

**Exchange visit to Milan, Italy**  
**Dates: 27 – 28 January 2026**  
**Project: Support to Frontline Workers (SFW)**

## **EVENT TAKEAWAYS**

### **1. Context**

Under the Support to Frontline Workers (SFW) project, implemented within the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) and funded by the European Commission (DG HOME), a two-day exchange visit was organised in Milan on 27-28 January 2026. The visit responded to a clear demand from governmental authorities and civil society organisations for peer-to-peer exchange on how to reach, support, counsel and accompany migrants in irregular or precarious situations, including those living outside formal reception systems.

The relevance of the visit is closely linked to the implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which calls for more coherent, humane and sustainable approaches to return and reintegration. As Member States prepare National Implementation Plans, the role of local authorities and frontline workers becomes increasingly central in identifying sustainable case outcomes, particularly for undocumented or otherwise “invisible” migrants.

Within this context, the SFW project seeks to explore how multi-level collaboration, co-design methodologies and local service ecosystems can inform national and EU-level frameworks. The Milan exchange visit offered a concrete opportunity to analyse how these elements operate in practice, and how they shape rights-based case management and return counselling.

### **2. Objectives and focus of the exchange visit**

The exchange visit aimed to:

- Provide participants with an in-depth understanding of Milan’s local support mechanisms for vulnerable migrants’ case resolution, with a particular focus on co-design, multi-level cooperation and governance;
- Explore how local authorities, national institutions and civil society jointly address complex and mixed migrant profiles, including people in irregular situations and those in vulnerable situations due to pathways such as secondary movements;
- Reflect on how outreach, information provision and holistic case management contribute to sustainable case resolution, including voluntary return as one possible pathway;
- Identify lessons with cross-border relevance for frontline workers and policymakers across Europe.

Throughout the two days, discussions were guided by the overarching question:

**How can co-design, multi-level planning, and collaborative governance contribute to effective case management support for migrants with complex and mixed profiles living outside the regular system?**

Participants were invited to reflect on planning and design processes; governance arrangements and coordination mechanisms; structural constraints (from a multi-level collaboration perspective) shaping local action.

### 3. The organisation of AVR for migrants outside formal reception systems: vertical perspective

**National:**

**Ministry of the Interior**

- Assisted Voluntary Return remains a national competence, governed by a centralised legal and procedural framework.
- The return process involves multiple actors (prefectures, police, IOM), requiring high levels of coordination to avoid delays and case drop-out.
- Recent legal and programmatic developments aim to expand access to AVR, including for vulnerable groups and people in irregular situations.
- Despite improvements, the system remains procedurally complex and difficult to navigate for migrants, without strong local support structures.<sup>1</sup>

|

**Intermediary coordination**

**ANCI – Cittalia**

- ANCI represents municipalities at national level and acts as an institutional bridge between central government and local authorities.
- Through regional focal points and technical networks, ANCI facilitates vertical coordination and dissemination of information.
- Cittalia (ANCI's operational arm) supports municipalities in implementing migration-related policies and accessing funding instruments.
- ANCI-type structures can function as multipliers for outreach, training and policy feedback loops.

|

**Municipal:**

**Milan**

- The municipality coordinates local social services, outreach, reception and inclusion policies.
- It operationalises nationally defined governance tools at the local level.
- It convenes and co-plans services with NGOs and international organisations.
- It manages frontline 'stabilisation' measures (housing, social services, homelessness prevention).
- It creates physical and institutional access points (e.g. Milano Welcome Center).
- Networks such as SAI (Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione) demonstrate, through being delegated certain state-level responsibilities, the structural role municipalities play in reception and integration governance.

|

**Crosscutting:**

- *IOM operates within the nationally defined AVR framework but is functionally embedded in local ecosystems such as Milan. Its dual positioning, accountable to national authorities while operationally integrated into municipal structures, illustrates the hybrid nature of return governance.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Understood as local ecosystems that include though go beyond public administration, including NGOs, informal networks and frontline professionals who play a key role in helping migrants navigate procedural complexity.

## 4. Milan's approach in action: horizontal perspective

Milan's migration governance diverges from traditional top-down service delivery. Rather than merely implementing national policies or outsourcing services, the municipality co-creates local responses with civil society. Third sector organisations are not contractors but institutional partners with real design authority and shared responsibility for outcomes. A national framework enables this and helps contextualise space for local co-creation.

