level, SPRAR suffers from a voluntary implementation mechanism, which encourages free-riding by reluctant mayors and an uneven settlement of migrants across the country. The resistance of local authorities led to a lack of reception facilities, and the government responded with an emergency solution that created a parallel system based on the Centres of Extraordinary Reception (CAS). In this case, the national authorities by-passed local governments, giving to private actors (mainly but not only NGOs: also, hotel owners and other private employers) the task of establishing and managing reception facilities of various kinds. The approval of Law no.132/2018, known as the ‘Salvini Security Decree’, modified the reception system in a more restrictive direction. According to this law, CAS should deliver to asylum seekers only essential services (food and accommodation) – other services were no longer funded. In addition to this, SPRAR – renamed SIPROIMI (protection system for people holding international protection and unaccompanied minors) – was no longer accessible for asylum seekers and migrants entitled to humanitarian protection (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). According to decree, humanitarian protection was abolished, and asylum seekers could not register themselves in the city.

In accordance with remarks from the Italian President, Sergio Mattarella, law no.173/2020 was approved, once again reforming the asylum reception system, introducing a new special protection permit and adding the possibility

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for asylum seekers to register in the city registry. The former SPRAR/SIPROIMI system changed its name to SAI (system of reception and integration) and was reorganised into two levels: the first dedicated to international protection seekers, and the second for those who were already recognised as international protection beneficiaries. The system provides international protection seekers essential services such as material reception (food and accommodation), and a few resources for Italian courses, health, legal support, linguistic-cultural mediation, and employment orientation. The second level is aimed at those who are recognised as holders of international protection – refugee status or subsidiary protection (these permits last five years) – and of special protection (this permit lasts two years). These beneficiaries are provided with Italian language courses, health, psychological and legal support, professional traineeship, and an individualised project of integration and inclusion.

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, 105,129 migrants arrived in Italy through the Mediterranean Sea in 2022. The three most represented nationalities were Egyptian (20,542), Tunisian (18,148), and Bangladeshi (14,982). The distribution of migrants in the reception centres were as follows: 1,947 people were in Hotspot, 71,882 in CAS, and 33.439 in the SAI system. As the data show, the CAS, which were born as an extraordinary measure, represent the norm, hosting more than twice the people hosted in the SAI.

In line with the laws that discipline international migration in Italy (Basso & Perocco, 2003; Della Puppa et al., 2020), the national reception system was developed following emergency and security logics (Cuono & Gargiulo, 2017), which seek to strengthen the command of migrant mobility, producing complex logistics based on control and discipline within the reception system (Di Cecco, 2019). This situation exposes asylum seekers and refugees to a holding pattern, involving both everyday forms of waiting for public services and bureaucratic formalities and longer-term practices such as those relating to the regularisation of one's status, justice and the uncertain future (Jacobsen et al., 2021). In addition, it can lead to forms of institutional violence, prompting 'infantilisation' and victimization processes, that fail to allow recognition of their subjectivity and agency (Pasian & Toffanin, 2018; Storato et al., 2021).

This system, managed by public authorities, is characterized by policies of subsidiarity where different actors, public and private, are involved at various levels of government. Generally, public authorities subcontract third sector actors and NGOs to provide inclusion and integration services to international protection seekers and holders. Despite central efforts to achieve harmonization on the national level, this scenario entails considerable differences between territories, particularly around their commitment and

willingness to promote paths of integration and inclusion from the street-level workers involved.

The street-level bureaucracy approach (Lipsky, 1980) acknowledges a central role in the process of policy implementation by those professionals who interact daily with citizens and take decisions about their requests based on a public mandate (Saruis, 2018). The role of these professionals is to apply general rules to concrete cases, by adapting their decisions according to context. The role of street-level workers in the reception system is the focus of this article, particularly the discretionary practices they apply to cope with the task of implementing a state mandate concerning management of immobility that affects the temporality of refugees and asylum seekers.

