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We Trained Perfect Tenants, We Should Have Trained Landlords: Migrants' Housing Pathways and Social Innovation in South Tyrol, Italy

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«WE TRAINED PERFECT TENANTS, WE SHOULD HAVE TRAINED LAND-LORDS»: MIGRANTS' HOUSING PATHWAYS AND SOCIAL INNOVATION IN SOUTH TYROL, ITALY

Drawing on findings from the monitoring of two European Social Fund-funded projects supporting migrants' access to housing in South Tyrol, Northern Italy, this article examines the interaction between the local housing and welfare system on the one hand and migrants' housing pathways on the other. Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected during this local case study, the article discusses the potential and limitations of socially innovative interventions to improve migrants' access to housing. The findings suggest that barriers to housing access due to the residual (social) rental sector and discriminatory practices in the housing market have a significant impact on migrants' welfare. The discussion highlights three key elements. First, the need for socially innovative interventions that address the structural features of the local housing and welfare system. Second, the need to design such interventions based on the recognition of migrants' agency in coping with housing precarity. Finally, the importance of overcoming the sectoral gap by establishing cooperation between policy sectors (social, housing, reception) to address housing inequalities. This integrated approach would facilitate the development of informed and inclusive policies, ultimately promoting greater social cohesion and the well-being of migrants in South Tyrol and beyond. This research enriches the field of housing studies by challenging the dominance of national-level research by showing how local factors influence migrants' housing outcomes, and migration studies by highlighting the link between migrants' housing pathways and their well-being and aspirations.

KEYWORDS *Migrants' housing pathways, Local housing system, Social innovation, Housing policies, Discrimination.*

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1. Introduction

Housing is a key aspect and a core domain in the integration process of migrants[1] (Ager and Strang 2008)[2], as it is «a precondition for the full enjoyment of social and civil rights as well as social services» (Bolzoni *et al.* 2015). Migrants' housing trajectories involve the intersection of legal, economic, socio-cultural, and linguistic factors affecting not only physical access to housing, but also processes of social integration and participation more broadly (Fravega 2018; Boccagni 2023). Despite its critical importance, migrants' access to housing, whether in the private rental market or in social housing, has been largely neglected in policy discussions and research or rather framed as a security concern (Serpa 2023; Ulceluse *et al.* 2022).

This paper conceptualises the local-scale entanglements of housing, welfare and integration policies and their impact on migrants' housing pathways, their agency and sense of belonging. In line with the «local turn» in migration studies, the implementation of integration policies, welfare and thus also migrants' housing rights largely depend on local level policies and practices implemented (Çağlar and Schiller 2011). We examine these issues in the context of the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol, which offers an interesting perspective due to its special status but also its economic environment. Its population of approximately 516,000 is composed of 70% German-speakers, 26% Italian-speakers and 4.5% Ladin-speakers. Approximately 9.7% are persons with foreign citizenship, and 6.6% of the entire population are non-EU citizens[3]. Amongst Italy's wealthiest provinces, South Tyrol has a low unemployment rate and, consequently, a high reliance on foreign workers. Thanks to its Statute of Autonomy, it has broader legislative and administrative competences than other Italian provinces with «regular» status, extending to policy fields such as housing, welfare, and integration. Despite these extended competences, housing remains a key concern in the region due to the shortage

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[1] Here and in the rest of the text, the term «migrant» indicates persons with a migrant background who participated in the two monitored projects. They are Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) with different legal statuses, including asylum seekers, beneficiaries of different types of protection, migrants with different types and durations of residence permits. In all cases, they are documented and in a precarious housing situation, as these two aspects were prerequisites for participation in the two projects monitored.

[2] Acknowledging the ongoing debate on the term (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016), we refer to integration processes and policies as the most commonly wording to address the complex and multidimensional processes of adaptation and negotiation between newcomers and destination contexts.

[3] In 2021, foreign citizens amounted in the province to 9.7% of the total population, a percentage slightly higher than the Italian national average of 8.7%. Data source: ASTAT (2023a).

of affordable housing with negative effects particularly for vulnerable persons such as migrants.

The article examines how and to what extent interventions adopting socially innovative approaches can foster structural changes to promote accessible, affordable, and stable housing for migrants by filling the gaps of existing housing and welfare provisions. It is based on the monitoring activities of two social innovation initiatives funded by the European Social Fund. The following research questions guide the analysis:

1. Which mechanisms of housing, welfare, and integration policies influence migrants' housing pathways at the local level?

2. How do housing, welfare, and integration policies affect the aspirations, capabilities, and sense of belonging of migrants?