### *Co-design as a governance tool*

Milan's model is grounded in co-design (*co-progettazione*), a collaborative methodology **established under Italian law** that enables public administrations and civil society actors to jointly plan and implement services.

It functions not simply as a participatory method, but as a **governance framework**. It recognises that effective migration management requires combining institutional authority with the proximity, intercultural competence and trust that NGOs maintain with migrant communities.

This approach **reshapes coordination and ownership**. Planning, implementation and adaptation are conducted collectively through governed collaboration, which reduces fragmentation and competition among actors. Responsibility for case outcomes is distributed: public authorities retain legal and policy mandates, but have to give up control in part, handing it over to relevant civil society actors (as well as secondarily linked formal third sector mechanisms) that from their end add operational flexibility, community access and specialised expertise. Note that this co-ownership can contribute to the depolarisation of the AVRR topic.

This being said, co-design still requires structure. Clear division of roles and responsibilities remains necessary to prevent overlaps or accountability gaps. Moreover, it is important that the actors who plug into the project retain their specialised competencies in workings outside of the co-design project – otherwise all participating parties will lose their specific added value.

While inherently dynamic, the system must rest on stable governance arrangements rather than ad hoc cooperation. Informal relationships and mutual understanding between institutions remain crucial, as actors operate under different mandates and constraints. An open question remains whether such trust-based collaboration can be fully institutionalised or whether it continues to depend on individual commitment and leadership.

### *Operational implementation: the Milano Welcome Center*

The Milano Welcome Center (MWC) represents the **operational expression of this governance model**. It provides a single, coordinated space where migrants can access municipal social services, legal counselling from civil society partners, employment guidance and voluntary return counselling delivered by the International Organization for Migration.

Within this framework, voluntary return is not presented as a stand-alone or externally driven intervention. Instead, it emerges organically from **comprehensive case management** once housing, legal status, health and employment needs are assessed.

Participants observed that this integrated model enables more realistic identification of overlapping vulnerabilities, facilitates multidisciplinary responses, strengthens trust with migrant communities and enhances flexibility in responding to evolving migration patterns. Its **dynamic structure also allows new initiatives to integrate into the system, creating space for multi-level collaboration and continuous adaptation**.

## *Filling structural gaps*

It is **municipal frontline workers who encounter structural gaps in daily practice**. When national frameworks do not fully address evolving realities, **cities respond** through targeted and often temporary initiatives. Milan illustrates how local innovation compensates for **systemic blind spots** — but also reveals the limits of municipal responsibility.

Participants identified several structural constraints that cannot be resolved at local level alone. **Limited alignment and communication across EU, national, regional and municipal levels** constrains implementation and slow case resolution. Irregularity remains a structural and enduring feature of urban contexts, yet legal pathways insufficiently acknowledge this reality. **Information** on migration-related options is **fragmented at central level**, with no comprehensive access point. Participants noted that coordination across governance levels remains uneven. Communication between national, regional and municipal actors is often reactive rather than structured, which can slow implementation and create uncertainty in complex cases.

The project **LGNet3** in Milan exposes **structural tensions** that in part originate from a mismatch between local responsibility and reactions vis-à-vis national strategic and operational frameworks. The project exists precisely because certain vulnerable groups are found to be excluded from those frameworks. (Moreover, despite addressing a continuous reality, it relies on time-limited funding.)

The project functions as a **rapid-response mechanism** addressing **vulnerable groups** arriving through secondary movements or emergency situations who fall outside national SAI criteria. It provides immediate intake and, where needed, same-day accommodation (often at Casa Jannacci), without legal-status preconditions.

It combines rapid stabilisation with holistic early assessment, covering legal status, housing, health, schooling and livelihood needs. Assessments are conducted in coordination with the Milano Welcome Center, municipal services, health providers and the International Organization for Migration, allowing **exploration of multiple pathways**, including voluntary return. Where eligibility criteria are met, referrals to the SAI system are made.

Participants, together with met peers, remarked that for families in secondary movement, the **moment of arrival** often represents a **critical reassessment point**. Stabilisation creates the conditions for informed decision-making, including the possibility of voluntary return as one option among several. Observed outcomes include prevention of homelessness, reduced onward movement and improved capacity for realistic case resolution.

## 5. Good practices observed

### *Good Practice 1: Co-design as governance infrastructure<sup>2</sup>*

In Milan, co-design functions as a **governance infrastructure** rather than a project-based methodology. It structures how public authorities and civil society **jointly define needs, priorities and operational responses in migration case management**. Third sector organisations act not as contractors but as institutional partners with shared responsibility for outcomes.