I analyse how the politics of time have been managed by street-level workers involved in the reception system in two medium-sized Italian cities in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Bologna and Parma, which are acknowledged as ‘virtuous’ systems of urban asylum governance (Bazurli et al., 2020; Spada, 2021). While the central role of a variety of street-level workers – such as social workers, case-workers, and police officers – in the everyday management of asylum seekers and refugees has already been investigated (Campomori, 2007; Borrelli, 2021; Giacomelli, 2021; Giudici, 2020), less attention has been devoted to the issue of their discretionary power and agency in dealing with managing the legal and social limbo that ensnares asylum seekers and refugees while waiting to receive their status – and, therefore, a residence permit – for international protection or while trying to activate paths of work and social inclusion (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021). How the impact of the temporalities of waiting in the biographical trajectories of asylum seekers and refugees is perceived by this group of street-level workers and how they use their discretionary power to combine their role together with the values of their organizations are the main research questions that guide this analysis.

In this contribution I argue that this group of street-level workers uses their discretionary power as a tactic (de Certeau, 1984), tracing trajectories which contrast the inconsistency of Italian integration immigration policies (Barberis & Boccagni, 2014; Di Rosa & Allegri, 2022). While the mechanism of the reception system traps the asylum seekers and refugees, street-level workers try to use this suspended and expanded time to implement practices which reflect their visions and values around integration and inclusion. To explore these dimensions the article is structured as follows: to theoretically situate my study, the next section provides a literature review on the street-level perspective, followed by a methodological section. Empirical material on the perception of the temporalities of waiting by street-level workers and how they manage their discretionary power is then presented. The main findings and the implications of the study are discussed in the conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical background

This study investigates how street-level workers implement Italian government policies concerning accommodation and integration services with asylum seekers and refugees, in particular examining how agency and discretion intersect in the management of time that refugees and asylum seekers spend in the centres while waiting for a permit or social and labour inclusion. Lipsky (1980, p. 3) affirms that “street-level bureaucrats are public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work”. While Lipsky uses the terms street-level workers, street-level bureaucrats, and frontline staff synonymously, this study, following Borrelli and Trasciani (2019), uses the term street-level workers to highlight the direct contact with “clients”, which characterizes third sector workers’ daily professional routines. To cope with complexity, these figures manage a “space” of discretion shaped by formal and informal indications, tasks, and boundaries (Saruis, 2018), and whenever a task is delegated, part of the control is lost in favour of the delegated agency or person (Ham & Hill, 1986). The organizational, cultural, social, and economic context in which street-level workers are embedded and their view about policies and procedure influences their use and shape of discretion. The street-level approach helps to overcome the idea of discretion as violation and arbitrariness, while underlying its unavoidability (Lipsky, 1980; Evans & Harris, 2004), and its usefulness and even “desirability”, especially in complex situations, as it adapts implementation work to contingencies (Brodkin, 2008). Nevertheless, discretion maintains a crux problematic, considering its possibility to control policy implementation and fair or unfair treatment of ‘clients’.

Scholars (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010; Prottas, 1979; Hasenfield, 1983; Scott, 1997; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998) have classified a set of factors that influence the actions of street-level workers: a) individual decision-maker characteristics, including attitudes and values; b) organizational characteristics; c) client attributes; and d) extra organizational factors, such as the broader community, laws and regulations, the media, other service agencies, and general situational variables. Many studies on the relative importance of factors among these categories have been conducted, but many questions concerning how these factors intertwine remain (Scott, 1997). In research conducted in the Netherlands, Belabas and Gerrits (2017) explored the importance of different factors by contextualizing under what conditions street-level workers showed specific behaviour towards immigrants. They demonstrated that rather than avoiding discretionary acts, the willingness to help clients of street-level workers engaged in implementing integration policies “could transcend the boundaries when the following conditions are combined: high client motivation, extreme

personal distress of the client, and negative assessment of existing policies and policy instruments” (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017, p. 147). Similarly, Carey and Foster (2011, p. 576) developed the concept of ‘deviant social work’, which they defined as “small-scale acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage” that evade detection.