3. Whether and how did the socially innovative interventions implemented by the two projects under review contribute to improve access to housing for migrants?

Through a local case study, the article examines the interrelationship between the housing system, housing policies and migrants' housing pathways. In doing so, our research contributes to the field of housing studies by showing how specific elements of the local housing system influence migrants' housing pathways, in line with the call to challenge the dominance of the national level in comparative housing research (Hoekstra 2020). Embracing this local perspective on the housing regime, we consider their impact in terms of housing outcomes for migrants. Furthermore, the research contributes to the field of migration studies by highlighting the link between migrants' housing pathways on the one hand and their wellbeing and aspirations on the other. Finally, it explores the relationship between social innovation and local welfare systems, advocating for a comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences of exclusion and housing insecurity in order to facilitate more informed and inclusive policy debates.

2. Literature review

The article's theoretical framework builds on three interrelated pillars that explore the role of housing systems, migrants' agency and, finally, social innovation theory related to migrant integration.

Housing affordability and accessibility are structural conditions that derive from local housing systems embedded in broader welfare regimes and characterised by a particular arrangement of housing tenure and provision. These are closely linked to the welfare system, particularly the redistributive mechanisms adopted at the national, regional or local level (Arbaci 2019). In

analysing the local housing and welfare system of our case study, we therefore consider two main aspects: first, the province's welfare system aligns with the Italian national welfare system typified as a Southern-European, corporatist welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990). Consequently, it exhibits familistic forms of social protection, which tend to reinforce class structures (Allen *et al.* 2004). The corresponding housing system features a «dualistic tenancy system» with a residualized social rental sector, alongside a largely unregulated and primarily private rental housing sector, as well as a distorted rent subsidy system (Kemeny 1995; Hoekstra 2009). At the same time, the case study site is characterized by convergence trends in housing and welfare systems, whereby the welfare state and social housing are retreating in parallel (Belotti and Arbaci 2021). Although policy choices may have become more constrained in the context of these trends, analysis of the variation that actually exists in policies, institutions and outcomes allows an appreciation of feasible policy choices and possible reforms (Stephens and Hick 2024). Various authors recently explored the specific barriers that migrants with different legal status encounter when trying to access the housing system in Italy and other European countries, focusing on scarcity of public and social housing supply, employment precarity, discrimination and lack of «knowledge» of the housing system (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023; Bovo *et al.* 2022; Salinaro *et al.* 2022; Semprebon *et al.* 2022). Others explored this issue in the context of rural areas, emphasising the role of local configurations of social capital and housing systems in regions other than urban ones (Weidinger and Kordel 2020; Gardesse and Lelevrier 2020).

The second pillar of our theoretical frame relates to migrants' agency in shaping their housing pathways. Access to housing is a process of social construction in which economic, social, political, and legal factors interact with migrants' agency, emphasising their active role in navigating housing and precarity. While national and local housing and welfare structures shape the structure of opportunities in relation to access to housing, migrants' agency mobilizes available financial, material, cognitive, political, and social resources (Serpa 2023). Indeed, migrants use a wide range of strategies to cope with, and negotiate, housing inequalities. These strategies include the use of migrant networks to avoid racist encounters in the housing market and the welfare system, informal and irregular housing arrangements with family, friends, or acquaintances, but also rough sleeping and squatting (Boccagni 2023; Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023; Bolzoni *et al.* 2015; Fravega 2018; Montagna and Grazioli 2021; Chiodelli *et al.* 2021). These coping behaviours are important acts of resistance and contestation that highlight the shortcomings and inadequacies of the current welfare and housing system. Adopting a social constructivist perspective allows to analyse the interaction between migrants' choices, constraints resulting from prevailing structural conditions, the resulting

renegotiations, and their effects, integrating both agency and structure, and recognising varying levels of limitations as well as opportunities for choice experienced by migrants. We frame migrants' agency about housing as driven by their capabilities and aspirations within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures (de Haas 2021, 2). This framework also avoids rigid categorisations of migration as either forced or voluntary. It allows for the inclusion of mobility and immobility within the same conceptual context, offering a lens for understanding the diverse experiences of migrants (de Haas 2021). Moreover, it invites to critically analyse the often-paternalistic character of social welfare interventions (Reamer 1983; Mead 1997; Lumley-Sapanski 2022). We refer to the concept of migrants' housing pathways as the social constructionist framework that examines «the interaction between households and the structures that influence the opportunities and constraints they face» (Clapham 2005, 239). This framework places at the centre of the analysis actors' perceptions and attitudes, and the meaning they attach to housing, stressing the centrality of «patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space» (*ibidem*, 27). Inefficiencies due to inadequate support hinder progress, and inconsistent enforcement and application of national legal provisions at the local level create challenges, leading to civic stratification, social exclusion, precarity, discrimination and limited housing access for migrants (Serpa 2023; Bolzoni *et al.* 2015).

