



Intermediaries of integration: The role of nonprofit organizations in public value(s) governance

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Abstract

This study examines the application of the public value(s) governance (PVsG) framework within Italy's multi-actor refugee reception and integration system (SAI). Drawing on an exploratory case study in a rural province and semi-structured interviews with national and local actors, it investigates how public sector organizations (PSOs) and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) coproduce public value (PV) and identifies the factors shaping its strategic governance. The findings highlight the critical role of NPOs as intermediaries by facilitating service codesign, mobilizing operational capabilities, and bridging policy and practice. They also show how the municipalities' reliance on NPO expertise creates power dynamics that shape the translation of national policies into local services, emphasizing the interplay between macro- and micro-level factors in PV cocreation. Persistent challenges remain in incorporating refugees' perspectives, partly due to limited mechanisms for assessing impacts and outcomes and weak community-level accountability. This study contributes to the PVsG literature by showing how intermediary roles, resource dependencies, and cross-level dynamics shape the strategic governance of PV in collaborative service networks. It also provides practical guidance for managers and policymakers aiming to improve stakeholder collaboration in refugee reception and integration.

Keywords Public value coproduction · Multi-actor network · Public sector organizations · Nonprofit organizations · Governance

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1 Introduction

Public service delivery increasingly involves collaborations among public sector organizations (PSOs), nonprofit organizations (NPOs), and private entities, which are called upon to create public value (PV) (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). This shift requires understanding how diverse actors navigate their distinct PV perspectives and achieve goal congruence (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2020). Public value(s) governance (PVsG), developed by Thabit et al. (2024), provides a framework to address the complexities inherent in collaborative governance, network governance, and PV creation. Drawing on Bryson et al.'s (2017) multi-actor theory and Moore's (1995) strategic triangle, PVsG identifies four key dimensions for effective cocreation: engagement and authorization, mobilization of operational capabilities, the broader environment and public sphere, and instrumental and prime values.

Nevertheless, further research is needed to understand the conditions that support consensus and capacity building in stakeholder engagement (Bryson et al., 2017; Thabit et al., 2024; Cepiku et al., 2022; Nabatchi et al., 2017), the interplay between macro and micro factors in cocreation (Sicilia et al., 2016, 2019), and the practical operationalization and measurement of balanced instrumental and prime values (Sorrentino et al., 2024; Marsilio et al., 2021; Grossi & Argento, 2022; Cepiku et al., 2020; Campanale et al., 2021; Steccolini, 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015). These issues are particularly important given diverse values and interpretations of coproduction participants (Sorrentino et al., 2024; Mulvale & Robert, 2021). The extant literature also highlights the expanding role of NPOs as intermediaries, facilitating codesign and service delivery activities (Pestoff & Brandsen, 2010; Brandsen & Honingh, 2016; Ruggiero et al., 2021), stressing the need to investigate the power dynamics and the role of service users within NPO-mediated coproduction, particularly concerning equity and accountability (Haug, 2024). It advocates for context-specific studies (Sicilia et al., 2019), employing qualitative methods, to understand PV strategic governance in complex networks (Palumbo & Manesh, 2023).

This study investigates these underexplored areas through an exploratory case study methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews within the multi-actor network of the Italian Refugee Reception and Integration System (Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione [SAI]) in a rural province of the Marche region. It applies the PVsG framework within the SAI to examine how PSOs and NPOs interact for PV coproduction in such a setting (Nabatchi & AbouAssi, 2025).

The findings show that NPOs are essential for bridging structural gaps in small municipalities; however, overreliance on their expertise may lead to a dependency trap, suggesting that the PVsG framework requires administrative resilience as a core dimension to ensure long-term PV creation.

This manuscript thus contributes to the theoretical development of PVsG by providing empirical evidence of its applicability in a complex, resource-constrained service delivery context and identifying key factors influencing value cocreation. It clarifies how NPOs shape power dynamics, promote equitable coproduction, and help reconcile the social and jurisdictional disconnects inherent in the integration system. This study also identifies a paradox: reliance on NPOs enables value creation but might reinforce long-term dependency within PSOs. This research also reveals

how NPOs leverage their expertise to coordinate processes and shape service delivery within the network. Practically, the findings offer insights for public managers and NPOs seeking to foster effective and sustainable collaboration in multi-actor governance settings, particularly in refugee reception and integration.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical foundation by reviewing the PVsG framework and the role of NPOs as intermediaries in complex service networks. Section 3 describes the qualitative methodology, focusing on the exploratory case study of the Italian SAI system. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, illustrating how NPOs function as agile intermediaries that convert rigid jurisdictional mandates into flexible, person-centered social interventions. Finally, Sect. 5 discusses the findings, while Sect. 6 concludes.

2 Literature review

2.1 PVsG in multi-actor collaborations

Bryson et al. (2017) built on Moore's (1995) strategic triangle to introduce a multi-actor theory of PV cocreation, which highlights the central role of multiple actors (PSOs, NPOs, and firms) interacting at various governance levels for value cocreation. Each actor follows their own understanding of PV based on their authorizing environment and organizational capacity (Bryson et al., 2017); therefore, collaboration can be challenging and requires discussions to address conflicting goals and resolve complex issues (Frederiksen & Grubb, 2023). This situation compels public managers and PV entrepreneurs to establish open arenas for dialogue that facilitate negotiation among actors, thereby enabling value cocreation (Bryson et al., 2015, 2017; Alford, 1998).

To reconcile the literature on collaborative governance, network governance, and PV, Thabit et al. (2024) proposed a framework of PVsG in multi-actor collaborations, comprising several dimensions that collectively foster effective collaboration and governance within democratic contexts.

First, the “engagement and authorization” dimension emphasizes active stakeholder participation and legitimate support. It involves facilitating dialogue and negotiation for collective decision-making and developing a shared value proposition through collective agreements and strategic alignment (Hartley et al., 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022; Torfing et al., 2024). The conditions under which actors can reach consensus on collaboratively creating PV, secure necessary approval amidst conflicts, and build interconnected capabilities require further investigation to address gaps in interorganizational collaboration (Bryson et al., 2017; Thabit et al., 2024; Cepiku et al., 2022; Nabatchi et al., 2017). These factors are crucial for effectively managing the complexity of value cocreation in multi-actor networks (Best et al., 2018; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023).

The second dimension focuses on “mobilizing operational capabilities,” incorporates key elements of collaborative governance—such as leadership, knowledge, and resources—and emphasizes individual and collective assets, strategic management, and collaborative designs (Cheng, 2019; Ottmann et al., 2011). Enablers of effec-

tive coproduction include public managers' openness, administrative leadership and organizational culture, NPOs' expertise, and goal congruence (Strokosch & Osborne, 2020; Cepiku et al., 2022; Bryson et al., 2014; Alford, 2009).

