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Refugees Welcome Italia ONLUS, shaping the new hospitality system

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Abstract

The birth of Refugees Welcome Italia ONLUS (RWI) comes at a critical moment in history, in which both the European Union and the national states have failed to respond in a timely, effective and coordinated manner to what UNHCR has called “*the greatest migration emergency since World War II*” (UNHCR, 2015).

RWI was founded in December 2015 as part of the international Refugees Welcome network, in order to develop a system for the reception of refugees and asylum-seekers by and into host families through a web platform (www.refugees-welcome.it). RWI was created to respond innovatively and sustainably to the needs of refugees with respect to reception and inclusion in the community, in light of the inadequacy of the existing. The 80 co-living experiences shaped through RWI’s methodology are the tangible proof that the physical space of private house with its deep interactions has the right characteristics to promote reciprocity, sharing and participation.

KEYWORDS: domestic hospitality, refugees, cultural and social change, sharing, reciprocity, participation

Extended Abstract

Background information

The birth of Refugees Welcome Italia ONLUS (RWI) comes at a critical moment in history, in which both the European Union and the national states have failed to respond in a timely, effective and coordinated manner to what UNHCR has called “*the greatest migration emergency since World War II*” (UNHCR, 2015). There is a clear inability to balance international obligations of protection, inherent in the founding principles of the EU and in many national constitutions, including the Italian one, with a preference for security measures based on emergencies, which may violate the rights of migrants. These policy decisions are counterbalanced by an exceptional and widespread mobilization in favour of refugees and asylum-seekers on the part of activists, third sector associations and NGOs from almost all member states. RWI was born in this movement.

Description of the service: what it offers, who offers it, to whom it is addressed, what needs it solves

RWI was founded in December 2015 as part of the international Refugees Welcome network, in order to develop a system for the reception of refugees and asylum-seekers by and into host families through a web platform (www.refugees-welcome.it). RWI proposes a radical change to reception policies, which are outlined and managed by the Ministry of Interior with European funds, through partnership with the third sector and municipalities (for second-phase reception).

RWI was created to respond innovatively and sustainably to the needs of refugees and beneficiaries of international protection with respect to reception and inclusion in the community, in light of the inadequacy of the existing system and the potential risk, concerns about, and occurrences of social disruption in various parts of the country. These issues are largely due to the presence of medium and large shelters that don't have the proper resources or processes to benefit either the refugees and asylum-seekers or the communities involved.

The RWI project has the following goals:

- To actively involve local citizens in the integration of refugees and beneficiaries of international protection through a new model of participative and inclusive reception;
- To include a new element in the often-dysfunctional relationship between social workers and beneficiaries, by creating a methodology based on proactivity and a relationship between equals on a human level, to help the refugees recover their natural resilience and resources, and to facilitate the knowledge of the socio-economic context; this can be possible only by breaking through the segregation and isolation experienced in reception centers;
- To propose a change in the national reception policy, to include the broad implementation of a sustainable system that would be effective for both the beneficiaries and the community; this system would be oriented toward rebuilding social cohesion and making resources available for integration;
- To support a cultural change in public opinion, through strategic communication and awareness-raising campaigns disseminated via multimedia and through multiple stakeholders, in order to affect the perception of migration that is often manipulated by politics and a stereotyped media narrative.

Service structure: the actors involved in the system and the role of the different actors involved

RWI addresses “active citizenry”. This term refers to all those who wish to participate in the promotion of a strong cultural change in terms of equal rights, opportunities, resources, reciprocity and social well-being. The three main actors of the service are: citizens who decide to host “unknown” people at home, called “host families”, those who need to be hosted and citizens wishing to commit themselves to ensure that this hospitality can be concretized, called “activists”.

The organization is overseen by a governing council, which consists of nine people who dictate the strategies, manage institutional relations and advocacy and communication activities, define and adapt the methodology, and coordinate local teams and planning and fundraising activities. Local teams, which began in Rome, Milan and Bologna during the start-up phase, have been added and trained in Turin, Alessandria, Cuneo, Genoa, Como, Padua, Macerata, Siena, Florence, Catania, Palermo and Cagliari.