Finally, we draw on social innovation theory to examine how the two case study projects contributed to improving migrants' access to housing through the reconfiguration of «attitudes, behaviours or perceptions» (Neumeier 2012, 55). Following Moulaert, we see social innovation as encompassing both processual dimensions (e.g., mobilisation of actors, participatory processes) and outcomes (e.g., new and improved means of joint action, new governance structures) (Moulaert *et al.* 2013). We then draw on Mulgan's theory of «connected difference» to examine the integration of existing elements and the forging of new social relationships to foster innovation diffusion. Accordingly, we consider the combination of existing elements, the implementation across organisational, sectoral and disciplinary boundaries, the creation of new meaningful social relationships that contribute to the diffusion and embedding of the social innovation (Mulgan *et al.* 2007). The study applies Oosterlynck's definition of social innovation as locally embedded practices addressing unmet social needs and promoting structural transformation (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013). By focusing on locally developed solutions to housing and welfare challenges, it reveals how communities can fill policy gaps effectively. Finally, authors exploring the role of social innovation in supporting migrants' access to housing argue that it can contribute to the effectiveness of the post-reception transition (Campomori and Feraco 2018; Astolfo and Boano 2018).

3. Methodology

The article is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout the life cycle of two European Social Fund-funded projects – Project A and Project B – designed to support migrants living in the multilingual border region of South Tyrol in Northern Italy. The authors of this article were responsible for the monitoring of these projects over a period of 12 months, from summer 2022 to spring 2023.

The projects

Projects A and B both shared the overall objective of supporting TCNs, regardless of their legal status, as long as they are not undocumented, on their way to self-sufficiency in housing through socially innovative approaches. A key aspect of the projects was their emphasis on bridging the gaps in traditional housing and welfare provision, firstly by establishing cooperation between the public, private and third sectors, and secondly through their client- and needs-based approach. Both projects were a partnership consisting of public institutions and third sector organizations. Two NGOs, the provincial social housing authority and a municipality were partners in Project A, with one of the NGOs leading the project. Project B involved a district community as the project lead, an NGO, and a local cooperative. In both projects, the main role in service design and delivery was played by the NGOs, with different degrees of expertise in housing support, while the involvement of public authorities varied. The strengthening of inter-sectoral collaboration was considered fundamental to address weaknesses and gaps in the existing housing and welfare systems in the province, but also to provide sustainable, innovative, and effective interventions in close collaboration with key institutions and stakeholders already present on the territory, rather than in isolation or in parallel to them.

      Project A sought to reduce housing exclusion and insecurity of migrants in South Tyrol's provincial capital Bozen/Bolzano, home to the largest number of migrants in the province and considered as a gateway for migrant trajectories along the Brenner route (degli Uberti 2019). The project implemented micro level activities (individual and group counselling to support housing integration of individual users) and macro level interventions aimed at widening the network of public and private actors involved in planning future interventions to support independent living. Overall, 140 migrants participated in the project, 128 of them took part in the monitoring.

      The main objective of Project B was the creation of a one-stop-shop for migrants with the objective to aid migrants in finding jobs and housing in a rural and peripheral area. This not very diverse part of South Tyrol faces a

lack of services for migrants and a shortage of workers for local hotels and factories, largely due to the difficulty of finding accommodation. The project served a heterogeneous group of more than 200 migrants, mostly residing in temporary asylum seeker accommodations, providing highly diversified services that ranged from language courses to legal and psychological advice.

The methods

We used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, to analyse the impact of locally embedded housing and welfare systems on migrants housing outcomes, and to trace the effects of the socially innovative practices implemented by the two projects. We conducted desk research on the Italian and South Tyrolean housing policies and systems, used a questionnaire compiled by key local stakeholders in the field of housing and welfare[4]; and conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with project staff, including social workers, and local experts, to then conduct a thematic analysis of the transcripts.

To examine migrants' housing pathways, we tracked individuals' housing situations throughout the project lifecycle using the ETHOS typology and conducted semi-structured interviews with migrants involved in the two projects, as well as with social workers and other project staff, in addition to participant observation of project events and activities.