Third, the "broader environment and public sphere" dimension addresses macro-level administrative structures, legal frameworks, and historical contexts, acknowledging values like democratic accountability and equity (Torfing et al., 2024).

Finally, the "instrumental and prime values" dimension introduces procedural legitimacy, relational value, democratic accountability, and equity and reciprocity as means of enhancing the effectiveness of collaboration. It also introduces performance metrics (such as effectiveness and durability) and improved problem-solving capabilities to address complex issues through learning, innovation, and better information (Torfing et al., 2024; Conteh & Harding, 2023; Campanale et al., 2021; Ottmann et al., 2011).

Moreover, using performance measures to assess coproduction-related value depends on the specific context, goals, and nature of coproduction (Brix et al., 2020; Yang & Northcott, 2019). For example, government and nongovernment actors' coproduction can enhance how public managers conceptualize and assess performance, thereby fostering an organized cocreating environment with clear roles and objectives (Sorrentino et al., 2024).

Consequently, the literature calls for further investigation into how various actors' PV perspectives can be strategized to enable effective coproduction (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2020). In particular, identifying emerging critical issues in the governance of coproduction could help address challenges related to collaboration among different entities (Thabit et al., 2024; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023).

2.2 PV cocreation in multi-actor networks

When examining the provision of public services, the growing significance of private organizations and NPOs acting as intermediaries in coproduction initiatives must be considered (Pestoff & Brandsen, 2010; Ruggiero et al., 2021; Haug, 2024). Indeed, austerity policies and the progressive public funding reductions (Best et al., 2018; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012) have caused a legitimacy crisis for PSOs, leading to the increasing involvement of other actors in public service delivery (Longo et al., 2015). These players act as intermediaries, providing additional resources to support PSOs in the codesign (Martini et al., 2017; Eseonu, 2022) and delivery of public services (Haug, 2024; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023; Mazzei et al., 2020). Empowerment and the representation of service users' interests can also be achieved through interactions between intermediaries and citizens (Eseonu, 2022; Fonseca Peso et al., 2020; Torfing et al., 2024; McMullin, 2021), supported by public managers' openness (Landi & Russo, 2022). Thus, factors such as trust, innovation risk management, goal congruence, and leadership have been identified as key levers for cocreation (Cepiku et al., 2022; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020; Lino et al., 2019; Torfing et al., 2019; Bryson et al., 2014; Alford, 2009). NPOs acting as intermediaries in coproduction activities can lead to boundary spanning, which refers to the "individual and collective efforts of agencies and actors within a given policy domain to link their organizations' respective programs and resources into more integrated and synchronized initiatives" (Con-

teh & Harding, 2023, p.107, based on Bovaird et al., 2019; Tushman, 1977; Thomson, 1967; March & Simon, 1958). Boundary spanning can be challenging due to power imbalances (Frederiksen & Grubb, 2023) between PSOs and intermediaries in public service coproduction, as power dynamics can vary depending on the intermediaries' roles and activities (Haug, 2024). Power disparities affect the effectiveness of coproduction, which relies on service providers' willingness to share authority and leadership (Haug, 2024; Lino et al., 2019). NPOs are often hampered by dependence on state-led frameworks and resource constraints (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). Specifically, competitive contracting and inherent bureaucratic complexity can trigger mission drift (Cordery et al., 2019), where NPOs prioritize administrative survival over flexible user-centered engagement (McMullin, 2021; Yi et al., 2025) and may unintentionally reinforce existing power asymmetries. These organizations possess significant authority compared to the individuals they serve; thus, their leadership can lack the alignment necessary to represent the public. This situation, in turn, limits the genuine influence of end-users in the service delivery process (Nipa et al., 2025; Haug, 2024; Mazzei et al., 2020). Ultimately, NPOs are vital for scale and representation (Nabatchi et al., 2017); however, their role risks becoming an additional bureaucratic layer that shields the state from direct accountability, potentially undermining the self-efficacy and empowerment that coproduction aims to achieve (Cepiku et al., 2022).

Consequently, the role of NPOs as intermediaries in coproduction warrants further investigation (Coule et al., 2022; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023) to better understand relational dynamics in multi-actor networks providing public services (Haug, 2024). Furthermore, scholars have called for more exploration of when and how authority is distributed in multi-actor networks, the components of equitable processes, and their impact on coproduction success (Haug, 2024; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023).

2.3 PV cocreation in refugee integration

PV cocreation for refugee integration is not a linear policy output; instead, it should be conceived as a dynamic process of interactive value formation (Naveed, 2025). Within this framework, value cocreation occurs when service providers, refugees, and community stakeholders integrate their diverse resources to improve individual and collective well-being (Ongaro et al., 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that labor market integration is strengthened by early, intensive interventions that combine vocational language acquisition with supervised work placements, alongside vertical bridging social capital (Dahlberg et al., 2024; Kanas & Kosyakova, 2023). Strategic linkages with established entrepreneurs within ethnic or national networks facilitate direct recruitment pathways; conversely, reliance solely on horizontal bonding ties among job-seeking peers often precipitates labor market marginalization and unemployment (Dagnelie et al., 2019; Gericke et al., 2018).

In contrast, threats to value codestruction emerge from the misintegration of resources, typified by prohibitive administrative burdens, informal asymmetry, and a systemic inability to serve (Engen et al., 2021). These outcomes are often exacerbated by structural impediments, such as centralized dispersal policies that isolate displaced populations in regions characterized by atrophied arrival infrastructures,

limited transit connectivity, and stagnant local labor demand (Baalbergen et al., 2024; Fasani et al., 2022; Foged et al., 2024). Such systemic failures generate institutional distrust that permeates the broader community fabric (Järvi et al., 2018).

In the contemporary institutional landscape, the responsibility for refugee integration has shifted from central ministries to the sub-national periphery (Bazurli et al., 2022; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). In this decentralized milieu, municipalities operate as orchestrators of heterogeneous networks comprising NPOs and private-sector actors, necessitating a transition from traditional bureaucratic hierarchies toward relational management and trust-based governance (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020); however, local administrators must exercise sophisticated strategic leadership to mitigate coordination gaps between rigid national mandates and localized initiatives (Caponio et al., 2022; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2022; Hillmann, 2022; De Tona et al., 2023). Persistent vertical misalignment results in a dilution or erosion of PV (Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala, 2025; Naveed, 2025).

