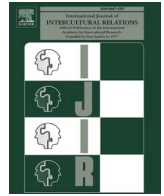





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## The impact of the widespread reception of migrant families on rural Italian communities: Understanding the main challenges and opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of migration has become a central issue in the global demographic landscape. The integration of migrants into the host country and cohabitation within rural communities represent a moment of change for both the host community and newcomers. This study investigates a northwestern rural area in Italy where, for over 10 years, reception centers have been active, offering services to immigrant beneficiaries and managed by the third sector organization to facilitate access to local resources and promote acculturation and integration processes. The aim of this work is to evaluate the impact of the widespread reception project in the northwestern rural area in Italy by exploring the perspectives of the host community in order to understand their perceptions regarding the opportunities and challenges on processes of acculturation and integration. Two focus groups were conducted. Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified two main themes. The first theme "Challenges of widespread reception in the process of acculturation" includes issues perceived by participants as barriers to migrants' participation in the social life of the host community. The second theme, "Opportunities of widespread reception", highlights positive aspects supporting migrants' adaptation in the local context, including factors that facilitate integration, utilitarian forms of integration, and structural aspects that support integration processes. The study suggests improving coordination between local institutions and social policies, with concrete actions to promote reception pathways based on the specific needs of rural areas.

### Introduction

In the past twenty years, the phenomenon of migration has gained central importance in the global demographic landscape. The World Migration Report (2024) indicates that there are currently 281 million migrants worldwide, accounting for 3.6 % of the global population. An increasing number of people are forced to move within or outside their country of origin due to conflicts, political violence, economic instability, climate change, or other natural disasters. In 2023, 117.3 million people were displaced globally, a rise from the previous year, reflecting a consistent trend over the last 12 years (UNHCR, 2023). Between 2020 and 2022, the number of refugees and asylum seekers increased by 30 %, rising from 4.1 million to 5.4 million, and further growing to reach 6.9 million by May 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Europe hosts the largest number of migrants, with a total of 92.9 million people, about 37.4 million of whom

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reside within the European Union (Dossier Statistico Immigrazione, 2023). Italy serves as a key point of transit and resettlement. Migrants arrive on Italy's shores via three main routes: the Central Mediterranean route, the Balkan route, and the Eastern Mediterranean route. The Central Mediterranean route, which saw approximately 38,000 migrants passing through between the start of the year and August 15, 2024, shows a significant decrease compared to the same period the previous year (down by 62.5 %) (Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2024). Regarding the remaining routes, [Frontex \(2024\)](#) reports that the period from January to May 2024 saw a significant decrease in arrivals in Europe via the Balkan route (8900, down 71 % compared to the first half of 2023). However, the Eastern Mediterranean route was an exception, with 21,773 people passing through during the first half of 2024, marking a 103 % increase compared to the same period the previous year. The fluctuating number of arrivals in Italy has forced successive administrations to reorganize the reception system multiple times. Although these services are intended to meet the needs of migrant communities and ensure access to local resources, the actual impact of widespread reception systems on processes of acculturation and integration, particularly within the context of rural areas, remains insufficiently investigated. It is therefore crucial to examine the perspectives of host communities in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with services implemented by the third-sector organization. This organization, operating within the framework of widespread reception, aims to respond to the specific needs of rural territories and to develop reception pathways that are context-sensitive and locally appropriate.

### Acculturation processes and integration

The integration of migrants into host communities brings profound changes for both locals and newcomers. The encounter between culturally heterogeneous groups forces those involved to confront the issue of diversity and to implement adjustments, known in the literature as acculturation processes. According to Berry's bidimensional model (1980, 2018), the combination of the different characteristics of various ethnic groups creates an intercultural space, within which members of both groups develop their cultural boundaries and social relationships. In this way, the acculturation process, which involves both migrants and the host community, leads to changes in cultural practices, values, and identities, with consequences for the well-being and social functioning of those involved ([Berry, 1997](#)).

Since acculturation begins with intercultural contact, it is essential to understand the nature and characteristics of both the origin and host cultures, including their compatibility or distance. Some researchers suggest that greater cultural distance makes integration more challenging and increases acculturative stress for migrants, negatively impacting their psychological and sociocultural adjustment ([Ward, 2001](#); [English et al., 2021](#)). Sources of acculturative stress include language barriers, which can create problems when the two cultures struggle to communicate and understand each other. There are also challenges related to finding employment, which can generate differences and imbalances between the host community and migrants. Other problematic aspects include intercultural relationships, based on the sharing of different values and traditions, perceived discrimination, and social isolation, stemming from the difficult adaptation to a new cultural context ([Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005](#); [Miller et al., 2011](#)). Schools also play a crucial role in these adaptation processes ([Aromolaran, 2013](#)). While strong assimilation pressure in school settings can lead to withdrawal, perceived social support from peers fosters a more positive attitude towards the host country and, consequently, more effective integration ([Tartakovsky, 2012](#)).