To arrange and support the co-living situations throughout the country, the regional groups listed above carry out a complex process, beginning with an in-depth telephone interview of

people interested in hosting, followed by training for the families, a home visit to assess suitability, and writing up a profile of the family. When suitable families or individuals are found, the best possible matches are made with refugee candidates. Co-living situations start after one or more meetings in which the family and refugee get to know each other and decide whether to continue or not. The RWI tutor then helps the host family and the refugee-guests work out a co-living agreement that defines all aspects of the co-living arrangement. Tutors are in continuous contact with the families and refugees-guests.

How the service differs from other similar solutions on the market and what the elements of innovation

The main aspect of innovation of the service is the philosophy that gave birth, have grown and moved RWI: the promotion of a cultural and social change achievable through domestic hospitality. RWI considers this model exportable to all those areas of social intervention concerning the people registered in “vulnerable categories”.

Another important aspect of innovation are the tools and the methodology published by RWI in the manual for domestic hospitality. The manual arises from the experiences of 3 years of activities and from the direct and participated observation of reality. RWI decided to publish these guidelines in order to model the path made and to demonstrate the validity and scalability of the approach used.

RWI was also able to create a new narrative frame. Its commitment is based on the concept of reciprocity in the relationship and in the decision-making processes, the circularity of resources and the sharing of experiences. Every actor involved in the relationship has an equal role respect the others, none should feel “beneficiary” or “charitable”. These aspects are clearly reflected in the communication, defined as “counter narrative”.

The last aspect of innovation is the use of technology. Thanks to the CRM and the platform for community engagement RWI is able to automatize processes, collect and systematizes the data related to families, refugees and activists and monitor the co-living situation and the progress of hosted people.

How it was designed: by whom, how and in how much time

RWI was founded through the activism of a team of professionals with solid experience in the field of immigration, reception and social inclusion policies. These professionals are active in non-profit companies and social innovation processes; they have promoted an initiative of active citizenship throughout the country, involving hundreds of willing host families and hundreds of activists willing to create local groups.

This multidisciplinary team of experts has developed a methodology to promote the development of co-living experiences with high quality standards, with attention to psychosocial factors, the creation of resilient and proactive communities, and the reactivation of the refugees' resources to facilitate their integration into the country.

How and why the case fits into the theme of the track and why it is a proof or concept for a given approach or solution

The basic assumption of RWI is that there is no a “migrants emergency” but the need to develop a social awareness about the modality of presence on the territory of young foreigners forced to live long waiting times in places often isolated from the city and, consequently, not facilitated to know the territory and to socialize with the local population. The majority part of those people, once obtained refugees status or other form of international protection, are forced to leave the reception center without having developed a social network, having found an accommodation and without having started a path of integration into the labor market; in few words, without being autonomous

The current situation shows that places like medium and large shelters don't have the proper resources or processes to benefit either the refugees and asylum-seekers or the communities involved.

RWI is the proof of concept that domestic hospitality helps the refugees recover their natural resilience and resources, and to facilitate the knowledge of the socio-economic context; this can be possible only by breaking through the segregation and isolation experienced in reception centers.

RWI, thanks to the methodology developed, has succeed in shaping a new “space” for hospitality: the family. The physical space of private house with its deep interactions among people living in it has the right characteristics to promote the reactivation of the refugees’ resources that facilitate their integration into the country.

Future challenges and possible developments

A future challenge for RWI is to create partnerships with local organizations. RWI does not initiate co-living situations where there isn't a local team. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen existing teams in partnership with other organizations in regions that are not easily accessible, but that offer high potential for medium- to long-term receptions projects that would also benefit the communities, including the repopulation of various areas and the recovery of skills in various fields, such as agriculture and crafts.

Another important challenge is to make domestic hospitality an integral part of the social welfare system. RWI affirms that the results achieved in autonomy, such as bottom-up participation, strengthening of social and relational networks, support and social cohesion, cannot be overlooked by the organization of the welfare state.

RWI is seeking support from national and local institutions for the development of its method and collaboration to rethink reception policies.

RWI strongly believes that the framework developed will, as the number of co-living situations grows, contribute to the development of policies for better and more effective reception.