The contribution of this study lies in providing a better understanding of the management of integration policies, the attitude and values of the street-level workers, and the discretionary practices they implement to deal with the politics of time (Jacobsen et al., 2021) that run through asylum and integration policies. Indeed, the mobility of migrants is mainly driven by the reception regime: a disposition that controls the movements and shapes the temporalities of new arrivals (Sanò & Zanotelli, 2023). Migrants are constantly exposed to spatial and temporal uncertainty caused by waiting for documents or not being able to enter the labour and housing markets. Andersson affirms that “There is, then, a doubleness to waiting. On the one hand, it constitutes an imposed state of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2009) engendered by pre-emptive controls, in which time may appear as ‘sticky’ or ‘suspended’ (Griffiths 2014). On the other hand, it is a bidding of time: a tactic, in Michel de Certeau’s (1984) sense, or a technique” (Andersson, 2014, p. 802). While these reflections apply to migrants’ experiences, I argue that the practices of street-level workers can be interpreted following this doubleness. While on the one hand the reception regime imposes policies and times, creating a state of ‘stuckedness’; on the other hand, street-level workers can use their discretionary power as a tactic to promote their views and values about asylum and integration policies.

### **3. Research setting and methods**

The research was conducted within the framework of the research project “SIforREF - Integrating Refugees in Society and the Labour Market Through Social Innovation”, funded by EU-Interreg Central Europe.

The fieldwork was carried out in the Italian cities of Bologna and Parma, both part of the project and located in the northeastern region of Emilia-Romagna, which is considered a ‘pioneer’ of local migration policymaking. The two cities share some similarities (e.g., medium-sized, situated in the same regional-administrative context), but demonstrate differences (e.g. political and civic context) as well (Bazurli et al., 2020). Bologna, capital of the region, is commonly considered the “showcase city of the Italian left” (Però, 2005, p. 832) due to the long-standing hegemony of its centre-left government, while the political history of Parma is more mixed. After decades of left-wing administrations, conservatives headed the city government from 1998 to 2011,

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then in 2012 Movimento Cinque Stelle won the elections, but the mayor soon quit the party in conflict with its national leadership and, in 2017, was re-elected for a second term with the support of a left-leaning local list. Since 2022 a left-wing coalition has once more been guiding the city. The two cities differ also in terms of pro-immigrant civil society, with Bologna having a much wider and robust network of organizations traditionally involved in policymaking compared to Parma, where this role is ultimately covered by one important NGO named CIAC (Center for Immigration, Asylum, and International Cooperation) (Bazurli et al., 2020).

After analysing the existing literature and having examined the main policy documents that national, regional, and municipal authorities have released over the last three years, the team collected 20 semi-structured interviews (10 in Bologna and 10 in Parma) during the summer of 2019. In each city the research involved three policymakers, three stakeholders, and four third sector workers who deal with asylum seekers and refugee policymaking and integration services. In Bologna two men and eight women were interviewed, while in Parma there were six women and four men. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and all interviews were transcribed and analysed. All participants explicitly agreed to be included in the research and were guaranteed anonymity.

While the focus of the project which originated the research was to understand how social innovation was included in the local policies concerning asylum seekers and refugees' integration, during the interviews the dimension of temporalities and the waiting time asylum seekers and refugees must spend in the reception centre clearly emerged. Because of this I decided to adopt a street-level lens to analyse narratives of street-level workers, mainly focusing on employees of third sector organizations and NGOs (e.g. social workers and educators). This group of street-level workers has the task of defining an individualized project of integration and inclusion together with each asylum seeker and refugee hosted, providing all services needed (accommodation, Italian language courses, health, psychological and legal support, professional traineeship, etc.), and at the same time have to manage the tensions between the implementation of governmental rules and procedures, while answering asylum seekers' and refugees' needs and requests.