Based on the combination of these factors, both migrants and the host community can follow different acculturation models: integration, separation, marginalization, and assimilation ([Berry, 1980](#)). These models represent both individual choices and the majority group's expectations about how migrants should integrate. Integration allows the preservation of elements from the culture of origin, while assimilation requires abandoning these elements, with positive effects on migrants' well-being ([Berry, 1997](#)). Similarly, the host community develops expectations regarding the culturally diverse groups they interact with. These expectations are based on the belief that the group should either seek contact with the host culture or maintain their original attributes. Based on these beliefs, the host community can adopt various approaches: segregation, multiculturalism, the melting pot, and exclusion. Segregation reflects the idea that migrants should not come into contact with the local culture. Multiculturalism supports the idea that migrants can adopt some new cultural traits without completely abandoning their original ones. The melting pot model expects migrants to abandon their original culture and fully assimilate, while exclusion involves marginalization ([Phinney et al., 2006](#)).

Several authors have highlighted the adoption of integration models depends not only on sociodemographic, cultural, personal, and motivational factors ([Sam & Berry, 2010](#)) but also on the host states' immigration policies and ideologies ([Bourhis et al., 2010](#)), in which the economic and social value of migrants can be assessed in utilitarian terms ([Gabel, 1998](#)), in relation to the overall benefit for the host community ([Kupriianova & Kupriianova, 2023](#)), influencing citizens' opinions regarding migration policies and how migrants should integrate ([Piontkowski et al., 2002](#)). Migrants thus face numerous challenges during their adaptation to a new culture ([Berry, 1997](#)), experiencing feelings of uncertainty related to cultural aspects that differ from those they were accustomed to in their country of origin ([Bilewicz et al., 2021](#)). The encounter between cultures entails reciprocal influence between the two communities and changes in the context, altering relational dynamics ([Bartholini & Pascoal, 2021](#)).

### The Italian reception system and rural communities

The Italian reception system is based on a model known as "widespread reception." This approach aims to avoid concentrating migrants in specific areas, such as southern regions and large cities, and to limit the use of large reception facilities (e.g., barracks, abandoned hotels, tent camps), instead favoring apartments and smaller structures ([Albanese & Marconi, 2022](#)). The Italian reception system is structured on two levels. The first level of reception is provided by Hotspots and government centers, which manage initial

procedures such as pre-identification, fingerprinting, and preliminary verification of eligibility for international protection and refugee status. If government centers are full and the asylum seeker has not yet received a response to their application, prefectures may establish Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS), which are managed by private entities through public contracts. According to Decree 20/2023, government centers no longer provide psychological assistance, Italian language courses, or legal orientation services, focusing solely on healthcare, social assistance, and linguistic-cultural mediation services (Openpolis, 2023).

Like government centers, CAS offer a more limited range of services compared to the Reception and Integration System (SAI), which represents the second level of reception in Italy. These services are designed to meet adequate housing standards and provide access to resources that promote integration processes (Rania et al., 2018). The SAI system includes initiatives to foster linguistic, social, labor, and cultural inclusion (Dossier Statistico Immigrazione, 2023). It also assists beneficiaries and their families in job search activities for adults and school enrollment for minors.

In Italy, the presence and impact of migrant reception in rural areas have become central topics in political and academic debates (Dines, 2022; Fanizza & Colloca, 2020), and more broadly, regarding the reception system in these regions (Bolzoni et al., 2022; Galera et al., 2019). Although most foreign nationals choose to live in cities, a smaller portion of migrants have settled in small rural towns. The presence of foreign residents in these areas has increased in recent years, rising from 12.9 % of the total foreign population in 2015–20 % in 2017 (D'Agostino & Corrado, 2019). Therefore, while immigration is primarily perceived in medium-to-large urban areas, many newcomers live in small towns and municipalities, thanks to Italy's settlement structure, which is characterized by numerous small centers and, in some cases, vibrant local economies (Balbo, 2015). However, Italy still lacks a precise model of reception and integration that embraces the growing cultural diversity of Italian society (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caneva, 2014) and in general, political and media arenas tend to represent immigration as a contingency to be resolved (Moralli et al., 2021; Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2022), rather than a stable phenomenon that should be managed with non-emergency policies.

## Aims

This study aims to evaluate the impact of the widespread reception project in rural areas. In particular, it explores the perspectives of host communities to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with reception systems in Italian centers.

## Method

Within this research project, the adopted methodology was a qualitative approach, employing specific scientific tools from community psychology. This method encouraged open discussions and provided a deeper understanding of the dynamics of interaction between the host community and migrants. In particular, two focus groups were organized to explore the host community's perception of the impact of migrants' arrival in these contexts, fostering a dialogical environment capable of bringing out both conflicts and opportunities.

## Focus group

The focus group methodology, first described by Merton et al. (1956), originated as an approach for interviewing groups of people and has since become increasingly popular in qualitative research. A focus group is a group discussion centered on a specific topic, guided by a moderator (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). The central feature of this methodology is the interaction between participants, which differentiates it from other types of interviews (Robinson, 1999). According to some scholars, the interaction between participants can reveal information that would be difficult to obtain through individual interviews (Stewart et al., 1998). In this research, focus groups were chosen to gather participants' perceptions about the integration of beneficiaries within the rural context. The interaction allowed the unique perspectives of the participants and their views on relationships with migrants currently residing in these communities to emerge. This tool allows for the exploration of significant topics that arise during the discussion. The moderator can independently decide which topics to explore, while remaining aligned with the themes of the study. For this reason, the guides used in the sessions serve as a thematic outline, rather than a strict script to follow.