Based on these premises, this study addresses the following research question: *What factors affect PV strategic governance in multi-actor networks involved in managing the refugee reception and integration system?* Table 1 summarizes this study's theoretical framework around three main pillars: the macro-level PVsG framework provides the foundational dimensions for multi-actor value cocreation; the operational dynamic analyzes multi-actor networks and the strategic role of NPOs as intermediaries; and the empirical context focuses on the complexities of local refugee integration.

3 Study design

3.1 The SAI project

This study is set in the context of coproduced reception and integration services for refugees, given their relevance to current migration challenges.

The SAI was established in 2002 in response to increasing migration flows, which peaked during the 2014 migration crisis and was overseen by the Ministry of the Interior. The SAI is organized into two tiers: the first dedicated to assisting asylum seekers, and the second aimed at the reception and integration of refugees. The current SAI was established in 2020 (Law 173/2020) following two years of restructuring. Law Decree No. 113/2018 had previously excluded asylum seekers from accessing integration services and reduced available funding (Collini, 2022; Bolzoni et al., 2022). Consequently, in response to public solicitations from the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, NPOs began implementing temporary programs offering material, legal, and psychological assistance to support the socio-economic integration of refugees (Collini, 2022; Ponzo et al., 2022; RETESAI, 2024).

The SAI remains under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior; however, the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) coordinates refugee assistance, offering technical support to municipalities that join the SAI. In this regard, local municipalities can navigate complex multi-level policy dynamics (Bazurli et

Table 1 Theoretical framework summary table

Pillars	General description	Key Concepts	Key Reference Studies
<i>Macro-Level: the PVsG framework</i> (Thabit et al., 2024)	Establishes the core dimensions required for diverse actors to negotiate conflicting goals and cocreate value.	Engagement and authorization: active stakeholder participation and development of shared value propositions	Hartley et al. (2019); Sørensen and Torfing (2022); Torfing et al. (2024)
		Operational capabilities: use of assets and strategic management; enablers include leadership, organizational culture, and NPO expertise	Cheng (2019); Ottmann et al. (2011); Strokosch & Osborne (2020); Cepiku et al. (2022); Bryson et al. (2014); Alford (2009)
		Environment: legal and historical context	Torfing et al. (2024)
		Values: balancing means (procedural legitimacy and equity) with outcomes (effectiveness and problem-solving)	Torfing et al. (2024); Conteh and Harding (2023); Campanale et al. (2021); Ottmann et al. (2011)
<i>Operational Link</i>	Moves from abstract collaboration to the practical role of NPOs as “boundary spanners” who bridge the gap between state mandates and citizens	NPOs as intermediaries: Providing resources for codesign and delivery	Pestoff and Brandsen (2010); Ruggiero et al. (2021); Haug (2024); Martini et al. (2017); Eseonu (2022); Mazzei et al. (2020)
		Boundary spanning: linking disparate programs into integrated initiatives	Conteh and Harding (2023); Bovaird et al. (2019); Tushman (1977); Thomson (1967); March and Simon (1958)
		Power dynamics and imbalances: Disparities that impact coproduction effectiveness	Frederiksen and Grubb (2023); Haug (2024); Lino et al. (2019)
		Mission drift: risks that NPOs prioritize administrative survival over user engagement due to rigid bureaucratic requirements	Cordery et al. (2019); McMullin (2021); Yi et al. (2025)
<i>The Empirical Application</i>	Apply the concepts of collaboration and intermediation to the specific, complex challenge of local refugee integration.	Interactive value formation through resource integration for well-being	Naveed (2025); Ongaro et al. (2025)
		Enabling factors of refugee integration: synchronization of interventions for beneficiaries with vertically bridging social capital	Dahlberg et al. (2024); Kanas and Kosyakova (2023)
		Risk of value codestruction: negative outcomes from misintegration of resources and administrative burdens	Engen et al. (2021); Baalbergen et al. (2024); Fasani et al. (2022); Foged et al. (2024); Järvi et al. (2018)
		Decentralization and leadership: shift of responsibility to local municipalities, requiring public sector relational management	Bazurli et al. (2022); Campomori and Ambrosini (2020); Caponio et al. (2022); Haselbacher & Segarra (2022); Hillmann (2022); De Tona et al. (2023)

al., 2022) and expand local coalitions of stakeholders to address resource limitations and implement interventions for refugees’ reception and integration (Caponio et al., 2022; Hillmann, 2022). Municipalities voluntarily establish hosting facilities for refugees in response to calls from the Ministry of the Interior, while the management

of these facilities is undertaken directly by the municipalities or entrusted to NPOs through public tenders (Ponzo et al., 2022).

In 2023, the SAI network supported 54,512 individuals, including 24,112 new beneficiaries and 4,910 unaccompanied minors. As of March 2024, the national network comprised 884 initiatives assigned to 749 local organizations across 2,000 municipalities. Data indicate enhanced planning in less populated areas, although major cities host more reception sites. The SAI increasingly targets low-population areas: 42.6% of participating municipalities have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and account for 23.8% of available reception spots. Additionally, 43.2% of SAI municipalities are located in regions experiencing population decline, primarily rural areas reliant on nonintensive farming, where refugee integration could strengthen local economies and sustain public services.

3.2 Methodology

An exploratory case study (Yin, 2009) examined the SAI and related refugee housing services in a rural province of the Marche region, Italy. This context is appropriate because policy-dependent complexity influences the roles and interactions of the actors involved in the coproduction of specialized services for refugees (Mintzberg, 1983; Bassoli & Campomori, 2024). The prominent role of NPOs in supporting the public sector in refugee management further supports its relevance (Axelsson et al., 2022), with eight active projects in the area as of 2024 (RETESAI, 2024). The region also had a relatively high proportion of foreign-born immigrants, who accounted for 7.4% of the population in 2008, compared with 5.8% nationally. At the same time, foreigners made up 8.8% of the regional workforce, compared to the national average of 7.3% (Potter et al., 2010).

The single-case design provided an in-depth understanding of the context under investigation (Yin, 2009), allowing the researchers to capture complex relational and governance dynamics that broader approaches, such as comparative or multi-case study designs, would struggle to capture. To operationalize this approach, the study focuses on the On The Road, a prominent NPO (social cooperative) engaging in anti-trafficking measures, migrant reception, and marginalized group empowerment across Central Italy. By incorporating empirical investigation into On The Road's participation in the SAI network, this single-case design encapsulates the intricate multi-actor networks, institutional mechanisms, and frontline governance practices that define contemporary integration measures.