The added value lies in the shift from transactional coordination to continuous joint planning. Because services are designed together, coordination becomes embedded in the system itself,

---

<sup>2</sup> Model to be made available in the Support to Frontline Workers Repository

reducing fragmentation and competition among actors. Shared ownership strengthens **commitment** and improves **coherence** across interventions, particularly for migrants with complex and overlapping vulnerabilities.

*What co-design requires in practice:*

*For public authorities:* Co-design implies relinquishing some **control** over service definition and implementation. Institutional actors must accept that they do not have all the resources, knowledge and relationships that civil society partners bring.

*For civil society organisations:* Co-design implies greater **accountability** and planning responsibility beyond project implementation. Organisations must engage in strategic thinking, accept institutional constraints (budgets, legal frameworks, political realities), and commit to long-term collaboration even when they disagree with specific municipal decisions.

*For the system overall:* as a reflection from participants, co-design should **remain dynamic** over time. Co-design cannot be a one-time planning exercise that then runs on autopilot. It requires built-in mechanisms for monitoring, regular review moments where partnerships can be renegotiated, adaptation when migration patterns or needs change, and even exit strategies when collaborations no longer serve their purpose. Without this ongoing work, co-design risks becoming rigid or deteriorating into traditional contracting relationships.

### *Good practice 2: Milano Welcome Center, One-Stop Desk Model*

The Milano Welcome Center (MWC) represents a concrete operationalisation of co-design and multi-level governance. It is a municipal one-stop desk that integrates information provision, social and legal counselling, referral to reception and inclusion services, and voluntary return counselling within a single, accessible space.

Its strength lies in integration rather than limited specialised services offered. Migrants access a single-entry point where comprehensive assessment precedes any specific pathway discussion. **Return is embedded** within a broader rights-based and person-centred service offer. By framing return as one possible pathway among several, the MWC reduces **AVR stigma and supports informed, trust-based decision-making**.

Key benefits include improved accessibility, holistic case management, reduced information inconsistencies and flexibility in case trajectories. Individuals can move between integration support, regularisation pathways and voluntary return without exiting the system.

At the same time, the model is resource-intensive and depends significantly on time-limited funding streams. Questions remain regarding long-term sustainability and replicability in smaller municipalities with fewer resources. Nonetheless, the MWC demonstrates how local authorities can create accessible institutional interfaces linking local practice to national migration frameworks.

## 6. Opportunities and challenges

The Milan exchange visit highlighted that effective migration case management cannot rely on isolated services or linear pathways. Co-design and multi-level collaboration offer a structural solution to this fragmented approach, enabling more coherent responses to complex and overlapping vulnerabilities. At the same time, the model reveals sustainability constraints and governance tensions that require careful management.

### *Opportunities*

Co-design facilitates comprehensive identification of needs and produces inherently **multidisciplinary responses**. Housing, legal status, health, family needs, employment prospects and voluntary return counselling are addressed within a shared framework, reducing fragmentation typical of siloed systems. Inclusion of NGOs in decision-making strengthens ownership, service quality and long-term commitment.

Collaboration within a co-designed system **reduces competition** among organisations and encourages complementarity based on specialisation. Rather than competing through procurement cycles, actors contribute distinct expertise within a **shared strategy**. This increases coherence and helps avoid contradictory interventions.

Community ownership further enhances **legitimacy and trust**. When services are jointly designed and delivered, migrants and local stakeholders perceive greater consistency and accountability. Integrated one-stop-shop models also create space to address sensitive issues such as voluntary return in a balanced manner. By embedding return within a broader rights-based service offer, it is reframed as one possible pathway among others, grounded in informed choice rather than stigma.

### *Challenges*

The model's complexity introduces **governance risks**. With – in the MWC's case – more than 40 organisations involved, coordination demands clear role definition and accountability mechanisms. Collaborative decision-making and operations can **blur responsibility and roles**, if not carefully structured. An option at the design stage is to limit participating actors to a smaller, fixed number instead of launching an open-ended call for participating.

**Project sustainability** remains a structural concern. Key services, including the Milano Welcome Center and LGNet3, depend heavily on **time-limited funding streams**. This creates uncertainty for staff, threatens service continuity and complicates long-term institutionalisation of innovative practices.

Maintaining **coherence** across actors also requires continuous coordination. While it can be an asset in some cases, diverging interpretations of policies or different approaches to discussing return can result in inconsistent information and undermine trust.