## Procedures

### Data collection

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Genoa (Approval Number 2023.86). Before the focus groups, participants were provided with a privacy form and an informed consent document that detailed their role in the research. The participants in the focus groups were recruited through the mediation of those managing the reception service in the area. Focus groups included citizens with neighborhood and community contacts with migrant families, as well as stakeholders holding institutional roles, such as mayors, kindergarten teachers, and local entrepreneurs. The focus groups were conducted by the researchers in the Italian language and had an average duration of approximately two hours. The focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized, with codes assigned to participants to ensure they could not be identified (an example of a code is P1FG1F/M: participant 1, focus group 1, female/male). Before beginning, the research team informed participants that the anonymized and aggregated data would be used solely for research purposes, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. This approach ensured the ethical integrity of the research process and respect for

participants' autonomy throughout the study.

### Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis in psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which, due to its theoretical adaptability, allows for the identification, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of patterns and clusters of meaning within a data corpus. The data extracted from transcripts and text segments were selected for the final analysis. Each text segment was assigned labels (codes). These codes were then grouped into sub-themes, which were further organized into themes. The analysis followed the stages, shown in Table 1, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). It was a recursive process that, as suggested by the authors, repeatedly went through the steps of coding and re-coding, thematizing, and re-thematizing. The analysis was carried out independently by multiple researchers to ensure objectivity and to capture the greatest possible number of significant segments. The results obtained by each researcher were then compared with those of others, leading to a recursive restructuring and reanalysis of sub-themes and themes. This interactive process enriched and refined the data organization, allowing for a more comprehensive synthesis of the collected data. The final phase involved integrating the results by drawing on the Thematic Analysis approach (Terry et al., 2017). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was conducted inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2019), allowing themes to emerge from the data. A structure aligned with Berry's (2005) theoretical framework was then created to critically construct and analyze what appeared as reality, refine the data, and offer a clearer synthesis. Therefore, themes were initially developed through an inductive, reflexive engagement with the data. During later stages of analysis Berry's acculturation framework was identified as a useful interpretative lens to make sense of the pattern observes in host communities narratives.

### Researcher position

The researchers who facilitated the focus group in this study are NR and IC. NR, who identifies as a woman, is a senior lecturer and researcher in Social Psychology with over twenty years of experience in research on migrant reception contexts and in the use of this technique. IC, who also identifies as a woman, previously worked as a social worker in migrant reception centers. After earning her degree in Psychology, she completed a PhD in Migration and Intercultural Processes, collaborating with NR on research projects within migrant reception settings. DL, who identifies as a man, holds a degree in Psychology and is also part of the research team. He was involved in the initial phase of data analysis, working in close collaboration with NR and IC. Both NR and IC participated in the analysis and discussion of the collected data, identifying codes, sub-themes, and themes. Together, they decided to use Berry's theory to provide a theoretical framework for the findings that emerged from the focus group analysis. Following this phase, AVP, who also identifies as a woman, reviewed the themes and supported NR and IC in revisiting the findings within the chosen theoretical framework.

### Participants

The research involved 15 members of the host community, including 8 citizens and 7 stakeholders. Specifically, two focus groups were conducted, comprising 4 kindergarten teachers, 4 neighbors of SAI beneficiaries, 1 representative of the local administration, 3 collaborators from local volunteer associations, 2 local business administrators, and 1 administrator from a third sector organization. In this research, the participants were recruited through the mediation of those managing the reception service in the area. Participants were selected through a targeted strategy, which involves the identification and selection of people or groups who are knowledgeable and have direct experience with the phenomenon of interest.

### Results of focus groups

From the data analysis of the focus group transcripts, codes, sub-themes, and themes were identified. This process led to the identification of two main themes: "Challenges of Widespread Reception in the process of acculturation", and "Opportunities of Widespread Reception". In the presentation of the results for each code shown, a meaningful explanation was provided to make the reading more accessible. The interview excerpts, originally conducted in Italian, were translated verbatim to preserve the accuracy and reliability of their content.

**Table 1**

Phases of thematic analysis to process for conceptual (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Step	Description
<b>Data Transcription and Familiarization</b>	Transcription and repeated reading of the data to achieve in-depth familiarization and generate initial reflexive notes.
<b>Initial Coding</b>	Inductive and reflexive generation of initial codes capturing meaningful features of the data.
<b>Constructing initial Themes</b>	Group codes into potential themes, by exploring patterns of shared meaning, collecting all data related to each theme.
<b>Reviewing and refining Themes</b>	Review and refine themes in relation to coded data extracts and the entire dataset
<b>Defining and Naming Themes</b>	Further develop and clearly articulate the scope and meaning of each theme.
<b>Producing the Report</b>	Interpret and present themes in relation to the research question and existing literature.

### Challenges of widespread reception in the process of acculturation

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis, showed in Table 2, pertains to the “Challenges of widespread reception in the processes of acculturation”, which is divided into four sub-themes: “Assimilation”, “Marginalization”, “Separation” and “Supra-structural issues”. Participants highlighted problematic elements within the processes governing reception, specifically aspects of the experience that were less effective and could be improved.