In the next sections I trace the perception of temporalities by street-level workers and the way they manage their discretionary power.

#### 4. Street-level work and the temporalities of waiting

Waiting time has been defined both as a social phenomenon and as an analytical perspective that is useful for a deeper understanding of migratory processes and practices (Jacobsen et al., 2021). In these studies, waiting time is outlined as a type of "temporal uncertainty" that "keeps migrants [...] in a passive and desperate state of continuous transience" (Griffiths, 2014, p. 15). The asylum decision-making process is a slow one, marked by bureaucracy, applications, interviews, and paperwork. The permit for an 'asylum applicant' lasts six months and needs to be renewed until the end of the process. This adds bureaucracy on top of bureaucracy and final decisions can take from two to five years to arrive.

In the narratives and experiences of the street-level workers I met, time was often described as suspended. The transient condition experienced by migrants, while waiting for the conclusion of the asylum procedure, impacted their well-being, organization, and planning for the future. In particular, street-level workers highlighted two main aspects – the first concerns the well-being and psychological and mental health of asylum seekers and refugees.

How can you feel suspended?! ... I believe that in these years one of our defeats has been not to adequately support migrants in relation to the psychological experience. I feel them dehumanized not so much by the violent rhetorics that are part of the game and that have always been there. But by the fact that they are not seen, there's a lack of investment in individual understanding. (John, street-level worker, Parma)

If earlier [ten years ago] people arrived devastated by the countries of origin now the biggest traumas are suffered on the journey and in the reception centres... If you have to wait 3 years for the commission, then you have the denial, then wait for the court... The legal paths are so complex and uncertain they do not help. There are people in the structure for 3 years who still do not have documents ... we are facing the problem of the pathologization of the guests. We increasingly need psychological paths; the psychiatrization of some situations is becoming stronger. If some years ago an anxiety disorder due to the time of waiting ended with the obtaining of a permit ... Now this gets worse and worse because the answer never comes. And then the rules change all the time and it's hard for applicants to understand these steps. With all this waiting we are creating monsters, sick people. Suicide attempts. We have a boy who tried to kill himself by drinking brake fluid... There is a great rage that makes integration even more difficult. In the last year we have also increased access to psychiatry and psychiatric management... forced treatments have also increased. Now we need the



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drugs, before perhaps it was solved with psychological support. (Jane, street-level worker, Bologna)

The condition of waiting has been defined as an existential limbo (Haas, 2017) that can be interpreted as the opposite of an existential movement, which indicates that life is going somewhere – this represents a necessary component of a viable life (Hage, 2005). Third sector workers' narratives show how the impossibility for asylum seekers and refugees to see their life moving forward ends in a compromise of their existence's viability. Powerlessness characterizes migrants' experiences in the reception centres. As Bourdieu highlights, waiting connotes submission and epitomizes the connection between power and time. Those who wait are condemned to live in a time orientated by others, an alienated time (Bourdieu, 1997). An alienation that is "creating monsters" (Jane, street-level worker) leads to the emergence of psychological/psychiatric diseases and suicide attempts. The absence of individualized relationships that consider each subjectivity as unique is producing dehumanization or, following Agamben (1995), is producing a specific kind of homo sacer. Homo sacer is the sacred or accused man who, based on Roman law, is banished and may be killed by anyone, but not sacrificed (Agamben, 1995). This person is excluded from all rights and privileges as a citizen. Even if migrants in reception centres do have formal rights, the absence of recognition of their subjectivities has condemned them, following Agamben to a 'bare life', which is only hanging by the thread of waiting for a permit of stay. Scholars have readily shown how the condition of existential limbo impacts the well-being of migrants (Haas, 2017; Bova, 2022) and a study conducted by Aragona and colleagues (2020) regarding Chinese refugees residing in Italy clearly shows that a decrease in social suffering is related to obtaining legal refugee status. It is not difficult to imagine that the condition of stuntedness lived by asylum seekers and refugees would also impact their integration process as noted by street-level workers. Indeed, the second aspect that emerged in the narratives and experiences of the street-level workers concerns the waiting temporalities of asylum seekers and refugees and their integration and inclusion path.