This paper draws primarily on two of these data sets: the ETHOS data and the thematic analysis of interviews. ETHOS qualifies housing exclusion based on three domains: *physical* (adequate living space); *social* (ability to maintain satisfactory and confidential relationships in that space); and *legal* (recognised legal title allowing full enjoyment). The absence of one or more of these conditions defines four categories of housing exclusion: *roofless*, *house-less*, *people living in insecure housing conditions*, *people living in inadequate housing conditions* (Brändle and García 2015). In addition, the semi-structured interviews with migrants and social workers provided qualitative observations about migrants' housing pathways and the barriers faced. These interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis; however, the sampling strategy for selecting participants were constrained by the availability of «suitable» respondents identified by social workers. Moreover, there was a low number of women among the interviewees particularly in project A, in line with the participant

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[4] The questionnaire was adapted from the methodology of the H2020 project SIMRA and examined the respective roles, the social, economic, and institutional impacts, as well as the sustainability of the interventions implemented.

Table 1. Themes and methods used

Observed dimension	Methods
Entanglement of housing and integration national and local policies	Desk research on the national and local housing systems
Innovation in housing support services	33 semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders (local administrators, welfare service managers, landlords' representatives, real estate agents, social workers, project partners)
New collaborations in service delivery	10 Focus groups with project staff within each project 2 joint focus groups with staff from project A and B Social innovation questionnaire compiled by 20 project partners (11 from project A and 9 from project B)
Changes in individuals' housing situation	ETHOS categorization conducted with 128 out of 140 participants (migrants)
(Re)definition of individual housing pathways	59 semi-structured interviews with participants (22 migrants) and project staff (37) Participant observation of project events and activities

population, leading to a potential underrepresentation of issues linked to gender and intersectionality (Project A: 20% women, Project B: 50% women).

4. Key findings and discussion

In this section, we describe the main findings, presenting them through our three research questions.

Context: Features of the housing, welfare, and reception systems at national and provincial level

We start the discussion of results by addressing our first research question: *Which mechanisms of the housing, welfare, and integration policies influence migrants' housing pathways at the local level?*

Italy is among the European countries with the lowest share of social housing (4.2% compared to the EU average of 7.5% of total housing stock) and private housing stock available for rent, with housing policy strongly encouraging homeownership (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023, 15). This limits access to, and affordability of, the rental market, which particularly affects

low-income groups. Access to social housing is regulated at regional/provincial level, often imposing strict eligibility criteria for TCNs (proof of absence of property in the country of origin, residence, and work requirements) which were considered discriminatory by the Constitutional Court (judgement no. 9/2021). As a result, low-income renters face higher rates of overcrowding (23% compared to the EU average of 17%) and excessive housing costs (35% compared to the EU average of 28%) (OECD/European Commission 2023).

Since the 1990s, Italian reception and integration policies have been characterised by emergency measures and the consequent lack of a structured reception system (Procacci and Marchetti 2013). The Italian reception system is a two-track system, with a standard track (renamed over the years as SPRAR, SIPROIMI and then SAI) and an emergency track based in large-scale reception centres (Centri Accoglienza Straordinaria, CAS). Since municipalities' participation in the standard track is voluntary, it has a rather marginal role, with reception taking place mainly in CAS. Receiving more than 60% of asylum seekers in Italy, CAS only provide accommodation, largely neglecting social, labour and housing integration (Bove *et al.* 2023, 120). While the National Plan for the Integration of Protected Persons does not address the issue of housing, recent reforms have further eroded the capacity of the reception system to create the conditions for independent living (Bovo *et al.* 2022; Campomori and Feraco 2018; Semprebon *et al.* 2022).

The Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano is embedded in this national framework but displays several particularities with regards to reception/integration policies and housing. Due to its autonomous status, South Tyrol has legislative competences in key areas for the inclusion of migrants, such as welfare, urban planning, reception, and integration, as well as social housing. South Tyrol has the lowest unemployment rate among Italian regions and provinces – 2.9% compared to 8.1% at national level in 2022[5] – and a resulting high labour demand which depends on workers from outside the province. It is also the province with the largest difference between the average income of the local population (Fondazione Moressa 2023).

The structure of the reception system in South Tyrol is influenced by the strong autonomy of the province and its geographical location. Indeed, the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano is responsible for the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. The city of Bozen/Bolzano is a key junction on the Brenner migration route, which has fueled the city's self-representation as a place of transit, strongly influencing the provision of reception services. The use of categories such as «migrants in transit» and «out-of-quota» has exacerbated migrants' vulnerability and limited their access

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[5] EUROSTAT, Unemployment rates NUTS 2 regions (lfst_r_lfu3rt).

to the reception system and welfare services (degli Uberti 2019). Studies on the local reception system identify as an implicit goal of provincial policies «the «refusal of any burden», thus avoiding the potential «pull effect» of inclusive policies» (Caroselli and Semprebon 2021, 183). The consequences of this approach have led to numerous cases of «homeless asylum seekers», excluding them from the juridical and social rights asylum seekers are entitled to (degli Uberti 2019, 10). The SPRAR program was introduced in the province only in 2017, and currently, only three district communities are part of the SAI system (SAI 2023).