#### Assimilation

This sub-theme highlights challenges in communication, job insecurity due to lack of qualifications, and difficulties in adopting local norms. These aspects reflect the complex acculturation process influenced by the host community’s expectation that migrants completely abandon their culture of origin to assimilate into the local culture. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

#### Language barrier

Interviews often highlighted language barriers hindering communication between migrants and the host community, especially in schools where better interaction could foster support networks. Some participants noted that limited knowledge of Italian leads to misunderstandings, reinforcing prejudices and distorting perceptions of migrants' attitudes.

“These comments relate more to the mothers because they are more involved in school life. They feel disoriented, and they are also scared, and the difficulty in communicating prevents them from becoming part of the class group network, you know... A small thing... attending birthday parties is a way to socialize and integrate more... but sometimes they just don't know how to contact them... and make themselves understood (P1FG1F).”

“And the thing I've noticed, and I sometimes try to point it out to others, is that they, because of their limited language skills, might use verbs in a certain way, like in the imperative, and it seems rude... it seems like they're... so sometimes I've had to explain that... it's just because their language is limited; they are trying to express themselves in a certain way, and it might seem like they're being verbally aggressive, but that's not the case at all (P3FG2F).”

The language difficulties hinder the beneficiaries' ability to find employment. In relation to this issue, the language barrier limits the transmission of necessary information to perform the tasks required by certain jobs.

“Two people had already been living here for a while... and they didn't speak a single word of Italian... so even in terms of work, it's difficult. (P6FG1F)”.

#### Lack of qualifications

The job insecurity faced by the beneficiaries of the projects is further exacerbated by the lack of qualifications of those seeking employment, a challenge that often forces them to attend training courses, thereby extending the time needed for integration into the workforce.

"They are non-EU citizens, but in the end, you have to train them, like with a trimmer license, a driver's license... so you constantly have to... and you can't let them work... but to be honest, they are only non-EU citizens. (P6FG1M)".

#### Adherence to shared rules

Participants also expressed the perception that individuals involved in the reception projects struggle to adopt the rules of the new context, often displaying behaviors considered inappropriate for harmonious coexistence. This difficulty in adapting to the local norms and regulations is seen as a barrier to successful integration into the community.

"I remember years ago the issue was the condominium rules, the noise... and the same thing over and over... over the years we

**Table 2**  
Theme: Challenges of Widespread Reception in the Processes of Acculturation.

Codes	Sub-themes
Language barrier	Assimilation
Lack of qualifications	
Adherence to shared rules	
Lack of working opportunities	Marginalization
Managing the family unit	
Segregated groups	
Traumatic experiences	Separation
Social isolation	
Low participation of migrants in community activities	
Abandonment of the territory	Suprastructural issues
Worn-out housing	
Lack of services	
Infrastructural issues	
Media create prejudice	
Project too short	

noticed that it varies depending on where these people come from, you know... especially in the condominiums... they don't respect the hours... and so they caused problems... like calling the marshal at 3 in the morning... (P6FG1M)".

### *Marginalization*

The sub-theme Marginalization encompasses factors that impede the acculturation and integration process, where migrants are expected to relinquish their original culture to fully assimilate into the host society, consequently slowing their journey toward independence. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

#### *Lack of working opportunities*

According to the participants, within the rural Italian context, job opportunities are scarce, not only for the migrants involved in the projects but also for those who have already been living in these areas.

"The negative things are, first of all, the job opportunities, which are already very few for our own people... there are very few (P3FG2F)."

#### *Managing the family unit*

Regarding the topic of employment, managing the family dimension also hinders the search for stable work. The presence of children makes it more challenging to maintain job positions and slows progress toward independence.

"They can't leave... if they have three children, how can they go to work? (P2FG2F)"

#### *Segregated groups*

The social life of the beneficiaries seems to rely almost entirely on contact with fellow nationals, forming groups that rarely mix with the host community. This segregation makes it difficult for meaningful interactions and integration with the host community to occur.

"It's hard to find a truly heterogeneous group, and even many... let's say, local residents, also tend to form groups themselves... partly out of necessity, partly because they know each other. They know each other, they talk about, for example, the arrival. (P5FG2F)".

### *Separation*

The Separation sub-theme highlights difficulties stemming from migrants' experiences that negatively impact their ability to adapt and connect with the host community. These factors reflect the separation process, where migrants preserve their original culture and limit interaction with the host society, thereby hindering their integration within the community. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

#### *Traumatic experiences*

The first element emerging from participants' reflections concerns the traumatic experiences of migrants, related to their journey or the context of origin. These experiences deeply affect their ability to open up to contact with others and adapt to different life contexts.

"But where they come from is really important, in my opinion, because of what they've seen... in some cases, it's really difficult to integrate them, even for work... (P6FG1M)".

"And they come from situations where these women stay at home, veiled... or they still have difficulty coming out into the open, and those who are more exposed might have come from trafficking. We've encountered people, women, who had suffered enormous hardships... with experiences that are unspeakable... (P2FG1F)".

#### *Social isolation*

A significant difficulty for adults in forming connections with members of the host community was highlighted, a challenge not shared by the children. Adults struggle more to build relationships, while children seem to integrate more easily into the social fabric of the community.

"The children, no, I don't think there are problems... but the adults, the parents, to be honest... in some cases, integration is difficult... it's hard for them to integrate with the community... and it also partly depends on our local realities... (P6FG1M)".

