



**CO-DEVELOPED SOLUTION AND POLICY
REQUESTS TO ADVANCE THE RIGHTS OF
UKRAINIAN WOMEN AND YOUTH IN ITALY**

SWEETIE

Supporting Women and youth in Emergency
with Environment of Trust In Europe.

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THE SWEETIE PROJECT

SWEETIE promotes the integration of Ukrainian women and youth by improving access to rights, employment and training, while strengthening the quality, accessibility and gender responsiveness of public services in Italy, Greece and Poland.

In Italy, the project combined community-based orientation desks, participatory assessment, peer mentoring and multi-stakeholder co-development processes in Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria. These activities involved Ukrainian women and youth, peer mentors, community representatives, public service staff, educational institutions, employment services, social and healthcare services and other local stakeholders.

The recommendations presented below were developed through the analysis of rights-holders experiences and needs, as well as through workshops, focus groups, interviews and co-development activities carried out in 2025–2026. They aim to support the transition from project-based experimentation to more integrated, accessible and participatory public service systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS. WHAT SHOULD BE IMPROVED IN 5 PILLARS

1. Co-develop gender responsive public services

Clear, accessible, multilingual and gender-sensitive information should be co-developed with communities and linked to coordinated referral pathways, ensuring continuity between orientation, public services and follow-up support.

Public services should ensure that users can clearly understand which service is competent, what documents are required, which steps they need to follow and what outcomes they can realistically expect. The findings emerging from the participatory assessment and co-development activities carried out in South Italy suggest that public services should be improved above all in terms of accessibility, clarity, continuity and responsiveness to rightholders' evolving needs, particularly in contexts shaped by displacement, conflict and complex transnational trajectories. The role of word-of-mouth communication and the active protagonism of communities is key, as they often represent the first and most trusted channel through which information is shared and interpreted. It is therefore important **to support the co-production of intersectional and accessible information materials**, and user-friendly brochures, developed in ways that respond to the actual needs and language practices of the people concerned. The availability of physical noticeboards

in public offices, as well as accessible, transparent, and easy-to-navigate websites, would also contribute to making information more visible and usable. In this regard, **facilitating regular engagement opportunities with communities is essential** to better understand emerging needs, including the direct impacts of the war against Ukraine, such as family separation and transnational care responsibilities. In this perspective, community-based orientation desks and other accessible support spaces should remain connected to public services, so that individual support can inform collective reflection and recurring structural barriers can be addressed through more systematic responses.

2. Advance women's economic empowerment and labour inclusion

European, national and regional institutions should work towards clearer, more accessible and more harmonised procedures for the recognition of qualifications.

The first key point is to strengthen service orientation functions related to labour inclusion, ensuring that users can clearly understand which service is competent, what documents are required, which steps they need to follow and what outcomes they can realistically expect. Information should be transparent, consistent and easier to understand, especially in areas where procedures involve several institutions, such as qualification recognition, access to employment and training, healthcare, housing and residence-related pathways. In this regard, the establishment of clearer and more harmonised procedures for the recognition of qualifications is particularly urgent. This is especially relevant in light of the increasing demand in host territories for skilled professionals, including in scientific, medical and educational fields. Universities, language schools, Employment Centres and public administrations should cooperate more closely to develop integrated pathways linking qualification recognition, language learning, training and access to decent work.

3. Establish integrated coordination mechanisms among institutions and refugees

Connecting institutions through coordinated, gender-sensitive and person-centred pathways, recognising people's biographies, competences and lived experiences as essential to the effective delivery of public services.

