From Access to Inclusion

Key Findings and Recommendations from the SWEETIE Project

Strengthening services, rights and participation of Ukrainian women and other migrant and refugee communities in Poland, Greece and Italy.

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1. Introduction and purpose

The SWEETIE project is a European partnership bringing together organisations from Italy, Poland and Greece. The project was implemented by three organisations: ActionAid Italia, Polish Migration Forum and KMOP - Social Action and Innovation Centre in the period from April 2025 till October 2026.

The project aimed to strengthen the social inclusion of refugees fleeing Ukraine, particularly women and youth, while contributing to more accessible, effective, gender-responsive and culturally sensitive welfare and labour services. The project recognised that meaningful integration depends not only on the availability of services but also on beneficiaries' ability to understand, access and navigate them, and on the capacity of relevant institutions to respond to their specific needs.

The project consequently moved beyond an approach based exclusively on service delivery. Ukrainian beneficiaries were considered active participants in identifying obstacles and shaping possible improvements. The overall lesson emerging from the SWEETIE project 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.

This report presents key recommendations emerging from participatory multi-stakeholder co-design workshops and focus groups with Ukrainian women. It aims to share the project's learning with institutions, practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders, supporting the development of more responsive services. Rather than proposing a single solution for different national contexts, the report identifies common priorities and highlights practical examples that can inform further dialogue and action across Europe.

2. Listening to women and local stakeholders

The Activity 5.2 process involved workshops and focus groups attended by Ukrainian participants and peer mentors across the three countries. The sessions used

experience-sharing, peer exchange, practical exercises and service mapping to explore how women navigate public services and what would help them exercise their rights.

The subsequent Activity 5.3 processes broadened the discussion to include institutions and other stakeholders. In Greece, workshops addressed multilingual information, service navigation, referrals, employment and participation. In Poland, discussions focused particularly on legalisation procedures, housing, educational support and the organisation of public services. In Italy, a separate multistakeholder process was organised

across Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria.

Across these activities, an important distinction emerged between services being formally available and people being able to access and use them in practice. Language barriers, unclear procedures, fragmented information, administrative delays and the need for individual assistance can prevent people from completing essential processes or benefiting from their rights.

Peer networks and community knowledge help women navigate these systems, but they cannot replace clear public information, accessible procedures and adequately resourced institutions. The project therefore points towards a combined approach: improving formal services while recognising the role of trusted community-based support.

3. Key findings and recommendations

3.1. Rights, transparency and fairness in administrative procedures

In all countries participants raised issues related to difficulties understanding administrative procedures and accessing employment-related and other public services. In Poland specifically, persons identified concerns related to inconsistent requirements across offices, insufficient information, delays and the absence of clear, reasoned decisions in legalisation procedures. In Greece, participants described difficulties understanding their rights and navigating administrative procedures. Their experiences also highlighted the consequences of unclear processes and limited access to practical guidance. In Italy, workshops in Naples addressed residence permits, protection statuses, renewal procedures, travel restrictions and access to public services.

Recommendations

- Make administrative procedures clear, transparent and consistent, with accessible explanations of requirements, documentation, costs and expected timelines.
- Ensure that decisions affecting individuals' rights are communicated in a clear and reasoned manner, with information about available review or appeal mechanisms where applicable.
- Strengthen accountability and the quality of interactions between service users and public officials.
- Review whether administrative requirements create avoidable barriers for people who are legally entitled to access a service or protection.
- Assess digitalisation by whether it improves the completion of procedures and timely access to rights, rather than by the number of services transferred online.

Administrative systems should be designed to implement applicable law fairly and effectively. Simplification must not come at the expense of legal safeguards, and individuals should not be left without understandable information about their situation or available options.

3.2. Institutional capacity and professional expertise

In Poland, participants highlighted backlogs, waiting times and delays in legalisation procedures, alongside concerns about the capacity of existing systems to process applications effectively. In Greece, the experience of navigating public services, including digital administration, showed the importance of practical assistance alongside formal systems. Italian workshops similarly explored the difficulties of navigating administrative and employment services and the need for stronger cooperation between institutions and communities.

Recommendations

- Review staffing levels, workloads and processing capacity in services experiencing persistent delays.
- Strengthen the professional expertise of staff working in migration-related administration, employment support, social services and other relevant areas.
- Provide regular training in applicable legislation, clear communication, intercultural competence, gender-responsive service delivery and working with people affected by displacement.