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors involved in the SAI network. These interviews were conducted between September 2023 and July 2024 and aimed to explore participants' perceptions of the network's organization and their roles in achieving its objectives.

Interviewees included On The Road representatives (NPO_A, NPO_B, NPO_C, NPO_D, and NPO_E), representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, local entrepreneurs, and officials from three municipalities (MUN1, MUN2, and MUN3). The three municipalities were selected due to their contrasting characteristics. MUN1 is a town of 36,000 inhabitants, which has participated in SAI since 2016 and currently hosts more than 50 refugees. MUN2 has fewer than 5,000 inhabitants

and has participated in SAI projects for over 10 years. MUN3 is a small municipality with fewer than 500 inhabitants.

The interview protocol was based on the PVsG framework and relevant literature; it included key themes related to collaboration dynamics, actor roles, and governance mechanisms. While maintaining a common structure, the protocol was adapted to the specific characteristics and roles of the interviewees to explore issues relevant to each actor. More specifically, the interview protocol focused on:

- How collaboration between the actors emerged, and what challenges exist in developing specific services to address beneficiaries' needs;
- Each actor's role in the coproduction process;
- The skills and resources made available by the different actors to enable the network to respond to the beneficiaries' needs;
- The coordination, reporting, and accountability mechanisms adopted within the network;
- The expected benefits of coproduction, and whether and how these benefits were achieved;
- The strategies used to ensure durability and address potential challenges arising from the implementation of the coproduction process.

This study was not longitudinal; however, several interviewees also retrospectively compared current SAI governance arrangements with earlier approaches to reception and integration. These accounts enabled the researchers to compare earlier and current arrangements, rather than a causal before-and-after evaluation.

Data analysis was conducted in parallel with data collection, enabling overlaps between the two phases and flexible data collection. This approach is consistent with what Eisenhardt (1989, p. 539) refers to as "controlled opportunism," where researchers take advantage of the unique aspects of a particular case and the emergence of new themes to refine theory development. Consistent with this study's exploratory nature, the protocol was iteratively refined during data collection to incorporate emerging insights and deepen the investigation of salient issues (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Interviewees were selected to capture diverse perspectives within the case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), representing all levels of the network. Table 2 presents a detailed list of interviewees.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, and categories were defined based on the research question, existing literature, and prior related studies. The thematic framework was structured into sub-levels and discussed to reach consensus among the researchers (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

The interviews were coded using NVivo 12 (Edhlund & McDougall, 2019); a codebook was developed based on predefined categories and applied through line-by-line and word-by-word analysis. Codes were then matched to relevant text excerpts that corresponded to the established categories (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Table 3 summarizes the themes and subthemes used in the analysis.

Given this study's qualitative and interpretive nature, the researchers acknowledge their role in shaping both data collection and analysis, adopting a reflexive approach throughout (Tracy, 2010). Coding and interpretation were discussed among

Table 2 List of interviews and documents accessed

Organization	Interviewees
Ministry of Labour and Social Policy	Employee: General Directorate of Immigration and Integration Policies (GOV_A) Employee: General Directorate of Immigration and Integration Policies (GOV_B)
Municipalities	Head of Office of European Policies, Special Projects, and Employment Policies in Municipality 1 (MUN1_A) Instructor: Social and Welfare Services in Municipality 1 (MUN1_B) Municipal Secretary in Municipality 2 (MUN2_A) Instructor: General Secretariat, Legal Affairs, Culture, Tourism in Municipality 2 (MUN2_B) Project Manager for Reception and Integration System (SAI) in Municipality 3 (MUN3_A)
Nonprofit organization (NPO)	Vice-president (NPO_A) Head of Employment Services Area (NPO_B) Project Coordinator (NPO_C) Project Officer (NPO_D) Data Manager (NPO_E)
Entrepreneurs	Owner of a Small Firm in the Thermo-hydraulic Sector (ENT_A) Owner of a Small Firm in the Frozen Food Sector (ENT_B)
Documents	Memorandum of understanding on the promotion and organization of the coordination of SAI projects in the Marche Region Tender specifications for the contract award of the management of activities and services for SAI projects in 2023–2025 (MUN_2) NPO proposal for SAI project (MUN_2) Contract between MUN_2 and the NPO for the management of activities and services within the SAI Executive Plan for the management of activities of the SAI (MUN_2) Financial Plan for the management of activities and services for SAI projects in 2023–2025 (MUN_2)

the research team to ensure consistency and reduce potential bias. NVivo supported a systematic and transparent coding process, enhancing the traceability of analytical decisions and facilitating comparison across data sources.

Potential informant bias and the prominence of certain actor groups (e.g., NPOs) were mitigated by including multiple knowledgeable stakeholders and iteratively comparing data during analysis (Kumar et al., 1993); however, some limitations remain, as discussed in the final section.

Table 3 Themes, subthemes, and codes from the coding process

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Embarking on the cocreation journey	Institutional context	Historical and political context of the EU
		Local context and willingness to join the SAI network
		SAI evolution toward collaborative, multi-actor governance arrangements
	Values alignment	Acknowledgment of different desiderata (institutional, community, refugees, NPO, etc.)
	Convergence of interests for goal congruence	Plurality of desiderata that demand negotiation processes; qualified consultation leading multi-year programming
		Need for coordination
	Capacity building	Transaction costs
		Municipalities as key actors
		Recognizing the third sector's spanning capacity (e.g., technical expertise in project design)
		NPOs as proximity agents and the pragmatic approach to addressing mini-administrative hurdles
Cocreation implementation	Reputation	Capacity to collaborate with other municipalities
		Recognition of the role of the NPO at the local level
		Longstanding presence of the NPO in the local area
		Need to strengthen NPO's role at the national level
	Stakeholder involvement	Involvement of the local community
		Involvement of entrepreneurs
	Service provision	Technical expertise of the NPO in service provision (engaging businesses, replacing regional employment centers, supporting housing search)
		NPO's pragmatism in addressing emerging situations and overcoming local barriers (e.g., lack of transportation and housing)
	Coordination	From formal to informal relationships based on trust and the local reputation of the NPO built over time
		Distributed leadership
Ensuring continuity over time	Accountability	Vertical accountability to the Ministry
		Limited horizontal accountability
	Project durability and viability	Multiple target groups with diverse needs
		Operators' frustration concerning project continuity over time
		Municipalities' commitment to ensure continuity in project design
		Municipalities' sensitivity and collaboration in fundraising efforts
	Align services to meet users' expectations.	Quality as a leading criterion in public tenders
		Need to activate multi-agency service desks across the territory to provide tailored responses to emerging issues
		Potential for bottom-up initiatives (e.g., multicultural school) enabling beneficiaries and residents to participate actively in community-based initiatives
		NPO-led advocacy through observatories
Ongoing monitoring	Ongoing monitoring	NPO's participation in observatories to identify local issues and emerging needs