The SWEETIE pathways show that many difficulties arise not only within individual services, but also in the gaps between them. Better cooperation among Employment Centres, educational institutions, legal support actors, social services, healthcare-related offices and other relevant stakeholders would help reduce fragmentation and avoid situations in which users are repeatedly redirected without a clear pathway. More stable forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration should therefore be established at local and regional level. Structured roundtables, shared referral mechanisms and regular coordination practices could help connect users, frontline services and decision-makers, ensuring greater continuity between individual support, institutional coordination and policy planning. This coordination function should also allow the experiences emerging from service access to inform the design and improvement of local policies. Another important area for improvement is the quality of interaction between rights-holders and institutions. The evidence suggests the need for more gender-sensitive, culturally aware and person-centred approaches. This includes giving greater value to listening practices, recognising participants' biographical and professional trajectories, and avoiding excessively formal or standardised interactions that

treat users only as administrative cases. The development of a dedicated coordination function is also recommended. This function should connect users, frontline services and decision-makers, ensuring that individual cases can inform service planning and that recurring structural problems are addressed collectively. This role should be understood as a form of service coordination and governance rather than as an additional bureaucratic layer.

4. Participatory governance as a pillar of democracy

Services should be designed around people's actual circumstances rather than treating users exclusively as administrative cases.

Improving communication does not simply mean translating information. It means ensuring that people's requests are genuinely understood and that institutional responses are meaningful in relation to their lived realities. A biographical and narrative approach could provide a useful reference model, allowing public services to recognise personal histories, competences, aspirations and the specific barriers affecting each person's access to rights. Particular attention should be given to children and young people, both those remaining in Ukraine and those growing up in Italy. Targeted support should help preserve linguistic and cultural ties while facilitating inclusion in the host context. Across Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria, participatory activities also highlighted the importance of stable cultural spaces that foster exchange between Ukrainian traditions and the cultural life of the host cities. This could include Ukrainian music, theatre and dance activities, access to Ukrainian language and literature, dedicated sections in public libraries, exchanges between Italian and Ukrainian schools, and initiatives involving cultural mediators and community representatives.

5. Recognise peer mentors, community leaders and cultural mediators

Community leaders, peer mentors and cultural mediators should be recognised as active contributors to public service provision and policy design.

The role of community leaders and peer mentors is crucial in making communication more effective, reducing misunderstandings and supporting a more respectful relationship between institutions and users. The peer mentor model developed through SWEETIE has proven to be an important enabling factor for knowledge transfer, practical empowerment and trust-building. It should therefore be further strengthened and progressively integrated into ordinary community-based support mechanisms, rather than remaining dependent exclusively on short-term projects. Local policies should also place greater value on the participation and representation of migrant communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of public services, with particular attention to women and youth who face multiple and intersecting barriers to the exercise of their rights. This could be promoted through permanent spaces for dialogue, co-design processes and the structured participation of community representatives in intercultural consultations and other local participatory and decision-making bodies. Participation should not be limited to consultation after policies and services have already been defined. Communities should be involved throughout the process, from the identification of needs to the assessment of results. Recognising community leaders, peer mentors and cultural mediators as active contributors to these processes would help ensure that public policies are better informed by the lived experiences, priorities and capacities of the people they are intended to support.

CONCLUSION

Services become more effective when they are clear, coherent and responsive to people's lived realities, recognising their biographies, competences and aspirations. The experience of SWEETIE also confirms that Ukrainian women and youth should not be regarded only as beneficiaries of services, but as active contributors to their design, implementation and improvement.

Ensuring the sustainability of the project's results will therefore require local and regional authorities to integrate community-based orientation, peer mentoring, cultural mediation, inter-institutional coordination and the formal participation of migrant communities into ordinary policy planning and service provision. This should be supported by stable resources, shared referral mechanisms and regular opportunities for dialogue between institutions and communities.

The legacy of SWEETIE lies in demonstrating that trust is not an additional element of public service provision, but a condition for its effectiveness. Building systems based on trust, participation and shared responsibility can reduce fragmentation, strengthen autonomy and contribute to more inclusive, gender-responsive and accountable public services in Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria.

The overall lesson emerging from SWEETIE is that access to rights cannot be ensured through isolated services or one-off interventions. It requires integrated, accessible and person-centred pathways that connect orientation, referral, follow-up and participation.

The following matrix translates the recommendations emerging from the SWEETIE participatory assessment and co-development activities into operational proposals. It identifies the main actions, lead actors, partners, timeframe and indicators required to support their implementation across the three Italian territories involved in the project: Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria. The proposed actions should be adapted to the institutional arrangements, resources and existing networks of each territory.