...one of the first things for integration that should be done is to give an exact time to the application for asylum, time that I can check, otherwise how can I retake control of events after I did three years in the hands of a trafficker, two years in a place of suspension where I cannot go back and forth and then the next day I have to be performing and trained to live at the pace of Italian society. (John, street-level worker, Parma)

The obstacles to the success of the work process are especially seen in the vagueness of the asylum application. This is the first problem. Law

provides that after 60 days from the application for asylum you can work, but employers do not make fixed-term or indefinite contracts because they see that the permit expires after 6 months... even if we know that it will be renewed, the employers do not proceed with contracts. (Paula, street-level worker, Bologna)

One of the tasks of street-level workers includes the implementation of integration and inclusion services, such as Italian language courses, employment and housing orientation for asylum seekers and refugees hosted by their associations or NGOs. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these activities is strongly compromised by the temporalities of the waiting. The narratives of street-level workers explicitly reveal the two dimensions of the complexity which connects integration and waiting.

The first dimension concerns the individual and human condition of the asylum seekers and refugees. It does not matter whether they have experienced an existential limbo or if they have spent the last five years adapting their life to formal and substantial rules taken by others – as soon as the notification of permit recognition arrives, they are supposed to integrate themselves (to find a job and house) within in six months, according to the policies imposed by the reception regime. A regime which requires passage from a condition of suspension and non-action to a condition of accelerated action is needed. By virtue of the legal permit to stay, life changes, and refugees are required to implement an existential switch and integrate themselves into Italian society. The need for definite temporalities concerning the asylum procedure is stressed by street-level workers as a crucial element to allow migrants to project their existence into the future and to build paths according to their needs and desires.

The second dimension highlighted by street-level workers is the impact of the reception regime temporalities on the choices of employers. The absence of precise timing in the asylum procedure and the 6-month-length of the permit for asylum application – which is renewed several times before the procedure ends – represent obstacles to the labour integration of asylum seekers. Employers refuse to hire asylum seekers since there is no certainty about the continuity of the working relationship. They do not want to invest their resources in training employees who may have to leave the workplace the following day, if a negative response arrives. The formal recognition of the right to work after 60 days from the application for asylum represents an illusion for asylum seekers. Even if they formally have the right to work, substantially this right does not materialize. The impossibility of entering the job market with a regular contract contributes to forcing migrants into a condition of suspended lives. While literature has largely analysed the temporalities of waiting in the context of illegal immigration (Jacobsen et al., 2021), the paradox experienced

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by migrants in Italian reception centres is that they have documents, they are entitled to work, and there is the possibility that at least could give a sense of living while waiting for the asylum procedure response, but they cannot concretize this right, due to the consequences of the reception regime's timing and organization.

In this realm the role of street-level workers becomes relevant. Starting from reflections about the temporalities of waiting and the awareness of being involved in this process, in the next section I show how practices implemented by street-level workers can be interpreted as tactics to promote their view of integration and inclusion.