- Include stress management and burnout prevention in staff support, particularly in services dealing with complex needs and high workloads.
- Establish clear quality standards and feedback mechanisms to identify recurring problems and improve service delivery.
- Strengthen cooperation between public institutions, local authorities and civil society organisations, while maintaining clear institutional responsibilities.

Digital tools can improve efficiency, but they cannot compensate on their own for insufficient staffing, inconsistent decision-making or a lack of specialist knowledge.

3.3. Effective access to services

In Greece, participants reported difficulties using the public administration portal gov.gr because it was available only in Greek, limiting their ability to complete administrative procedures independently. They also shared experiences of unclear processes and difficulties accessing services, including employment-related support.

In Poland, focus groups addressed access to healthcare, administrative and employment services, social support and counselling. Participants discussed language, financial and administrative barriers, and situations in which additional guidance was needed. In Italy, workshops examined access to healthcare and social care, education, professional training, employment services and labour-rights protection.

Recommendations

- Assess services from the perspective of the people who use them, including whether they can understand requirements, complete procedures and obtain the intended support.
- Identify and reduce barriers related to language, costs, waiting times, appointment availability, childcare responsibilities and complex administrative processes.
- Offer assisted access for people who need help completing forms, navigating digital systems or understanding institutional requirements.
- Provide alternative routes to essential services when online access is not feasible.
- Where legally and operationally possible, introduce flexible appointment arrangements and service hours that better reflect users' circumstances.

- Monitor where people abandon procedures or are repeatedly referred elsewhere, and use this information to improve services.

A service should not be considered accessible simply because it exists or because information about it is published. Its effectiveness depends on whether people can realistically use it and obtain support in a timely and appropriate way.

3.4. Accessible information, peer support and coordination

In Italy, workshops highlighted the role of community networks, peer mentoring and practical guidance in navigating public services, legal procedures and employment pathways. The Reggio Calabria discussions also explored how public and private social services could work together to provide more integrated support. In Poland, stakeholders called for clearer information and stronger cooperation between institutions and civil society. In Greece, workshops focused on navigating digital public services, sharing practical information and mapping available support.

Recommendations

- Provide clear, practical and regularly updated information in relevant languages, using online and offline channels.
- Explain not only which services are available, but also who is eligible, how to apply, what documents are needed, how long procedures may take and where to seek help.
- Use multiple communication channels, including websites, printed materials, service noticeboards, social media and community networks.
- Establish clear referral pathways between institutions and organisations, with designated contact points where appropriate.
- Reduce the need for service users to repeatedly explain their circumstances or navigate disconnected systems without assistance.
- Recognise peer mentors, bilingual workers, cultural mediators and community leaders as potential partners in service access, with appropriate training, supervision, safeguarding and clearly defined roles.

Community-based support can strengthen trust and help people navigate unfamiliar systems. It should complement, rather than substitute for, the responsibility of public services to communicate clearly and provide accessible assistance.

3.5. Gender-responsive services and meaningful participation

The project places Ukrainian women's experiences at the centre of its participatory approach. In Poland, focus groups explored access to reproductive and gynaecological care, paediatric healthcare, social support and counselling. In Italy, activities in Reggio Calabria addressed women's financial resilience, gender pay gaps and protection against economic abuse. The Greek workshops created opportunities for women to exchange experiences, identify barriers and contribute to proposals for service improvement.

Recommendations

- Integrate gender-responsive approaches into the planning, delivery and evaluation of public services.
- Consider how childcare, caring responsibilities, safety concerns, work schedules and language needs affect women's ability to access support.
- Ensure that women can access relevant healthcare, psychosocial support, social protection and advice on their rights.
- Strengthen awareness of economic abuse, unequal pay, labour exploitation and other risks that may affect women's independence and safety.
- Involve women and young people in service design from the outset, rather than consulting them only after decisions have been made.
- Establish regular opportunities for beneficiaries to provide feedback and participate in dialogue with institutions.
- Communicate how participants' proposals have influenced decisions, service design or follow-up actions.

Participation is most meaningful when it can influence decisions and when institutions explain what has changed, what remains unresolved and why.

3.6. Stable housing, education and integrated support systems

In Poland, Activity 5.3 workshops identified gaps between emergency accommodation and longer-term housing. Participants raised the need for transitional housing, improved access to municipal and social housing, rental support and more consistent eligibility rules. In Greece, participants identified information and navigation barriers affecting access to services and integration support. In Italy, workshops explored the accessibility of welfare services and the need for more coordinated responses between public institutions, non-profit organisations and community resources.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the transition from emergency accommodation to stable housing, including transitional options and improved access to existing housing support where eligible.
- Review administrative and practical barriers to accessing municipal or social housing and rental assistance, taking account of applicable eligibility rules.
- Improve coordination between housing, education, healthcare, employment and social support services.
- In education, support the sustainable provision of intercultural assistance, including adequate training, continuity and clear integration into school teams.
- Strengthen cooperation between public authorities, schools, civil society and community organisations so that people can access appropriate support without being passed between disconnected services.
- Build the capacity of mainstream services to respond to diverse needs while retaining specialist expertise where it is necessary.