A similar reluctance can be observed in South Tyrol's approach to migrant integration policies whose development has been delayed and constrained by conflicts regarding the distribution of competences between levels of governance, as well as the related tensions in the governance of «new» diversity in a territory inhabited by «old» minorities (Carlà and Mitterhofer forthcoming). Thus, despite its additional competences, South Tyrol adopted a Provincial Law on Integration only in 2011, later than most other Italian regions (Medda-Windischer 2015; Wisthaler 2016). Importantly, provincial integration policies do not explicitly focus on the long-term housing integration of migrants, reflecting a general trend where integration policies generally do not address housing (Edgar *et al.* 2004). Access to social housing in the province is highly regulated and deserves special attention. As in other Italian regions, it is linked to five years of residency and regular employment. Additionally, South Tyrol adopted the criterion of linguistic proportionality based on the relative number of people belonging to each linguistic group (Italian, German, Ladin, and the so-called «others») to regulate access to social housing[6]. This criterion nullifies the relative advantage linked to the greater availability of social housing in the province compared to the Italian average (7.1% of the total housing stock compared to 4.3%; ASTAT 2023c, 174) and constitutes in essence, a mechanism if not of exclusion, at least of strong penalisation in the enjoyment of the right to housing. As the percentages in Table 2 show, only 6.4% of social housing assignees are TCNs, even though the data on average incomes suggest that the demand for social housing by this group is far greater. In fact, in 2022, 84% of all people assisted by social inclusion facilities were foreign citizens[7].

The 5-year residency rule also applies to public rent subsidies, thus excluding recently arrived migrants. Between 2001 and 2020, the total num-

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[6] Decree of the President of the Province 271/2023 on Allocation of public and social housing for rent, Art. 12, stating that «Applicants from non-EU states and stateless persons are treated as a separate language group», http://lexbrowser.provinz.bz.it/doc/it/231159/decreto_del_presidente_della_provincia_23_agosto_2023_n_27.aspx?view=1.

[7] See ASTAT (2023b).

Table 2. Social housing tenants and rent subsidy recipients by language group

	Italian speakers	German	Ladin	Non-EU citizens
Social housing tenants[a] (%)	49.7	42.4	1.6	6.4
Rent subsidy recipients[b] (%)	65	35		

Source: ASTAT (2023c, 192, 216).

ber of rent subsidy recipients increased from 8,535 to 12,237, the amount paid from 15 to 37 million euro and the amount per recipient from 1,768 to 3,051 euro, with a third of beneficiaries currently being TCNs (Table 2)[8]. The effectiveness of rent subsidies is questionable: without substantial interventions in the housing market or in wage policies, subsidies only buffer, but do not solve, the excessive pressure of housing costs borne by the economically weaker population. This corresponds to a «biased subsidy system» (Arbaci 2019) that favours landlords rather than tenants.

Current housing, welfare and integration policies in South Tyrol can thus be characterised as insufficiently responsive to the needs of migrants. The conditionality of access to social housing and rent subsidies, combined with widespread discrimination in the private rental market, increases the risk of housing and social exclusion. The following section discusses the impact of this locally embedded housing and welfare system on migrants' housing pathways, sense of belonging and aspirations.

The effect of housing, welfare and integration policies on migrants' aspirations, capabilities, and sense of belonging

Turning to our second research question, *How do housing, welfare and integration policies affect migrants' aspirations, capabilities and sense of belonging?*, a key aim of the projects studied was to support migrants' agency by strengthening their skills and knowledge of the local housing context. In practice, however, the projects replicated the often-paternalistic processes of traditional welfare provision (Lumley-Sapanski 2022). Indeed, in both projects, the migrant was considered a victim of a discriminatory socio-economic context who had to be assisted, and only in a second moment as an individual with agency capable of making autonomous decisions. The long-term success of the projects in promoting migrants' agency is therefore uncertain.

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[8] See ASTAT (2023c, 192-216).

