GOOD PRACTICE

Milan Welcome Centre and its Observatory

Navigating data challenges for local migrant integration

Comune di Milano

Title of the practice

Collecting, analysing and sharing data on migrant integration through the Milan Welcome Centre and its Observatory

Theme

Data collection and use, evidence-based local policymaking

Geographical area

Milan, Italy

Who leads on the practice?

Municipality of Milan, in close partnership with third-sector organisations

Target Group(s)

Municipal departments and policy-makers of the city of Milan, and service providers working on migrant reception and integration. Indirectly: migrants and refugees benefiting from improved policies and services

Project duration

The Observatory is active since 2024

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Description of the practice

The City of Milan's Observatory on the Reception and Integration System (SAI) consolidates and analyses data from services at the Milan Welcome Centre (MWC), the city one-stop shop where a range of services are coordinated to support migrants and refugees in their daily lives.

The MWC operates through a co-programming and co-design process with around 40 third-sector organisations. Frontline professionals record and update information in a secure, shared system, supported by the Observatory team to ensure data quality.

Findings are shared through monthly briefs, annual reports, and targeted meetings with internal and external stakeholders, guiding planning, coordination, and project development. Tools and indicators are collaboratively developed rather than imposed, fostering shared ownership and collaborative decision-making.

Purpose, goals and evidence of needs

The City of Milan set up the Observatory to better understand and improve its Reception and Integration System (SAI) through structured knowledge and evidence.

Data are collected through the services operating at the MWC, where information generated through everyday casework is consolidated and analysed at city level.
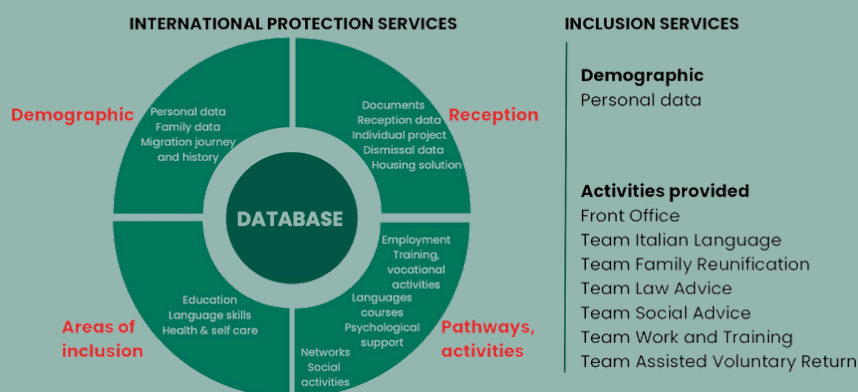
The purpose of the practice is to transform this operational information into shared knowledge on trends, needs and effective approaches, supporting coordination, planning and project and policy development. For example, analysis of the data revealed a higher incidence of families with minors, compared to adult migrants alone in previous years, which led to the reinforcement of actions and services for minors and families.

Similarly, an increase in registered psychological vulnerabilities among migrants prompted the expansion of psychological support services.

How it works

Data collection begins at the MWC, where frontline professionals – case managers, social workers, psychologists, legal advisers and other staff – record and update beneficiary information as part of routine service delivery. They use a shared web-based system (https://www.inclusioneMilan.it/) with secure personal credentials, granting different levels of access and functionality according to each user's role, while ensuring full compliance with GDPR. The Observatory team – composed of city staff and representatives of external organisations (See 'Partnership' below) - supports this process by providing guidance and coordination, ensuring data quality and consolidating information across services.

Collected data cover demographics, reception pathways, education, language training, health services, and social inclusion activities:

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION SERVICES

Demographic
Personal data
Family data
Migration journey and history

Reception
Documents
Reception data
Individual project
Dismissal data
Housing solution

DATABASE

Areas of inclusion
Education
Language skills
Health & self care

Pathways, activities
Employment
Training, vocational activities
Languages courses
Psychological support
Networks
Social activities

INCLUSION SERVICES

Demographic
Personal data

Activities provided
Front Office
Team Italian Language
Team Family Reunification
Team Law Advice
Team Social Advice
Team Work and Training
Team Assisted Voluntary Return

Data analysis: The quality of the data is verified by the Observatory team in terms of accuracy, validity, and completeness. A statistical expert is responsible for conducting these checks to ensure that only valid data is analysed. The data are processed in aggregated form, allowing for both longitudinal and thematic analysis.

Data dissemination: The Observatory team publishes monthly briefs providing key service data, beneficiary flows, and profiles, as well as annual reports presenting trends in beneficiaries served, outcomes achieved, types of needs and activities, demographic analysis, selected beneficiary stories, a glossary, and reflections to guide planning and decision-making. In addition, the team organises targeted meetings: internal sessions with MWC staff to discuss collected data, and external meetings with local organisations or institutional stakeholders, often tailored to their specific interests. The process is two-way, allowing city departments and stakeholders to request specific analyses, ensuring data are both relevant and actionable for planning, coordination, and service improvement.

Partnership and collaboration

The practice is led by the City of Milan, which retains overall strategic coordination and governance responsibility for the system, including the Observatory and the MWC. Building on the city's Welfare Development Plan approved in 2022 and renewed in 2025, the model is grounded in a formal **co-programming and co-design process launched through a public call** (in application of the Third-Sector Code) to identify third-sector organisations willing to jointly design and implement a **city-wide, unitary reception and integration system** (SAI).