## 5. Street-level workers in action

If you have to wait three years for the commission, then you have the denial, then wait for the court... surely all this complexity does not stimulate integration... There are people in the structure for 3 years who still have not reached the end of the procedure; how can I talk about integration to these people?! (Jane, street-level worker, Bologna)

...long waiting times for the definition of status... we leave them suspended for years... We talk about integration, but you stay suspended, you do everything to structure a life, but you don't know if you can legally stay in this country and then what do you do?! You blow everything you've built?! (Paula, street-level worker, Bologna)

The temporalities of waiting inevitably impact the integration processes of asylum seekers and refugees. Street-level workers experience daily the tension between the governmental mandate of promoting integration services, such as employment and housing orientation, and the eradication of life's projects lived by migrants in the suspended time of the reception centres. Migrants are forced to live in the here and now, with few possibilities to think about or even imagine their future. They perceive integration as meaningless without the certainty of definitive permit recognition. Street-level workers, who every day face the contradictions of such a reception regime, have a clear idea about what is needed:

Our reception system is full of holes... we need to rethink the system for refugees and asylum seekers in this country, in reverse to what is done... the actual system has nothing that goes towards the integration or autonomy of the beneficiaries in the system. (Paula, street-level worker, Bologna)

The work in the field, the daily implementation of policies and rules, and the relation with asylum seekers and refugees has allowed street-level workers to develop a precise opinion and vision concerning inclusion and integration. This issue emerged strongly from the narratives of our interviewees, who highlighted the need for reforming the idea of integration in Italy.

Integration has been defined as a multidimensional process, which brings into play identity and belonging with regard of the country of origin and the new country (Di Rosa & Allegri, 2022) and depends on multiple factors, at micro, meso, and macro levels (Portes, 1995). Integration should be understood as a “two-way movement of encounter between immigrant and the host society” (Ambrosini, 2008, p. 207-208), which involves the social, as well as the political dimension. Indeed, Marchetti (2023, p. 312) affirms that, “in order that there is a positive impact both on the integration of refugees and on social cohesion itself, the relations between the host community and refugees must be subject to specific policies”. Unfortunately, despite Italy becoming one of the main immigration countries in the European Union in the last 20 years, it has never been able to implement a comprehensive law on immigration capable of governing the phenomenon in a satisfactory manner, or of a precise national policy framework on integration, which could act as a unified frame of reference for local policies, to ensure a uniform minimum basis of initiatives and services aimed at encouraging the integration and participation of migrants in various territorial contexts (Di Sciallo, 2020). Integration has always been interpreted as a provision of services, characterized by a logic of parcelling out performance interventions. In addition, in the Italian context, integration is mainly seen as an individualistic attitude, a capacity of migrants, a voluntary act toward the host society, instead of a bidirectional process. While this vision of integration characterizes the policy approach in Italy, it is not shared by the street-level workers met during the research.

We have always believed that integration is a complicated, complex process. What instead in the current debate in national policies in public discourse but also in local policies is generally ascribed to the motivation, to the ability of the individual to build a path where his/her will triumphs over obstacles. Integration in our country is not thought out. And it is narrated in a profoundly insensitive way in relation to two crucial dimensions in the process of integration: first is the dimension of rights and the second is the dimension of social relations. It is thought of more in terms of services when it goes well. Integration is a two-way mutual process. We have in mind a model that starts from an inverted pyramid that reverses the point of view on integration. Integration is not having a home, health, training but those are indicators of an integration that does not take place unless preliminary steps are implemented, the first of which is, in the inverted pyramid, having

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rights and citizenship. We have seen that the people we could intercept at our offices, people with whom we can make a timely intervention for, even starting from conditions of serious vulnerability, these generally make a process of institutional reception much shorter and result in conditions of work and housing autonomy. This happens when we can do a qualified and timely intervention in time of need that looks at rights as well as needs. It does not make a generic assistance, but I try to coordinate the legal, social, health and social dimension. (John, street-level worker, Parma)