4 Results

4.1 Collaborative design and the municipality-NPO partnership

Italy's reception and integration landscape was significantly reshaped by restrictions on access to integration services introduced by Law Decree 113/2018. During this period, emergency reception centers (CAS for first-tier assistance) were operated through top-down management by local prefectures, effectively functioning as “*parking lots*” (GOV_A) without essential integration services such as language training or legal orientation. According to GOV_A and GOV_B, the current SAI arrangement (second-tier assistance) places socio-economic integration at the center of service provision. Within these governance arrangements, integration is voluntarily coproduced by municipalities that choose to join the network. This arrangement fosters a system of proximity that relies on the collaborative expertise of NPOs and local stakeholders, which can be interpreted as consistent with a PV logic oriented toward the creation of shared PV.

SAI implementation is embedded in Italy's longstanding experience on refugee reception programs.

“Italy holds a very strong position within Europe because it's where the whole matter of the reception programs originated. Touching this issue means striking very sensitive chords...” (NPO_B).

According to Ministry interviewees, a collaborative effort was undertaken to code-sign public interventions by allocating funds to regions and establishing coordination activities through different municipalities that became the implementers of government policies. Furthermore, interviewees acknowledged that municipalities might need support from other actors, indicating a shift toward more collaborative governance arrangements that can be interpreted as consistent with the dimensions of the PVsG framework. The previous governance model was frequently hampered by what GOV_A described as “*schizophrenia between different ministerial bodies*.” Historically, limited institutional coordination between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy resulted in fragmented and often conflicting policies; while the former focused on managing primary reception centers, the latter's efforts toward integration were often discouraged or undermined. In contrast, GOV_A stated that the current policymaking process utilizes a “*qualified consultation for defining the 2021–2027 multi-year programming*.” This process involves NPOs, universities, social partners, and migrant associations to identify and prioritize action for the “*socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable migrants*” (GOV_A). Compared with policies previously described as being “*dropped from above*” (GOV_A), this approach reflects the Ministry's acknowledgment that successful interventions require collaboration.

“We chose to establish a direct dialogue with municipalities due to the increasing emphasis on local dimensions in inclusion policies over the past decade, particularly at the European level. This choice leads to a problem related to

Italy's territorial disparities, as some areas lack experience, capacity, and resources to manage such projects effectively.” (GOV_B).

Municipalities can voluntarily apply for SAI financing, and some report that they entered the SAI due to “*a sense of care for the territory*” (MUN1_A) or “*a spirit of solidarity or philanthropy*” (MUN3_A).

Nonetheless, challenges emerge at the local level due to municipalities’ limited capability to comply with SAI requirements, manage funds, ensure project planning, and perform monitoring and accountability tasks.

These issues have also been recognized at the government level, which emphasizes the role of NPOs as a supplement to municipalities.

“NPOs are often involved in public-private partnerships, and they play a supplementary role. Sometimes, they not only collaborate but also substitute for public efforts. From our observations, projects are successful when there is a close collaboration between local authorities and the third sector. This collaboration fosters mutual learning: the NPO brings its expertise and capacity to local authorities, while gaining insight into administrative language and processes.” (GOV_B).

This involvement occurs at various stages during the SAI application and approval process, involving a wide range of actors that constitute a local network.

“The network was born somewhat spontaneously, partly forced, partly intentional, but certainly well-thought-out. Today, it’s also a necessity driven by a more structured, European-level perspective, focusing on the centrality of the individual who must be able to self-determine and follow a path that leads them out of a difficult situation. To do so, they need a functional network—a network that, clearly, they cannot build on their own but that is provided by someone else. Here, the need for codesigning and creating functional stakeholder networks arises, and today, the effort goes further by fostering public-private synergy.” (NPO_B).

The NPO’s involvement in the SAI resulted from established collaborations with local municipalities developed through previous projects that strengthened the relationships among the NPO and multiple actors. These included regeneration projects in a peripheral neighborhood that had become a multi-ethnic, problematic suburb characterized by vulnerability and marginalization issues, where a series of public interventions were implemented. These interventions led to the development of networks among different actors and the creation of ad hoc services.

“The network connected public stakeholders with private and nonprofit actors. Since 2021, our cooperative has been physically present in such a neighborhood, mainly through proximity activities and the creation of a multi-agency help desk to which refugees can apply. Another project contributed to urban redevelopment and regeneration, with very substantial investments in the

neighborhood, including the construction of entirely new facilities for housing services.” (NPO_C).

The NPO’s involvement in these projects led to the development of competences that were key to the SAI’s development. For example, NPO employees reported that they assist municipalities in drafting proposals to submit to the Ministry, even if the NPO might not be involved in the project. These actions occur because the NPO possesses specific expertise in “*coordination and capacity building*” (NPO_C), having also invested in infrastructure to support project proposal development and management.

“Regarding small municipalities, we provide significant assistance in presenting the project to the Ministry, although it is not guaranteed that we would ultimately be awarded the project. Also, bigger municipalities, like MUN1, sought our assistance in constructing the project proposal to submit to the Ministry. Now we have a permanent office with a dedicated team on that. This was an investment we also made in our infrastructure.” (NPO_E).

This support was also acknowledged by municipalities, especially smaller ones, which are often understaffed and lack specific expertise. Small municipalities also establish relationships with larger municipalities that have more experience in the SAI to gain support during the application process. MUN3 reported this situation, which was confirmed by MUN2, who assisted in the application process.

During the initial drafting of the proposal, the NPO is involved in providing municipalities with knowledge concerning the needs the project might address, thereby sustaining a more comprehensive proposal. In this regard, NPO_D referred to their role as “*cocreators of value*” (NPO_D) in developing public policies, serving as the main interlocutors for municipalities before SAI financing was secured.

The support provided by the NPO is crucial, highlighting a structural dependency for the small municipalities under study. Interviewees suggested that NPOs often move beyond supplementary roles into the actual substitution of municipal functions. MUN3_A noted they relied entirely on NPOs for expertise, while MUN2_A admitted being

“understaffed and not able to manage projects internally.” MUN1_A described this process as “almost a delegation to NPOs due to limited internal resources.”

GOV_A noted that “*mutual learning can occur*” when NPOs and local municipalities coproduce interventions; however, the local-level approach often prioritizes immediate NPO expertise over developing internal municipal capacity. MUN1_B confirmed that municipalities “*lean on*” NPOs for essential economic management, which could undermine long-term public sector capacity building.