This is compounded by the widespread discrimination faced by many of the migrants. In the interviews, migrants reported frequent episodes of discrimination on the private rental market manifested through housing ads specifically looking for «native renters only», unanswered phone calls, ignored emails, and openly racist remarks. These discriminatory acts tend to occur as soon as the applicant's ethnic background becomes apparent, as recalled by one participant: «I've tried to call them myself and as soon as they hear my voice they say: "no, no, no"». The experience of being repeatedly refused housing not because of a lack of financial security or legal status, and not even because of linguistic or cultural barriers, but purely due to landlords' discriminatory attitudes toward «foreign» renters, not only prevented migrants from finding housing but resulted in a deep sense of exclusion and marginalization, undermining migrants' self-confidence, aspirations and ultimately, their sense of well-being, identity and agency (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023). Considering the short and long-term impacts of housing exclusion and insecurity on their aspirations and employment, one interviewee stated: «If I don't have a place to live, I can't work; it's difficult. After work I must shower, eat, sleep. If I don't have a house, I can't do anything». As residence permits are strictly connected to regular employment contracts, not having a place to live may trigger a chain reaction leading not only to a loss of work, but ultimately also to an irregular legal status. The forced prolonged stay in temporary and collective housing structures thus generated a deep sense of social, economic, and legal precariousness. As one of the interviewees nearing the end of her contract in one of these facilities, explicitly stated: «Now I'm scared, very scared. I can't live on the street after work, can I? I want to stay here. If I find a place, I'd like to stay here. There are many job opportunities here, but the problem is there's no place to live». Concerns about future prospects, family life, family reunification[9] and personal development also emerged from the interviews: «One has to think about what is very important in life. This house is not my home. I cannot host anyone. If you tell your girlfriend not to come to your house, what does she think?». Similarly, for families with children, inadequate housing and houselessness can lead to minors being placed in temporary foster care. Ultimately, the inability to find stable housing can lead to profound self-doubts which in turn contribute to a pervasive sense of social exclusion, illustrated by a poignant question raised in one of the interviews: «Do you think I am "good enough" to find a place to live?».

This question is highly significant: migrants were frequently made to feel that they were indeed «not good enough» to meet the expectations of

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[9] According to Italian law, adequate housing is a precondition for family reunification. For a family of 4, the apartment must be at least 56 m², with an additional 10 m² for each additional person. With a rental cost between 8-15 €/ per m² (ASTAT 2022), this is unaffordable for many.

the local housing market – and never will be, regardless of their economic or legal situation. Crucially, housing insecurity is not primarily the result of insecure legal status or employment (see also Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023): while about a third of people enrolled in the projects had a permanent work contract and all of them had valid documents, less than 10% were successful in finding a house on the open market (see next section for details). The resulting continuous renegotiation of emotions, identity, and belonging, in addition to the financial, administrative, and logistical aspects involved in a housing search, contribute to rendering migrants' housing trajectories highly complex and starkly different from the housing trajectories experienced by natives (Boccagni 2023).

Significantly, while the two interventions focused on addressing gaps in existing housing services and policies and the lack of availability and accessibility of social housing, discriminatory practices were not explicitly addressed. Indeed, while migrants were trained to be «good and worthy applicants, not too exotic» by, for instance, teaching them how to communicate with potential landlords by editing their social media presence (removing religiously charged content or using profile pictures depicting them in front of South Tyrolean sights), drafting housing inquiries and practicing phone calls, or encouraging them to attend courses focused on housekeeping or recycling, they did not offer anti-discrimination training for landlords or housing agencies. Thus, the projects acted only superficially upon discriminatory and racist acts. As one social worker self-critically stated, «We trained perfect tenants, but we should have trained landlords». The paternalistic approach adopted and the naïveté of some of the interventions can be partly explained by the different levels of experience of the project partners in providing housing support. For some of them, this was the first experience of supporting the search for independent housing solutions.

The intersection of inadequate housing and welfare policies and provision with direct and indirect discrimination which remains largely unaddressed, has significant effects on one particular subset of the migrant population which is experiencing «prolonged housing precarity» (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023) and an existence that can be characterised by «permanent temporariness» (Altin and degli Uberti 2022): documented migrants who have entered the labour market, have resided in the province for more than one year and who, in most cases, could afford paying rent. It is this category of persons that faces difficulties in accessing either private or social housing and shows the least variation with regards to their housing situation throughout the projects' lifecycles. Indeed, for this specific group, private market rentals are frequently inaccessible due to direct and indirect discrimination described above, and the lack of social networks with the local population. At the same time, social housing is largely inaccessible because of the province's five-year

residency requirement. Even so-called «hotel houses» (*casa albergo*), which are part of the social housing stock but accessible already after a residency of a year, are not a viable option for many as they only house single people and are therefore not a resource for families or other households. This is in line with literature arguing that prolonged housing precarity is not predominantly influenced by legal status, but rather by a combination of factors such as the individual's social connections and financial resources, which are, in turn, shaped by the structural and temporal dynamics of the housing system (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023). Considering the ineffectiveness of existing policies in facilitating the housing and social inclusion of migrants, the next section explores the extent to which the socially innovative practices implemented by the two projects contributed to improve migrants' access to housing.