#### *Low participation of migrants in community activities*

The host community report low levels of participation by migrants in activities designed to help them acquire useful skills. As an example, they cite a series of meetings held at the library, which received limited attendance from the migrant population.

"They had created a small support project for all kinds of needs, not just for migrants... but also for those living here... even for Italian people. I mean, those who maybe didn't know how to use a cell phone properly or read a utility bill, things like that, right? And unfortunately (...) even here at the library... no one ever came (...). So we had said to (operator)... (operator) had reached out to all of their contacts, but no one ever came, even though I think it was a useful initiative, right? Like, if you wanted to change phone providers or if you received a bill, maybe for €100, and you didn't know why... (P8SG2F)".

*Abandonment of the territory*

A particularly common phenomenon concerns the departure of migrants from the area. Migrants often 'disappear' from the community without notice, leaving abruptly and without communication. This absence makes it difficult to track their integration and address their needs.

"We wanted to invite them to our home, we had established a relationship because we were very sensitive to this issue. They disappeared, didn't even say goodbye, didn't tell us anything, and I felt a bit... (P1FG2F)".

*Suprastructural issues*

The sub-theme analyzing "suprastructural issues" includes considerations that highlight difficulties stemming from working conditions, housing, regulations, and social conditions that serve as the backdrop to integration pathways. Migrant integration is hindered not only by practical difficulties in reception contexts but also by broader challenges such as infrastructural deficiencies, limited access to essential services, and poor housing conditions. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for promoting social inclusion and improving the quality of life for both the beneficiaries and the host communities. These challenges highlight the need for greater understanding and collaboration to improve acculturation and integration processes. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

*Worn-out housing*

The availability of suitable housing is seen as an important factor for the integration of migrants. The host community highlighted the inadequacy of the housing available in the area. These accommodations are often in such poor condition that they are nearly impossible to rent, and even when they meet the minimum requirements, they do not meet the basic needs of those who live there.

"But the problem is that there are also many people who would rent out apartments that are so old they should be completely renovated... but they don't have the money because it's not there, so they're really run-down; you really can't rent them out, maybe there's no proper wiring or other issues... (P8FG2F)".

"With the new laws, you can't rent them like that. The truth is, there are families living in apartments today where, honestly, you wouldn't even let animals live (P3FG2F)."

*Lack of services*

Another important problem that emerged during the focus groups is the shortage of services in the area.

"One of the negative aspects in the rural area is the lack of services we don't have. (P1FG2F)".

*Infrastructural issues*

In addition to the lack of services, participants also pointed out infrastructural problems that make transportation difficult, further isolating the rural Italian context from surrounding areas. This isolation has had long-term effects on the external perception of the region. As a result, they believe it is necessary to actively promote and publicize the improvements that have been made.

"From the point of view of communication with our area, even just someone coming to work in the rural context from the city is really problematic... highways, traffic jams, etc., and vice versa, it's also complicated for us to get around... (P1FG1F)".

"So, despite the difficulties this context is facing right now, which are enormous, we've experienced them all, and it has led to the perception that the rural context is unreachable, because this idea develops... but it's not really like that... although for years we will have to carry this burden. We'll need to promote and say that the disruptions are over and people can return without any problems. (P8FG1M)".

*Media create prejudice*

During the discussions, participants expressed awareness that television programs and mass media, in general, tend to produce content aimed at instilling fear of foreigners. Migrants are often associated with crime, leading people to believe that they need to protect themselves.

"Television, since we are, as I was saying, rather elderly people, we stay at home with the TV on from morning until night. And there's nothing worse because television has become the ministry of fear. Do you remember Albanese playing the minister of fear? That's what it's become... So they bombard you... (P1FG2F)".

"It causes terrible damage. It instills fears, terrors. You were talking about COVID earlier, that was one of them... they make you feel terrified, so you just try to defend, right? Your home. (P3FG2F)".

*Project too short*

The participants recognized the difficulties related to the different types of reception provided by the State for beneficiaries of international protection and those awaiting a decision on their application. It emerged that the projects are too short to ensure real integration, forcing many to move from one project to another without being able to settle in a community.

"So, the negative thing about the project, in my opinion, is that when the project ends, there are people who haven't found anything, so they go into another project (P1FG2F)".

### Opportunities of widespread reception

The theme of "Opportunities of widespread reception", showed in Table 3, includes descriptions and codes that highlight positive aspects for the adaptation of migrants in the new context. This is divided into three sub-themes: "Factors that Facilitate Integration", "Utilitarian Integration" and "Structural Aspect that facilitate integration".

#### Factors that facilitate integration

During the discussion, participants highlighted factors that support adaptation to the host context, such as community support, access to employment, and both family and community assistance. In these cases, the arrival of families with children has had a positive impact on the community, creating a more dynamic and diverse social environment. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

##### Young age

Young age facilitates adaptation. Their openness fosters a welcoming environment and social cohesion. Children are less influenced by ethnic differences and make friends more easily than adults. Children tend to integrate easily into the community.

"Children, when they aren't influenced, I'd say, by adults, are very open, and for them, there is no difference... for them, everyone is the same... The teachers are competent, they manage to get the kids involved, and the children learn quickly... the language first, then the customs, and so on" (P3FG2F).