Overall, these findings indicate that current arrangements provide more opportunities for stakeholder engagement and joint project design than the earlier, fragmented arrangements described by interviewees. At the same time, municipalities’ dependence on NPO expertise limits the partnership’s symmetry. NPO involvement enables engagement and local implementation; however, it may also result in the

substitution of municipal functions rather than sustained mutual capacity building. Through the PVsG framework, these findings illustrate both the potential and the limitations of engagement and authorization in contexts with uneven administrative capacity.

4.2 Network implementation and multi-stakeholder engagement for service coproduction

After financing has been secured, municipalities issue a public call detailing the tender specifications, which refer to the potential services that refugees might need upon arrival, such as orientation, accompaniment, and integration services related to housing, employment, education, and social aspects, alongside administrative and legal support.

These services require that organizations applying to the call possess a wide range of competences; thus, the NPO provides a comprehensive set of services through its professionals (social workers, cultural mediators, educators, and interpreters), supported by an administrative structure responsible for managing, reporting, and ensuring accountability for activities conducted under municipal financing.

Participation requires a minimum portfolio of services plus additional ones; evaluation by municipalities mainly focuses on the quality of the offering rather than the economic aspects.

Recent tender specifications have become increasingly demanding across all municipalities involved, due to the increasing number of services required to enhance refugees' quality of life and prevent critical issues.

“Another thing we require and value is the network, meaning the proven ability to interact with the social fabric, third sector, commerce, etc., of this reference territory. NPOs report the types of relationships they already have or those they want to activate and intend to activate.” (MUN1_A).

Consequently, NPOs must maintain a broad network of relationships with multiple local actors and ensure the availability of housing services over time, as well as support refugees' socio-economic integration through orientation, job placement, and training opportunities. Consequently, NPOs must establish strong ties within the local community to ensure the overall effectiveness of the SAI. Municipalities emphasized that effectiveness is reflected in refugees' ability to integrate locally.

“The effectiveness of the project is achieved when the refugees become autonomous, are able to interact with others, and find employment...” (MUN1_B).

Integrating refugees into the socio-economic system and their self-sufficiency require various services—specifically, housing and employment services are essential features of the SAI project and are inextricably linked to its aims.

Municipalities require NPOs to secure housing or promise its lease within 60 days of being awarded the service; however, NPOs often find it difficult to ensure the availability of multiple residences before the service is officially granted. Therefore,

municipalities allow some flexibility in arranging housing services over time, which NPOs consider crucial, as otherwise allocated funds might be lost due to a shortage of suitable housing.

Housing services have been referred to as the main challenge due to the general housing shortage and discrimination by residents. The NPO has tried to address this issue by activating insurance policies to cover potential damage, albeit with limited success. The Ministry has supported this effort by raising awareness among property owners and real estate agencies and by creating local and regional registers of real estate agencies that are sensitive to the issue.

Employment is another critical issue, affecting municipalities' capacity to retain refugees, especially during the phase-out period, when long-term integration and stability should be secured. Employment requires coordination among various actors, including different ministries (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), whose policies complement each other. The Ministry of Labour provides job orientation services and placement, including six-month internships, while the NPO considers entrepreneur involvement in its network crucial for sustaining long-term employment opportunities. This view is consistent with the Ministry's recognition that the lack of a strong employment link is a critical issue in SAI but also "*a key lever*" (GOV_A) for creating stable relationships. Implementing such a network can generate positive effects addressing both national and local purposes, while also helping entrepreneurs overcome labor shortages.

"We sought out an organization or institution that could assist us in finding new resources to incorporate into our sector. [...] In depth, we experience the issue of finding available resources for work. [...] So, we have integrated into the SAI dynamic. I must say that the results so far have been more than satisfactory." (ENT_A).

NPOs support entrepreneurs in different ways. First, as an accredited entity, NPOs contribute to managing active labor policies at the local level. Entrepreneurs reported that they prefer to rely on the NPO rather than employment agencies due to the administrative support the NPO provides during the employment process:

"We perform technical and on-the-job training. However, the NPO supports these individuals not only from a linguistic perspective, with Italian courses, but also with administrative and personal matters, such as documents and even something as simple as opening a bank account. We often handle administrative matters with them rather than directly with the employees, to simplify the process a bit." (ENT_A).

Thus, a network of relationships is required to ensure the delivery of all the key services specified in tender specifications. Once awarded the public tender, the NPO is responsible for designing, implementing, and maintaining a network of actors capable of ensuring service provision over time. The interdependent relationships among these actors aim to provide a comprehensive range of services in the long term. The relationships developed by the NPOs confirm their supplementary role in the SAI,

often compensating for municipalities' limited capacity to work within a "system of proximity" (NPO_A).

"We almost function as a hinge in the relationship between private and public entities, often acting as a bridge and encouraging dialogue between parties that otherwise wouldn't interact. The SAI requires a multidisciplinary team to support beneficiaries in coming to terms with the transition from six months to one year in a secure environment to facing a new situation of uncertainty." (NPO_B).

The governance arrangements observed in the SAI help address the "incapacity for proximity" (NPO_B) that characterized earlier arrangements. NPO_B highlighted that within this new arrangement, the NPO assumes a "vital hinge function," acting as a bridge to reconcile the mismatch between rigid public mandates and the pragmatic requirements of the private sector. More traditional bureaucratic arrangements and conventional employment agencies did not always address essential micro-administrative hurdles; however, the NPO functions as an intermediary force capable of resolving specific barriers, such as facilitating the opening of bank accounts for refugees, thereby streamlining the integration process and fostering direct dialogue between parties that otherwise would not interact. Through the PVsG framework, these practices illustrate how mobilizing operational capabilities within this arrangement can support more collaborative and responsive service provision, moving beyond the mere delivery of services and contributing to the creation of shared PV.

Implementing the SAI in rural areas also presents transportation challenges, especially from residential facilities to places of employment. All interviewees acknowledged this critical issue—which undermines the achievement of SAI goals—with cases where refugees had to leave jobs due to the lack of transportation; however, institutional solutions remain inadequate: the Ministry cannot intervene at the local level, and attempts by the NPO to negotiate with public transportation services have been unsuccessful. Consequently, the NPO frequently relies on informal solutions, such as engaging volunteers to compensate for public transportation deficiencies.

Coordinating the various activities requires a high level of trust among the actors involved. Beyond formal tender procedures, municipalities rely on the NPO's expertise to identify key services for inclusion in the tender specification, recognizing its central role in the local community.