The potential of social innovation in housing policy

Finally, we consider our third and last research question: *Whether and how did the socially innovative interventions implemented by the two projects under review contribute to improve access to housing for migrants?* In this regard, the evaluation of the impact of the social innovation aspect of the intervention, carried out by means of questionnaires and interviews, shows mixed results and a dissociation between processual and outcome aspects (Moulaert *et al.* 2013).

From a processual point of view, both projects obtained the mobilisation of different actors and the extension of networks to include both private actors (such as the association of small building owners, representatives of economic categories and employers) and other non-profits in the area. Answers to the social innovation questionnaire indicate that new relationships were created at local level particularly within the third sector (8), with local institutions (6), homeowners (4), and private firms (3). Moreover, social workers could develop new skills and methods – focussing on individual pathways and on the coordination and cooperation existing among services and stakeholders – to offer alternative or complementary approaches to traditional social services. These represent a set of tools that could find positive application in future interventions, if adequately funded and supported.

In terms of outcomes, given the short duration of the project, the network established did not have time to develop into long-term collaborations. It is therefore certainly premature to speak of «changes in attitudes, behaviours or perceptions» (Neumeier 2012) – a key aspect of social innovation. While the goal of overcoming organisational and sectoral barriers has been partially achieved, it cannot be said that the relationships initiated will be sustainable or able to evolve into new governance structures that can be extended to other contexts (Mulgan *et al.* 2007). Thus, there have been no structural trans-

formations of social relations (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013) capable of changing locally embedded welfare and housing systems. However, experiences and observations gathered during the projects by participant organisations helped shedding light on local welfare mechanisms (Colombo and Saruis 2017) that need to be addressed in order to secure a more equitable access to housing for migrants and potential lines of action have been identified, such as the need for strong anti-discrimination policy and monitoring.

Considering the effectiveness in answering social needs, findings gained from an analysis of individual housing pathways and interviews with migrants and social workers, indicate the following. In Project A, less than a third (29%) of the 128 monitored participants experienced a change in their housing status during the project. The remaining 71% remained in the same situation of housing exclusion and insecurity. Only 10% of participants could find a stable, adequate, and self-sufficient accommodation on the private rental market by the end of the project. In project B, a total of 6 families was able to move out of temporary accommodation into a more permanent home as a direct result of the project. In both projects, most people were in the ETHOS category of «houseless», i.e., temporarily accommodated in publicly funded reception centres or residential facilities, many of which only offer shared housing. Significantly, this category of persons shows the least variation with regards to their housing situation at the end of the projects.

This suggests, in line with Bovo *et al.* (2022), that the scarcity of affordable housing resources, conditionality of access to social housing and rent subsidies, combined with widespread discrimination constitute a hurdle that is difficult to overcome. The persistence of housing exclusion and insecurity is not linked to legal status – all project participants had regular legal status – but to the structural conditions of the housing system. This indicates the need for structural interventions that, through socially innovative formulas, could improve the access, affordability, and quality of housing for migrants by acting on multiple levels and through a cross-sectoral logic. In the subsequent section, we delineate potential innovative policy interventions derived from the analysis of our case study, connecting them with insights gleaned from scholarly literature.

5. Conclusion: Summary of the key findings and their implications

Effective housing, welfare and integration policies constitute a key starting point for the long-term inclusion of migrants (Ager and Strang 2008; Bolzoni *et al.* 2015; Salinaro *et al.* 2022). However, as this article and others have shown, the current articulation of housing policy not only fails to respond to the needs of migrants and low- or middle-income groups in general (Dell'Olio
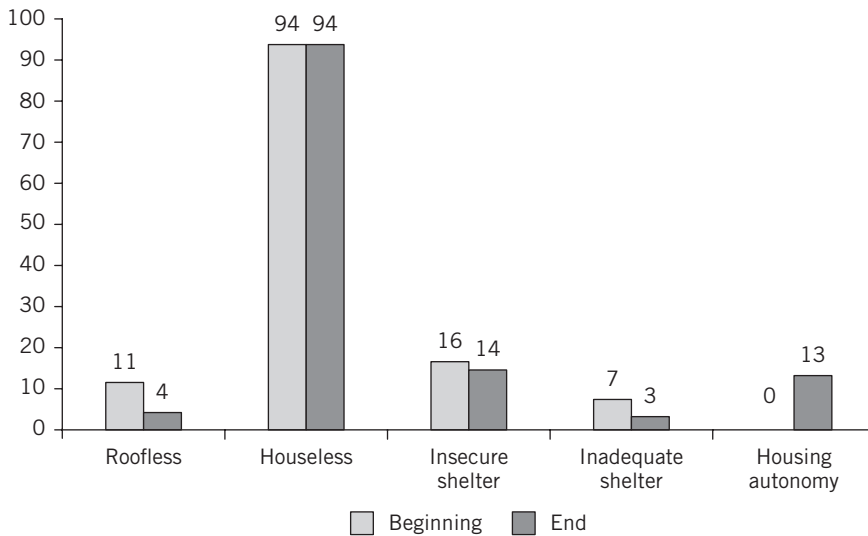
Figure 1. Change in housing situation.