##### Children as mediators

Their education is important because they often act as intermediaries for their families, bridging language gaps and facilitating access to services. The children's language skills become a valuable tool for parents, who often struggle with the language. Children help bridge the gap between the family and the services, facilitating access and communication for their parents.

"Then maybe they bring their daughter along, saying, 'I need to go to the bank, but I don't understand,' and I tell them, 'I know about as much as you do.' So, they often bring the children along for many things, because the kids know the language well, and they help them with that..." (P5FG2F).

##### Ethnic support networks

When the family unit and local services are insufficient, migrants often rely on the support of fellow nationals to address problems. These networks are crucial, for example, in assisting with childcare. Ethnic support networks are a vital resource for overcoming challenges, filling gaps left by formal systems, and easing integration by providing practical and emotional support within the migrant community.

"They also try to help each other, for example, among the Nigerians, etc... if someone has found work and knows how things go, then maybe there's another who will babysit and take care of that; so, there's this mutual support among them" (P3FG2F).

##### Community network

A key factor for the integration of migrants is the collaboration between associations in the rural context. The network of local associations provides many opportunities for migrants to connect with environments that facilitate integration, such as the Red Cross, and encourages the creation of informal relationships. These associations offer resources, social connections, and support that aid integration and create a sense of belonging within the community.

"But I think there's this difference compared to big cities, because the rural context works... it has an extensive network of associations... has about 35 associations, more or less... so there's really a lot of involvement..." (P5FG1M).

"It happens that a young person integrates more if they join the Red Cross, for example, or if they take part in some other activity.

**Table 3**  
Theme: Opportunities of Widespread Reception.

Codes	Sub-themes
Young age	Factors that Facilitate Integration
Children as mediators	
Ethnic support network	
Community network	
Small size of local communities	
Informal support	
Presence of solidarity initiatives	Utilitarian Integration
Having a job	
Reception fosters participation	
Demographic decline and schools	
Workforce	Structural Aspects that Facilitate Integration
Adequate services	
School as a privileged place of integration	
Family-oriented projects	

Then, there's sports—some who went to play football, and there it's okay because you're great friends in that association." (P3FG2F).

#### *Small size of local communities*

A positive aspect for participants is the small size of the communities in which migrants are integrated. This promotes integration by increasing opportunities for interaction and the creation of supportive relationships. The cohesion of smaller communities allows for more frequent and meaningful connections, creating a more welcoming environment for migrants.

"The fact that everyone knows each other simplifies things... It eliminates a lot of the bureaucracy, pretty much finished, as long as they see you on the street and the problems get solved very quickly... that's definitely a strength" (P3FG2F).

#### *Informal support*

Interaction with migrants in rural areas fosters informal support networks. These informal networks play a crucial role in easing the integration process by offering practical help and emotional support, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

"Maybe the mother is in the city for work, so we take this child as well, bring them to our place just to spend the afternoon..." (P3FG2F).

"When they need things, or when they're about to leave the project, like this woman who needs to set up her house... Then we try to give furniture" (P3FG2F).

#### *Presence of solidarity initiatives*

This supportive climate is evident in the solidarity initiatives supported by the community and well-received by its citizens. One example is the collection of used toys in good condition, which encourages children and young people to reuse toys for environmental protection and raise awareness about the difficulties faced by disadvantaged families. These initiatives reflect the community's willingness to help those in need, strengthening the sense of collective responsibility and social cohesion.

"In recent years, they decided to start the initiative which encourages children and young people to reuse toys. they encouraged even the youngest children to find a toy they actually cared about, not something they didn't use, and donate it to give to another child in need and I think it went really well, a lot of toys were collected..." (P5FG2F).

#### *Having a job*

Having a job is key to ensuring financial stability and a good quality of life for those who want to settle. It also fosters a sense of belonging to the local community and allows for family reunification.

"They have enthusiasm, they have the desire to work, to earn a salary so they can live independently and maybe even bring their family here... for me, they are here in the area, and personally, I see them as a resource." (P8FG1M)

"Many have found work, so they have formed ties..." (P3FG2F).

#### *Utilitarian integration*

The "Utilitarian Integration" refers to aspects where migrants' arrival is primarily viewed as a way to fulfill specific needs of the community, such as filling labor market gaps, rather than as a process of cultural or social inclusion. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

#### *Reception fosters participation*

Some participants noted that the arrival of migrants has encouraged significant participation in the local community. This has motivated resident to build community networks and to promote collaboration to develop a more inclusive environment.

"I mentioned experience... because it was something new that we had never dealt with before, and we had to step up and get involved" (P6FG1M).

#### *Demographic decline and schools*

The arrival of new families has contributed to the repopulation of the communities, with positive effects, especially in school. The arrival of families with children has allowed some classes to remain open, preventing demographic decline and sustain the local education system.

"Some classes, in terms of percentages, were saved here, in this context, precisely because of the presence of foreigners... so... long live that... and this, in towns at risk of depopulation, I believe could actually bring about an active sense of well-being (P7FG1M)."

#### *Workforce*

Migrants positively impact the rural labor market, helping sustain local businesses while gaining stable income. Their presence supports both the workforce and the economy in areas struggling to remain active.

"We recently had a situation where a couple of people retired, and we had a major problem with generational turnover for our business. We found that, because we hired another person—not part of the project but still a foreigner—they are much more willing to come and do this kind of manual labor compared to people from our area (P6FG1M)."