"Let's say that they are the ones who identify the primary need because, as much as we want to contribute, it's not our line of work. Within our organizations, we don't even have a network of social services, so we want to do our best. But sometimes, we are really hindered because we don't know how to achieve this best." (MUN2_A).

Moreover, municipalities acknowledge that the NPO provides the essential competences needed to sustain the SAI at the local level, even in the implementation phase.

“In terms of expertise, especially for smaller entities, they are the ones with the most competence. The biggest contribution, objectively, is theirs; they are the added value to the project, so I don’t know if they are an extension of us or if we are an extension of them.” (MUN3_A).

NPOs operate mainly with public funds, making them structurally dependent on state and European financing. NPO_B noted that participation in these networks is sometimes motivated by *“the money they give us to survive.”* NPOs must act as *“entrepreneurs of themselves”* while often waiting several years for payments from closed projects; therefore, they face a *“competition for resources”* described as *“scrapping between the poor”* (NPO_B). Furthermore, interviewees noted that rigid contractual structures can hinder coproduction efforts; for example, NPOs must adapt to *“bony structures set by European or national milestones that dictate specific activities regardless of immediate local needs.”* NPO_C and NPO_D also discussed the risk of fake coproduction, which arises when *“standard tenders are masked as collaborative planning; sometimes, it has happened that they call us just to make a modification to projects, without really involving us in the discussion table”* (NPO_C). NPO_C discussed another risk related to the depersonalization of social activities, *“when political interference prioritizes numbers—for instance, promising 50 internships for promotional purposes—over the qualitative, individualized support that the NPO aims to provide. This requires a certain upfront investment.”*

Compared with the earlier arrangements described by interviewees, current service delivery relies more on local networks, trust-based coordination, and flexible problem-solving; however, rigid contractual requirements, delayed payments, and instances of only nominal codesign continue to constrain collaboration. The evidence indicates a partial development of more relational governance practices rather than the complete replacement of hierarchical and contractual arrangements. From a PVsG perspective, these practices illustrate the mobilization of operational capabilities, while also revealing that uneven distribution of such capabilities remains across the network.

4.3 Shared monitoring, adaptation, and the pursuit of sustainable integration

Both municipalities and the NPO are involved in monitoring and reporting, which are directed at the financing entity, the Ministry of the Interior. Municipalities report contract accounts, annual reports, and financial plans adjusted for each year, while the NPO is also responsible for accounting for its own expenses. The NPO performs this activity autonomously through specific information systems, under the monitoring of the municipalities, which both conduct formal checks and interact with the NPO on the topic.

The NPO’s information systems are mainly used for financial accountability tasks. Data are not collected systematically for outcome and impact assessments; participation remains voluntary and is not required by legislation.

“The aspect of impact assessment is perhaps where we are most behind. Public policies should ideally incorporate this, but so far, it has only been done for specific projects. However, we are all aware that such assessments are crucial and functional for the reprogramming of policies.” (GOV_B).

The NPO, the municipality, and the Ministry acknowledge that refugees’ expectations concerning their permanence in the SAI project may differ from those anticipated by the actors involved. GOV_A recognizes that insufficient opportunities and services are associated with depopulation in small towns, and refugees need the same services and opportunities. In fact, MUN3 reported that only 2 of the 200 people hosted in the last 15 years remained to settle down. In this sense, all NPO interviewees acknowledge that their efforts might not align with refugees’ life plans.

“Repopulating rural areas with refugees isn’t viable just because we see it as an opportunity; it’s crucial that the refugees themselves perceive it as such. We’re now fully committed to rebuilding social ties in small towns. However, one cannot ignore the fact that a person prefers to live in a large city... Also, our cultural system is tied to stable residency, which clashes with the precarious nature of employment contracts for foreigners and their flexibility in relocation.” (NPO_A).

“They perceive our reception as temporary. They frequently consider the SAI a small obstacle, a sort of—I’m using a strong word—necessary, temporary confinement to move forward with their life plans, which rarely leads to staying in Italy.” (MUN1_A).

The NPO and the MUN established multi-agency desks to facilitate feedback from refugees and adapt services to meet their expectations. These instances are brought to the attention of the Territorial Councils for Immigration (CTI), where public and private actors discuss specific problems related to migration and integration. The provincial CTI network includes local municipalities, schools, employers’ associations, and nonprofit organizations, as argued by NPO_C.

“These periodic meetings are useful for connecting the various actors in the territory and jointly defining a territorial plan of interventions for the management of the migration phenomenon in the province.” (NPO_C).

In addition to the CTIs’ formal activities, the NPO is in regular contact with local stakeholders for the joint care of vulnerable groups.

“We organize monthly cross-functional public-private teams where we try to define supporting paths for the most fragile individuals with whom we had contact at the multi-agency desk. Quite often, the people participating in the team are voluntary applicants from the territory, and the beneficiaries themselves for whom it is necessary to find support.” (NPO_C).

Efforts to address the needs of the community and refugees are also related to opportunities to implement initiatives responsive to stakeholder requirements. In this sense, the NPO emphasized its interest in gathering people's suggestions at the local level; it adopts a bottom-up approach by encouraging residents to become actively involved in the design and implementation of community initiatives—the NPO provides logistical support but allows participants to organize events and actions independently that respond to local needs. According to the interviewees, this approach has strengthened social connections within the community and encouraged residents to take ownership of activities. Interviewees also reported that these resident-led initiatives could successfully foster collaboration across cultural groups and thereby generate broader community engagement. The governance arrangements in the case appear to support an active role of the service user within the integration system. Under previous arrangements, users were largely considered “*passive consumers*” (NPO_C) of standardized services, and interventions were managed top-down and focused on fulfilling “*quantitative reporting requirements within rigid, bureaucratic structures*” (NPO_C). In contrast, NPO_C suggested that some residents can assume a more active role as an “*engine of change*” in the design and implementation of community initiatives, contributing to what can be interpreted as social value. Self-organized initiatives showed evidence of this proactive engagement, such as the Ramadan dinners, where residents moved beyond receiving aid to independently managing logistics and food preparation to support the community's most vulnerable members. Similarly, participation in artistic workshops—such as the creation of a large-scale flying sculpture—demonstrated how residents could autonomously contribute their skills and labor, transforming a planned activity into a shared community event.

These bottom-up activities can be interpreted through the PVsG framework as extending participation beyond the “*mere reporting of numbers in traditional administrative accountability*” (NPO_C).

Furthermore, the NPO has facilitated participatory processes to create new collective spaces, including a transcultural community school. This initiative illustrates participatory community development, with the NPO acting as a proximity agent to create opportunities for beneficiaries and residents to participate more actively in community development.