Finally, close integration with public authorities raises concerns about **NGO independence and identity**. Organisations must balance collaboration with their advocacy role, while monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for co-design partnerships remain underdeveloped. Ensuring that collaboration remains adaptive, transparent and accountable over time is therefore essential for sustainability and replicability.

## 7. Concluding takeaways

The Milan exchange visit provided practice-based insights highly relevant for national authorities designing and implementing Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) frameworks. Observing how national systems interact with local governance structures revealed that outcomes depend not only on programme design, but on how governance is organised across levels.

### 1. *Embed AVR structurally within local support ecosystems*

AVR uptake and quality improve when return counselling is embedded within municipal one-stop desks and social services rather than delivered through stand-alone or centrally distant structures. When counselling is integrated into comprehensive case management, return becomes one pathway among several rather than a separate or enforcement-adjacent intervention.

National frameworks should formally **recognise and incentivise co-location of AVR services** within municipal hubs and treat local authorities as structural partners, not merely referral points.

### 2. *Use municipalities as outreach multipliers*

Municipal and NGO frontline services are often the first (and sometimes only) contact point for irregular or highly marginalised migrants. Engagement frequently occurs long before return becomes a realistic option.

National systems should therefore **channel standardised information, training and communication tools through municipal networks**. Associations of municipalities, such as Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (ANCI), can serve as **strategic multipliers**, ensuring consistency and early outreach beyond a limited number of national focal points.

### 3. *Stabilisation is a precondition*

Return counselling is ineffective if basic needs remain unmet. Housing, health, legal clarity and family stability are prerequisites for informed decision-making. **Stabilisation phases should be formally acknowledged within AVR pathways**, and performance indicators should avoid incentivising speed over sustainability.

### 4. *Reframe AVR as a pathway*

Stigma limits both outreach and political ownership of return programmes. Integrated service models such as the Milano Welcome Center demonstrate that when return is embedded within a rights-based service offer - delivered in cooperation with actors such as IOM - it can be discussed without promotional pressure and grounded in informed choice.

**National narrative strategies** should reflect this broader framing of case resolution.

### 5. *Institutionalise multi-level coordination*

Effective collaboration currently relies heavily on informal relationships and externally facilitated dialogue. For systems to be sustainable and replicable, coordination must move from personal networks to institutional structures. **Regular technical forums, structured feedback loops and clearer recognition of municipal and regional roles are essential**. These mechanisms should serve not only compliance purposes but **bottom-up system learning**.

## 6. Strengthen national ownership without recentralising delivery

Full outsourcing reduces adaptability to central policy and strategy, while over-centralisation undermines trust and access. National authorities should retain ownership of the legal framework and quality standards while allowing operational flexibility at local level. The role of a Ministry should extend beyond funding and procurement to include coherence-building, quality assurance and structured learning from local implementation.

### *Strategic insight*

#### **The Milan experience confirms that co-design is not merely a service-delivery method but a governance model.**

When public authorities, civil society and national actors share responsibility for defining needs and adapting responses, systems become more capable of reaching migrants who fall outside formal reception structures.

Local innovation also exposes systemic gaps. Projects addressing secondary movements and homelessness exist precisely because national frameworks leave categories unaddressed. Sustainable reform therefore requires integrating lessons from local practice into national policy design.

Ultimately, effective migration governance requires balancing control and delegation. It is neither purely top-down nor purely bottom-up, but a negotiated distribution of authority across levels. Vertical and horizontal coordination must be strengthened simultaneously if voluntary return is to function as one legitimate pathway within a broader, humane case resolution framework.

#### *Participating Representatives from RRF Member State Authorities and CSOs*

**Belgium:** representative from Fedasil and Bruss'Help; **Denmark:** representatives from the Danish Return Agency and the Danish Refugee Council; **Germany:** representatives from Raphaelswerk and State Office for Refugee Affairs; **Ireland:** representatives from Immigration Service Delivery; **Italy:** representatives from the Ministry of Interior; **Luxembourg:** representative from the Ministry of Interior; **Spain:** representatives from the Basque Region and Bilbao Municipality; **Switzerland:** representatives from the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) and the Canton of Zurich.

#### *Institutions and organisations met*

Municipality of Milan; Milano Welcome Center; Italian Ministry of the Interior; Prefecture; Lombardy Region; International Organization for Migration (IOM); Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (ANCI) and Cittalia; LGNet3; Center Sammartini; Casa Jannacci; and other municipal partner NGOs delivering outreach, reception, accommodation and case management services.