"From a work perspective, I see that the future of our company will increasingly rely on hiring foreign workers because, in general, there are no other local people who are willing to come and learn our trade (P6FG1M)."

### *Structural aspect that facilitate integration*

The inclusion of migrants in small communities becomes an advantage when integration processes and services are effective creating a more vibrant and diverse community environment. These factors help counterbalance the challenges previously mentioned, promoting more successful integration. The codes that define the sub-theme are listed and described below.

#### *Adequate services*

Contrary to some claims, others have highlighted the adequacy of the services provided by rural communities. Clinics, schools, railways, and highways meet basic needs and support those who wish to settle. These services are considered crucial for facilitating the integration and stability of migrants within the local context

"We have the highway, the railway, we have the alternative state road, schools from nursery to... health services, doctors, of course, we can't have a fully operational hospital or an emergency room, but we have more than the minimum... so, in fact, the rural context as a whole really offers a lot..." (P5FG1M).

#### *School as a privileged place of integration*

Access to school provides migrants with direct contact with the host community. Children participate in a welcoming environment that supports language learning and interaction with peers, both essential for integration and social inclusion

"So, our experience is this. On the school level, we can say that the children have integrated quite well... they've developed friendships, and the experience seems quite positive to me " (P4FG2M).

#### *Family-oriented projects*

Family-oriented projects, which involve the entire family unit rather than focusing solely on individuals, are considered more effective. Focus group participants emphasized that this approach fosters stronger support systems and more sustainable integration, addressing the needs of the whole family.

"I also believe that the family itself and the integration system are, how to say, two elements closely tied together" (P7FG1M).

"When it was proposed to reopen the hospital in the rural context... at the beginning, it was a pilot project, and it was focused on the family unit... so automatically, by working with a family unit, you could already manage it better... with small children or teenagers... not individuals or groups of young people..." (P6FG1M).

## **Discussion**

The analysis enabled an assessment of the impact of the widespread reception project in rural Italian contexts, with particular attention to host community perspective. The aim was to explore both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the reception systems implemented within SAI centers, in light of acculturation (Berry, 2005) and integration processes. Employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), several interpretative themes emerged, offering insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder these processes and highlighting areas for future improvement. In the context examined, we referred to the "Challenges of Widespread Reception in the Process of Acculturation" as those issues highlighted by the participants and identified as barriers to participation in the social life of the host community. Drawing on Berry's (2005) acculturation process theory, we identified various strategies adopted by participants. Among these, assimilation strategies included issues such as language barriers, as participants emphasized the difficulties migrant families face in adapting and the perceived need to conform to the norms of the host community. According to Berry (2006), the first type of adaptation involves behavioral change on the part of the individual undergoing acculturation, aimed at adopting the behaviors of the dominant culture in order to reduce stress or intergroup conflict (Kuo, 2014). Furthermore, it is possible that linguistic difficulties played a role in preventing dialogue between the parties. As emphasized by Dinesen and collaborators (2020) linguistic differences are associated with lower social trust between groups. This dynamic may foster feelings of conflict and lead to the perception that intercultural tensions can only be resolved through conformity to local social norms, rather than through negotiation (Phillimore, 2011). Another relevant aspect attributable to assimilation strategies concerns the lack of qualifications and adherence to social norms. These findings raise important considerations about how adaptation between culturally diverse individuals can change values and identity (Berry, 1980).

From the perspective of acculturation processes (Berry, 2005), the focus group transcripts reveal that the interaction between different lifestyles has generated tensions and demands for assimilation from some members of the host community. Difficulties in adapting to local norms are often perceived as barriers to successful integration, the failure to adapt to the rules of the new context can lead to conflictual behaviors. In literature, differences are often considered acceptable only when accompanied by adherence to local social codes (Phillimore, 2011). In addition, mere physical proximity to a group considered foreign to the context can evoke a sense of threat (Enos, 2014) and, consequently, a desire for assimilation (Sam & Berry, 2006). This attitude requires migrants to change their cultural practices, values, and identities, and can hinder true integration based on mutual recognition, potentially affecting their well-being (Danbold & Huo, 2022). A similar study by Prins and Toso (2012) revealed that community receptiveness toward immigrants in rural Pennsylvania ranged from welcoming to hostile, shaped by political, economic, and institutional factors. Elements such as lack of job opportunities, difficulties in managing the household, and the presence of segregated groups are attributable to the marginalization strategy (Yoo, 2021). Among the factors that shape how migrants adapt to the host society, the isolation of migrant populations into segregated groups can only exacerbate this shared perception, as it reflects a strategy that tends to marginalize migrant communities (Clark, 2007). Scientific literature emphasizes the crucial role that language training plays in supporting social

integration and the participation of migrants in the local labor market (Chiswick & Miller, 2015; Pont-Grau et al., 2023). The limited language proficiency of a significant portion of migrants makes it harder to access employment within the community (Ghio et al., 2023). This has been studied and documented in Italy in other research (Bianco & Ortiz Cobo, 2019), and its causes can be traced both to the extreme dependence of migrants on the associations managing their relationships with the host context and to traumatic experiences that, in the long term, hinder their ability to learn (Delaney-Black et al., 2002).