In the opinions of street-level workers, integration is not just about supplying a service but needs to prioritize and recognise the value of social relations and rights. Such a vision follows Ager and Strang's (2008) framework about the key area through which the process of integration is articulated. These authors consider the traditional aspects of socio-economic integration and the participation of refugees in the community, through work, housing, training and health as markers and means. They indicate key aspects of integrating into a new society. Nevertheless, they wonder, "If one is integrating 'within' a society, what are the standards and expectations of that society that provide some basis for cohesion?" (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 173). Since integration is bi-directional, they consider citizenship and rights as the foundations of this process. The more incisive way to develop an effective policy on integration relies on citizenship policy provisions by governments and thus the recognition of rights to refugees. Finally, these authors believe that the connective tissue between foundational principles of citizenship and rights and public outcomes in sectors such as employment, housing, education, and health rely on social relations, in particular on networks and social links (social connections), in their different nature of strong ties and weak ties, and on the presence of facilitators to overcome barriers concerning language and cultural knowledge and the perception of security and stability within the community. These dimensions should be understood as so strongly interrelated that we cannot speak of real integration without the satisfaction of the ten core domains that shape the concept of integration.

Street-level workers' narratives reflect the main dimensions of Ager and Strang's framework for integration, which highlights not only the importance of the process undertaken by migrants towards the host society, but also the ability and willingness of the host society (institutions and native citizens) to transform and adapt themselves. This vision of integration guides street-level workers' actions and, through their discretionary power, the implementation of practices aimed at giving a sense to the temporalities of waiting. I briefly provide three examples of these practices.

The “territorial protocol on special domiciliation” is promoted by the Centre for Immigration, Asylum and International Cooperation (CIAC) of Parma, a non-profit organization working on the protection, reception, and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. This protocol was conceived by street-level workers in the association, proposed to the municipalities where the association works, and implemented in agreement with them. In Italy, to formalize the application for asylum, people must have a residence. Without a residence, asylum seekers remain irregular. Employees of CIAC realized that to apply for asylum, asylum seekers went to the black market of fictitious domiciles which in Parma, as in other cities, cost around 300-350 euros. The Italian civil code art 47 states that it is possible to elect a special domicile for some offices and functions – its typical use is for lawsuits, when the office of the lawyer is chosen as a special domicile. This protocol provides a free release of the domicile by the municipalities; in other words it recognizes the right of having a public and free domicile to apply for asylum and stops the black market of fictitious domiciles.

The “educational farm” project implemented by ARCI is a cultural and social promotion association which also activated paths of reception and inclusion of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Bologna. This project has involved two asylum seekers, who were hosted by the association and waiting for their application response and who had already gained experience in the field of agriculture in their country of origin and a branch of the association attended by elderly volunteers who took care of the farm. The asylum seekers were invited to support elders in their daily routines; they could use their previous competences, the elders gave them plants and seeds, and they worked the land together. The collaboration between asylum seekers and elders grew and today the two young men have an indefinite contract: they are taking care of the educational farm, and they have increased their activities by receiving visits of students and organizing labs with them.

The “tutor for integration” project is promoted by CIAC in Parma. The tutor for integration is a private subject – individual or collective (civil society, parish community, formal and informal groups) – who ‘adopts’ an asylum seeker or refugee of integration by making available their relational and professional resources to offer emotional/relational and practical support. The presence of a tutor can build a protective network capable of coping with waiting temporalities, precariousness, seasonality of work, and other vulnerabilities. In addition, the goal of the project is to generate a process of dialogue between diversity of languages, codes, social practices, and expectations.

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These practices have been chosen to show how street-level workers activate their discretionary power in their professional routines. In particular, two dimensions emerge as crucial in this analysis.