Through this process, the municipality established a **public–private partnership** with around 40 selected third-sector organisations, based on shared objectives, complementary roles and joint responsibility.

Rather than outsourcing services, the framework – which is updated every year - enables the municipality and its partners to **collectively shape, implement and continuously improve** the local reception and integration system within a shared governance arrangement.

Given the complexity of the partnership, particular attention is paid to governance and public–private dialogue. The governance model itself was co-designed and is structured across three levels: a strategic Steering Committee guiding the overall co-design process of the SAI and composed of representatives of the city and the selected third-sector organisations; four permanent thematic coordination groups overseeing management, monitoring, and service improvement; and operational service teams responsible for planning and delivery.

From an organisational perspective, the system is fully co-managed, with municipal and third-sector representatives jointly participating in governance bodies to integrate expertise and ensure coordinated implementation.

Within this framework, Amapola brings expertise in research, technical assistance, capacity-building and data-driven analysis. It supports the Observatory by coordinating data collection processes across services, developing a shared data management system, and translating operational information into structured analyses.

Participation

Participation focuses on the collaborative involvement of frontline professionals in the **design, collection, and interpretation** of data. Social workers, case managers, and other staff at the MWC contribute directly by entering and updating beneficiary information, providing contextual insights, and participating in feedback and reflection sessions led by Amapola. This ensures that knowledge production is grounded in operational reality and that those delivering services have ownership of the learning process. Direct participation of beneficiaries of the MWC in the Observatory's data processes is not yet formalised.

Effectiveness

The Observatory improves data quality, supports coordination, and guides evidence-based decision-making, strengthening the City's ability to adapt policies and services over time.

A concrete example of its effectiveness is the analysis of psychological and mental health vulnerability within the local reception system. By integrating data from municipal services, reception providers, and health services, the Observatory revealed a substantial gap between officially reported cases and vulnerabilities detected by services, showing a progressive increase over time. This evidence informed strategic discussions, strengthened coordination with mental health services, and supported targeted responses, including early screening, referrals, and the development of a territorial network for psychological care. In this way, the Observatory serves not only as a data-producing body but as a tool for evidence-based decision-making, enabling more timely, appropriate, and coordinated interventions for vulnerable beneficiaries.

Funding and resources

The Observatory relies primarily on municipal and EU resources (AMIF), including dedicated Observatory staff (5/6 professionals from Amapola with different areas of expertise such as statistics, project management, sociology, social research) and IT infrastructure for the shared data system. Additional support comes from service providers working within the MWC, who contribute to data entry and participate in feedback and analysis processes.

TRANSFERABILITY CONSIDERATIONS
Topline issues

Success factors

The innovative co-programming and co-design process of the SAI, implemented through a **participatory governance approach** with public and third-sector partners, represents a genuine culture shift in Milan. This co-responsibility approach to governing inclusion policies successfully integrates expertise and ensures coordinated implementation.

Another key success factors include the **active involvement of frontline professionals** in designing the tool and indicators (See 'Risk and Challenges').

Context-specific factors

The practice benefited from the City's **political commitment** - outlined in the Welfare and Development Plan - to evidence-based policymaking and to coordination across social, health and reception system.

Furthermore, the strong and continuous collaboration between the local administration and central public authorities (such as national Ministries), as well as with international organisations has contributed to creating a fertile institutional environment.

This **multilevel cooperation** has fostered a shared culture of data-informed decision-making and policy learning, which in turn supported the development and consolidation of the Observatory as a trusted space for analysis, dialogue and coordination.

The practice also benefited from the existence of the MWC, **Milan One Stop Shop**, which serves as an entry point for data collection and fosters coordination across departments and with stakeholders.

A last factor contributing to the initiative's success was the involvement of **specific expertise** in **data analysis**, both internal and external, which enabled the effective consolidation and use of operational information, competences that are not always available or fully valorised in municipal departments.

Risks and challenges

The main challenge is the resistance from staff who see data-related tasks as extra work. To overcome this, all professionals are involved from the start in designing the tools and deciding how data would be collected and used. In the course of implementation, the Observatory team organizes meetings with service teams to present the data, clarify unclear points, and demonstrate its value for improving services. Training sessions and ongoing feedback help staff feel supported. By keeping operators engaged at every step, the process is experienced as a **joint effort rather than a top-down requirement.**

Recommendations to another city – the dos and the don'ts

DO'S

1. **Engage staff from the start.** Involve frontline professionals in tool design, indicator selection and definition, and process planning and ensure they see the system as co-created, not imposed.

2. **Provide continuous training and support.** Offer hands-on training sessions to explain why data collection matters and support staff in interpreting and using data.

3. **Be flexible and adaptable.** Recognise that data collection is dynamic: indicators may need adjustment as the context or phenomena change. Build mechanisms to update tools, outputs, and processes over time.

DON'Ts

1. **Don't let data remain hidden or siloed.** Failing to share collected data limits its value for decision-making, learning, and service improvement.

2. **Don't expect perfection from day one.** Attempting to collect all possible indicators from the start is unrealistic and can overwhelm staff or create confusion. Instead, focus on the most relevant data and indicators first and expand gradually, allowing the system and teams to grow and adapt step by step.