Another aspect related to labor market integration concerns the relationship between work activities, family management, and childcare. This difficulty, resulting from migration and separation from the homeland, could be explained by forced family nuclearization (Chinosi, 2002), which leads to the loss of a social support network capable of assisting children when the parent is unable to do so. Moreover, the lack of a regular contract, long or atypical work shifts, and reduced pay can discourage mothers from returning to work after the birth of a child, complicating access to maternity protections (Bonizzoni, 2014). Small et al. (2014) show that immigrant women report less positive experiences due to language barriers, limited familiarity with services, and perceived discrimination. In some cases, the presence of husbands in the family unit can represent a resource if there is a change in the perception of gender roles; however, in many instances, gender representations can become reinforced, hindering the emancipation processes of women in the host society (Santero & Saraceno, 2008). Large-scale social changes contribute to migrants' traumatic experiences. Traumatic experiences, social isolation, and low community participation shape host society's perception and can be traced to a separation strategy in Berry's (2006) framework. This makes the adaptation process more stressful and hinders the development of effective coping mechanisms (Allen et al., 2006; Acar et al., 2021) that limits the interethnic contact (Neto et al., 2005). This feeling experienced by the majority group is not solely related to the presence of a perceived difference but also to a series of other factors. Suprastructural issues, including deteriorated housing, lack of essential services, infrastructural deficiencies, and media-driven prejudice, as well as short-term projects, represent a significant concern in the perception of the host population. Housing is a key social determinant affecting migrant health and well-being (Rana et al., 2025), with inequalities severely limiting integration opportunities.

However, the presence of these challenges does not imply that contact with migrants has been perceived negatively by everyone. In fact, participants identified several opportunities within widespread reception that support migrant integration, notably the positive role of children in fostering social participation. They help to view beneficiaries as valuable resources for countering rural depopulation and preventing school closures. In this sense, migrants become a valuable resource, associated with several positive contributions, including the promotion of civic participation, the countering of demographic decline, and the strengthening of the workforce. Migrants in Italian rural communities are often assessed according to utilitarian criteria (Gabel, 1998). The utilitarian approach to migration differs from an authentic migration policy, and in this sense, immigrants are perceived as an essential contribution to the host community (Kupriianova & Kupriianova, 2023), whose efficiency might otherwise decline, resulting in a pragmatic but sometimes unfair management of migration (Morice, 2004). A study conducted in various rural reception areas (Moralli et al., 2023) highlights how labor integration processes are influenced by the local labor market, demonstrating that the availability of jobs unfilled by local residents opens positive integration prospects for refugees seeking economic stability. Training tailored to the specific needs of the area represents an opportunity for swift and effective integration (Lochmann et al., 2019). Among the key structural aspects identified, many participants highlighted that, thanks to the initiatives promoted by the Italian organization, widespread reception has fostered encounters with other cultures and supported the process of integration. The organization of activities aimed at interethnic contact is recognized by scientific literature as the main tool for reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The schools play a primary role in promoting positive social adaptation among minority groups (Birman et al., 2007), increasing the sense of belonging to the community and reducing the isolation of migrant families (García-Cid et al., 2020). McAreavey and Argent (2018) highlighted that migrant communities are considered an asset to the community. An example of the importance of institutional support for social contact comes from positive experiences in schools, which, despite the lack of linguistic mediators and professionals able to explain certain cultural aspects of the beneficiaries, have still managed to improve the social climate within the local community.

## Conclusion and implications

In conclusion, the integration of migrants into a rural context is a dynamic, reciprocal and territorial process. Language acquisition is essential for active participation in community life. Informal local networks are often more effective than institutional services. Balancing work and parenting, worsened by weak support, limits migrants' job opportunities. Despite these challenges, it is important to emphasize that contact between groups—when mediated by initiatives promoted by the third sector organization or institutional settings such as schools—can generate positive experiences and contribute to reducing prejudice by strengthening ties with the local community and reducing social isolation. Integration services are crucial, but the study highlights the need to strengthen language programs and introduce intercultural mediators in daily life contexts. The study's findings paint a complex and nuanced picture of integration dynamics and acculturation processes in rural Italian contexts involved in widespread reception projects. Narratives reveal openness and solidarity coexisting with prejudice and resistance, where inclusion opportunities intertwine with challenges. It is important to note that participant recruitment was partly mediated by third-sector staff and may have introduced gatekeeper distortion (Hamdani, 2003), with a risk of selection bias and partial representations of social reality. In this scenario, moving beyond welfare-based reception models is essential to promote migrants' autonomy by valuing their skills and resources, as reliance on institutions may reinforce exclusion instead of integration. Another crucial aspect concerns institutional coordination. The study's findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen cooperation among the various actors involved in reception projects, public institutions, third-sector organizations, schools, healthcare services, and citizens, to ensure integrated and coherent responses to local needs. It is also necessary to adopt an approach that actively engages the entire community to prevent the social isolation of minorities and build relationships based on mutual recognition and participation. This study paves the way for further reflections and the

potential development of a comparative investigation examining the experiences of the immigrant community and how these relate to and intersect with the perceptions of the host community.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Iliaria Coppola:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Nadia Rania:** Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Alessia Vincenza Puzzo:** Writing – review & editing. **Davide Lacqua:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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