2004; Dotsey and Chiodelli 2021; Bovo *et al.* 2022), but goes so far as to constitute a deliberate embedding of exclusionary border practices within housing and welfare systems (Serpa 2023; Ulceluse *et al.* 2022). Coupled with entrenched discrimination and racism, a limited supply of adequate public housing, high rents and lack of post-reception transition measures (Bovo *et al.* 2022; Campomori and Feraco 2018), the effects these policy shortcomings have on migrants are manifold and range from prolonged precarity (Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023) to social, economic and spatial marginalisation and exclusion not only with regards to housing itself, but affecting also migrants' employment, legal status, agency and sense of belonging (Boccagni 2023; Bolzoni *et al.* 2015; Fravega 2018).

Through a local case study, we examined how the local housing and welfare systems influence migrants' housing pathways, challenging the dominance of national-level research (Hoekstra 2020). The article enriches both housing and migration studies by linking migrants' housing pathways with their wellbeing and aspirations. Additionally, it explores the potential connection of socially innovative interventions, local welfare systems, and migrants' experiences of exclusion. Our findings call for a comprehensive understanding of the locally situated experiences of housing exclusion and insecurity faced by migrants. The following insights are applicable to the formulation and implementation of more effective and innovative housing policies more broadly.

First, and in line with the local turn in migration studies (Çağlar and Schiller 2011), it is of central importance to adjust the features of local wel-

fare and housing systems that influence the accessibility and affordability of housing. A «New Housing Policy» should include «housing solutions for particularly vulnerable groups, such as refugees and the homeless, in actions involving other groups, in order to create synergies that facilitate the sustainability of actions, but also produce spaces for positive social interaction and cohabitation» (Maloutas 2021, 110). An essential step in increasing housing availability in the short to medium term is the valorisation of under-utilised «ordinary» housing stock such as empty houses or apartments owned by municipalities or other public entities (Bovo *et al.* 2022). Through a logic of intervention inspired by social innovation, it would be possible, for example, to establish co-management of housing owned by municipalities through third sector organisations, in order to make vacant dwellings available to low-income or discriminated groups (Astolfo and Boano 2018).

Similarly, there is an urgent need to reshape access to social housing by prioritising actual needs over the current criteria of residency and, in the case of South Tyrol, linguistic affiliation, and by speeding up housing processes particularly for asylum seekers. Indeed, early integration into housing is crucial to prevent long-term marginalisation and should already start in reception centres and other types of temporary accommodation, to improve the transition processes toward independent living (Lumley-Sapanski 2022; Campomori and Feraco 2018; Bovo *et al.* 2022). To this end, training programmes for social workers with a focus on knowledge of the housing market and local housing support services are key and could be established building on the experience gained through these two pilot projects. A further aspect is the inadequacy of rent subsidies which do not respond to the root cause of the challenges that migrants face while trying to enter the housing market.

Second, there is a need for interventions that address both the demand and the supply side of the housing market. The widespread discrimination – whether by institutions or by individuals – in the housing market we and other scholars encountered in our research (e.g. Baldini and Federici 2011) must be tackled through anti-discrimination policies supported by a monitoring and sanctioning system and the creation of a social housing agency, acting as a non-profit mediator. Central to this is the avoidance of a paternalistic approach so common to social policy through which migrants are treated as passive victims of discrimination (Reamer 1983; Mead 1997). Instead, policies need to recognise recipients as actors who use a variety of strategies to negotiate the barriers to housing access (Boccagni 2023; Dotsey and Ambrosini 2023; Bolzoni *et al.* 2015; Fravega 2018).

Finally, socially innovative initiatives can play a role in solving the housing crisis, particularly in support of the so-called vulnerable groups, if they are capable of addressing, through a cross-sectoral approach, the structural features of the housing system.

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