Emergency assistance remains essential, but it should connect to longer-term pathways that support stability, independence and participation in local communities.

3.7. Sustainable economic inclusion and rights-based employment

In Greece, the workshops identified the importance of job matching, skills profiling, recognition of Ukrainian qualifications, upskilling and reskilling, labour-rights awareness and support for entrepreneurship. In Italy, workshops addressed the recognition of foreign qualifications, access to training and employment opportunities, labour-rights protection and representation. Activities in Reggio Calabria explored financial resilience and economic abuse. In Poland, the focus groups examined access to employment services and the information needed to navigate them.

Recommendations

- Make employment support accessible and understandable, including clear information about public employment services, available training and application procedures.
- Improve guidance on the recognition of foreign qualifications and skills, including practical information on requirements, documentation and alternative routes to employment.

- Combine job matching with language learning, professional training, skills development and opportunities to gain locally recognised experience.
- Strengthen access to information about employment rights, safe working conditions, reporting mechanisms and protection from exploitation.
- Support entrepreneurship through tailored mentoring and accessible guidance on relevant procedures and opportunities.
- Promote decent and sustainable employment rather than measuring success solely by rapid job placement.
- Where possible, provide follow-up support to identify barriers after entry into employment and help people progress towards work that reflects their skills and experience.

Economic inclusion should support women's autonomy, safety and long-term prospects. It should not require people to accept exploitative or unsuitable work simply to achieve immediate employment outcomes.

4. From recommendations to action

The project findings point to several practical priorities for public authorities, service providers and other stakeholders.

First, improve the accessibility and transparency of existing services. Review procedures from the user's perspective, identify recurring barriers and provide clear multilingual information, assisted access and understandable explanations of decisions.

Second, invest in institutional capacity. Address staffing and workload pressures, strengthen professional training and establish quality-assurance and feedback mechanisms.

Third, connect services rather than treating needs in isolation. Improve referral pathways between administrative, housing, healthcare, education, employment and social support services. Designated contact points and stronger public–civil society cooperation can help make these connections more effective.

Fourth, formalise the role of community support. Peer mentors and trusted community actors can improve access and build confidence. Their contribution should be supported

through appropriate training, supervision, safeguarding and sustainable arrangements, without shifting institutional responsibilities onto volunteers.

Fifth, make participation part of service governance. Regular dialogue with women and young people, service providers and other stakeholders can help institutions identify problems earlier, test proposed improvements and assess whether changes work in practice.

Finally, monitor outcomes, not only activities. Useful indicators could include the time needed to complete procedures, the proportion of users able to access services without repeated referrals, the availability of multilingual information, satisfaction with staff interactions, access to appropriate employment and housing, and the extent to which beneficiary feedback leads to changes. Indicators should be adapted to each service and local context.

The next step is to translate the project proposals into prioritised actions with clear responsibilities, realistic timelines and mechanisms for monitoring progress. Local authorities and service providers can identify changes within their direct control, while systemic issues may require coordination with national authorities and, where relevant, European-level dialogue.

5. Conclusion

The SWEETIE project demonstrates the value of combining women's lived experiences with structured dialogue among institutions, service providers and other stakeholders. The activities in Poland, Greece and Italy identify different local challenges, but together they highlight the importance of services that are understandable, accessible, coordinated and responsive to the circumstances of the people they serve.

The central lesson is that inclusion cannot be achieved through formal service availability alone. People must be able to understand their rights, navigate procedures, access assistance and participate in decisions that affect their lives. This requires adequate institutional capacity, clear information, effective coordination, gender-responsive approaches and sustained opportunities for participation.

The recommendations provide a practical basis for improving services in the three participating countries and for wider European learning. Their implementation should remain sensitive to national legal frameworks and local needs, with progress assessed through the experiences and outcomes of the people the services are intended to support.

The ultimate measure of an inclusive service is not only whether it exists, but whether people can access and use it effectively, exercise their rights and do so with dignity.

This report reflects learning and recommendations developed through SWEETIE project activities. Country-specific examples are identified as such and should not be interpreted as evidence that identical findings or measures apply in every participating country.