The first dimension concerns the street-level workers' awareness of the condition of stuckedness experienced by asylum seekers and refugees and the decision to put in place ideas and actions to try, together with migrants, to give a different meaning to the limbo time. The use of their discretionary power as a 'space' for personal and professional creativity (Saruis, 2018) is a resource on which the street-level workers draw to manage the complexities of the temporalities of waiting. The deterioration of migrants' bodily and mental health and the compromising of their existence's viability caused by the temporalities of waiting push street-level workers to activate and implement paths which not only aim to fill in the indefiniteness and suspension of time, but above all to recognize asylum seekers and refugees' subjectivities. In the 'educational farm' project the recognition of competences gained previously by asylum seekers and their valorisation encouraged the promotion of a project that allowed asylum seekers to re-conceptualise the empty time of waiting and to lay the foundations for a professional and human exchange between participants. The dialogue between asylum seekers and elders, the time spent together while working, and the reciprocal exchange of knowledge, techniques, and experiences has led to the construction of meaningful social bonds, which are acknowledged as fundamental to the inclusion and integration process (Ager & Strang, 2008; Ryan et al., 2008). The growth of the activities carried out by the two asylum seekers and the formalization of their activity in a contract both show how placing subjectivities at the heart of practices and aiming at involving the surrounding community can produce generative and inclusive paths. They not only create integration, but they also promote a social climate where fear and suspicion are not predominant (Campomori, 2020), in other words, they lay the foundation for social cohesion.

The second dimension, which is inextricably related to the previous one, is referred to by the street-level workers' use of their discretionary power as a tactic (de Certeau, 1984). "A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus [...] The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain impose on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" affirms de Certeau (1984, p. 36-37). The author also adds that tactics always act in taking advantage of the opportunity. Tactical action is 'the victory of time over space', of the creative moment on capitalization of victories (Rovea, 2022). In their daily professional routines, street-level workers must implement activities according to their governmental mandate; they must navigate paths that others have laid out, but they do have a space for creativity where they can intervene. Practices described previously show how street-level

workers, instead of limiting their job to a mere supply of integration services, decide to promote their vision about integration through the implementation of specific actions. The “territorial protocol on special domiciliation” was implemented thanks to an idea that emerged in Parma concerning the extension of the interpretation of an article of the Civil Code that had never had this application. This extension of a right reflects the view of the street-level workers concerning the need for rights recognition as foundational to the integration process. They have seen this possibility and promoted the development of an agreement with the municipalities involved in the project. Street-level agency has been the engine of this process, which has not been implemented elsewhere. Also, the “tutor for integration” project acted as a creative solution to fill the migrants’ time in the reception centre meaningfully, building up connective tissue made up of networks, social links and facilitators that represent the necessary elements to achieve integration. This practice, as others described, represents everyday actions, ways of doing that, following de Certeau (1984), constitute tactics through which street-level workers navigate their discretionary power, tracing unforeseen trajectories. Their awareness about the impact of asylum seekers and refugees’ viability in the limbo time of the reception regime combined with their views on integration and their commitment to recognizing the needs and subjectivities of asylum seekers and refugees in the reception system to produce specific insights, which find in their discretionary power the chance to become tactical practices.

## **6. Conclusion**

This work explored street-level workers’ reflections on the temporalities of waiting and the use of their discretionary power. Street-level workers’ narratives about the condition of stuckedness which characterizes asylum seekers and refugees’ lives in the reception regime contributed to understanding the impact of this waiting time on the psychological and mental health of asylum seekers and refugees and on their integration and inclusion processes. Street-level workers have a clear idea about the limits of the integration policies in Italy and their experience in the field has allowed us to focus on how integration should be intended and promoted. These factors guide their professional routines and their use of discretionary power. In the attempt to give meaning to the temporalities of waiting, together with asylum seekers and refugees, street-level workers implement tactical practices, which are novel and take advantage of this opportunity. Filling the discretionary space with tactics means deciding to intervene in the here and now with what is available in the moment. Promoting a specific vision of integration will have an impact on that specific context, but



it can also be an inspiration for neighbourhood contexts. This concurs with Belabas and Gerrits (2017), who argue that individual values of street-level bureaucrats matter more than close supervision by superiors and existing rules, especially when the client in question is motivated and in need of assistance. Through their tactics they are not only developing better services despite difficult circumstances (Lipsky, 1980; Musil et al., 2010), they are generating new perspectives and insights about integration and inclusion, building social cohesion, and above all recognizing persons' subjectivities.

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