SWEETIE – Operational Policy Matrix for Italy

Implementation framework for Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria

Strategic pillar	Policy recommendation	Key action	Lead actors	Main partners	Timeframe	Suggested indicators
1. Make public services genuinely accessible	Strengthen multilingual, gender-sensitive orientation, referral and follow-up functions	Consolidate community-based orientation desks and develop shared information and referral pathways across Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria	Municipalities and regional authorities	Public services; ActionAid; peer mentors; community organisations	Within 12 months	Number of active orientation channels; users reached; users successfully referred
2. Promote economic autonomy	Improve access to decent work and prevent professional downgrading	Connect employment orientation with qualification recognition, training, labour rights information and follow-up	Employment Centres and regional employment authorities	Municipalities; universities; CPIA; ARPAL; employers; trade unions; Third Sector	12–18 months	Users accessing qualified employment or relevant training; contracts monitored for compliance
	Strengthen work–life balance measures for women with care responsibilities	Expand access to childcare, educational support, after-school activities and flexible care services	Municipalities and regional welfare authorities	Schools; Third Sector; childcare providers; community organisations	Within 12 months	Families reached; women participating in work or training; childcare places available
3. Invest in skills and competences	Strengthen recognition and validation of qualifications and prior learning	Develop clear pathways for recognition of foreign qualifications, previous experience and informal competences, assessing entry-level competences through tests or other alternative methods	Regional employment authorities and Employment Centres	Universities; CPIA; ARPAL; Porta Futuro; professional bodies	12–18 months	Recognition pathways initiated and completed; training courses activated
4. Strengthen territorial governance	Establish integrated coordination mechanisms among institutions and the Third Sector	Create permanent local coordination groups involving welfare, employment, education, healthcare, housing, universities and civil society	Municipalities and regional authorities	Employment Centres; CPIA; ASL; universities; Third Sector; trade unions	Within 12 months; ongoing	Coordination mechanism established; meetings held; shared protocols or agreements
	Ensure continuity beyond the SWEETIE project	Establish a permanent local or inter-territorial forum to monitor implementation of these recommendations	Municipalities and regional authorities	Public services; universities; Third Sector; migrant communities; SWEETIE network	Launch within 12 months; ongoing	Forum established; annual meetings; monitoring report; recommendations implemented

Strategic pillar	Policy recommendation	Key action	Lead actors	Main partners	Timeframe	Suggested indicators
5. Engage the community as a resource	Ensure the formal representation of migrant communities in policy and service planning	Involve Ukrainian community representatives, peer mentors and migrant organisations in consultations, planning and service evaluation	Municipalities	Community organisations; peer mentors; cultural mediators; Third Sector	Start within 6 months; ongoing	Community representatives involved; co-design processes; proposals incorporated into policies
	Recognise and sustain peer mentoring and cultural mediation	Establish training, recognition and remuneration pathways, integrating peer mentors and cultural mediators into ordinary services	Municipalities and service providers	ActionAid; community organisations; public services; training institutions	12–18 months	Peer mentors and mediators trained and engaged; users supported; user trust and satisfaction
	Support cultural participation, intergenerational inclusion and community belonging	Promote cultural activities, Ukrainian language and literature, library resources and exchanges between local and Ukrainian schools and organisations	Municipalities and cultural institutions	Schools; libraries; community organisations; cultural mediators; universities	12–24 months	Cultural initiatives supported; participants; schools, libraries and organisations involved

The project

Supporting Women and youth in Emergency with Environment of Trust In Europe

SWEETIE aims to facilitate the social inclusion of refugees fleeing Ukraine, particularly women and youth, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. It achieves these objectives by influencing specific areas of the welfare and labour systems (i.e., job access and inclusion, education, healthcare) in each country for these to become gender-responsive and culture-sensitive public services. SWEETIE replicates an intervention model tested in Italy (SWEET) by transferring it to Greece and Poland and by scaling it up in Italy at a political level.

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