“In this initiative, residents are directly involved, bringing their own experiences, histories, and personal stories to share within the community. We organized several preliminary meetings to explore how to structure this transcultural initiative, and residents played a leading role in these early discussions. They actively contributed to building relationships and defining the key principles of the future school. There were also moments of exchange with educators and teachers from the main local school near the neighborhood, allowing for meaningful dialogue on important themes and helping to identify how and where transcultural practices could be introduced and developed within the community.” (NPO_C).

Additionally, the NPO engages in network activities with other organizations, such as local and national-level associations, by participating in permanent observatories. Through such collaboration, the NPO's staff can monitor relevant developments and emerging issues more effectively. Having access to reliable data enables the NPO to adjust its strategies and better integrate these new initiatives with its more traditional activities.

Through these projects, the NPO could broaden its target groups and expand its activities across territory, experimenting with new approaches like working directly in peripheral areas and developing true proximity-based interventions, in which NPO_C is engaged. This work later extended to initiatives addressing situations of severe poverty across the entire province, aiming to support vulnerable individuals throughout the region.

The insights gathered through these collaborations are also key to presenting issues in a way that highlights their urgency and encourages public institutions to respond to pressing societal needs.

"We are agents of change, but we also play a strong role in observing and analyzing phenomena. This is partly due to how the system itself is organized: operators often meet to discuss emerging issues and collect data. We are doing this by joining national networks — organizations that work with the homeless, for example—that aim to develop both research and policy initiatives on these topics. In these areas, too, we are influential, though in a slightly more indirect way: through our association, we contribute insights that eventually help shape broader policies." (NPO_E).

The NPO's longstanding expertise and strong relationships with social actors are crucial for guiding policymaking and helping national institutions identify social needs at the local level. The NPO's staff have emphasized this role, especially as European funding programs have provided additional resources to address poverty-related issues. In this context, the NPO reported that policymakers have increasingly recognized its expertise as an important resource for informing their decisions.

"I believe this is one of the areas where we have the greatest impact at a national policy level. When I think about extreme poverty, for instance, thanks to the EU Recovery Plan funding, resources have finally been allocated to poverty-related services. These initiatives are based on guidelines that, if you read them, clearly reflect the contributions of many associations, which have played a key role in drafting the guidelines from which the current projects have been developed. In practice, we have contributed significantly: since the founding of our center in 2010, we have been carrying out work that aligns closely with what is now officially recognized in the EU Recovery Plan calls for proposals, and our center's director regularly takes part in the meetings and discussions that inform policy decisions." (NPO_D).

These activities are also conducted to ensure the durability of assistance, and both the municipalities and the NPO are continually dedicated to identifying additional public calls. This commitment is essential to ensure the financial viability of new interventions aimed at satisfying emerging needs identified through multi-agency desks.

“The recent call for proposals (such as the allocation of the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) requires municipalities that manage SAI initiatives to submit projects addressing the phase of disengaging refugees from temporary SAI services. We are urging municipalities to present projects in areas where we can contribute our expertise to face refugees’ emerging needs.” (NPO_A).

“Municipalities can only sustain their projects if they can obtain funding. Otherwise, relying solely on their own resources or transfers from the State, they would only be able to guarantee minimal services. From this perspective, the message has been circulating for years: “Municipalities must invest in net-working.” (MUN3_A).

Changes in public procurement for integration services also affect the NPO. MUN1_A stated that the current public tender procedures differed from the traditional *“lowest bid logic”* that characterized the preexisting arrangements. In the most recent SAI procurement procedures, the evaluation process *“ignores the economic data by prohibiting financial discounts and instead assigning 100% of the evaluation score to project quality”* (MUN1_A). This shift suggests a stronger emphasis on service quality than on cost reduction. Through the PVsG framework, this approach can be interpreted as adding relevance to the quality and expected territorial impact of the provided services.

Overall, current arrangements have greater attention to adaptation, relational coordination, and service quality than the earlier practices; however, financial accountability remains dominant, outcome and impact assessment is limited, and refugees’ perspectives are incorporated indirectly. These issues qualify the extent to which instrumental and prime values are balanced in practice.

5 Discussion

The strong reliance on NPOs for PV cocreation in refugee reception aligns with the central tenet of multi-actor network theory (Bryson et al., 2017): interactions between state and nonstate actors to achieve shared outcomes. The challenges faced by municipalities with limited capacity reflect the importance of considering actors’ organizational capacity. On the one hand, the Ministry’s choice to interact with local municipalities for the SAI projects highlights the PSOs’ role in authorizing and facilitating public policy implementation at the appropriate level of governance (Caponio et al., 2022; Hillmann, 2022). On the other hand, the Ministry has acknowledged municipalities’ potential lack of capacity and recognized the supplementary role played by the NPO, demonstrating a strategic approach by PSOs to public service

delivery (Haug, 2024; Palumbo & Manesh, 2023; Mazzei et al., 2020). NPOs act as intermediaries, facilitating both codesign and service delivery, strongly supporting the literature on the expanding importance of NPOs in public service provision (Haug, 2024; Eseonu, 2022; Best et al., 2018; Martini et al., 2017; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). Power dynamics reveal the PSOs' strong reliance on NPOs' expertise, in line with past research (Frederiksen & Grubb, 2023; Haug, 2024).

The findings also support the PVsG framework (Thabit et al., 2024). The initial "engagement and authorization" phase is evident in the collaborative project proposals, when the NPO facilitates dialogue among the actors to reach consensus (Hartley et al., 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). Indeed, conditions for consensus and stakeholder capacity building are linked to the role of NPOs as knowledge brokers: they can articulate the needs of refugees, thereby contributing to shared understanding and goal congruence among the actors in coproduction efforts (Strokosch & Osborne, 2020). Furthermore, mutual learning and the NPO's support for smaller municipalities show how capacity building is fostered through actors' engagement and the NPO's network orchestration.

Through the PVsG framework, the findings suggest a shift from rigid and fragmented institutional arrangements toward more fluid and relational forms of service delivery. The interviews revealed that public functions no longer operate in isolation within this collaborative environment; instead, they are closely coordinated through formal and informal approaches that allow services to flow quickly to meet territorial needs. This development is further characterized by a shared trust between municipal employees, NPO operators, and volunteers, fostering a deep sense of communal purpose. In resource-constrained municipalities, this commitment serves as a key compensatory mechanism; limited administrative capacity is offset by intensive mutual learning and personal commitment. The NPO provides specialized expertise to public officials who, in turn, provide the administrative and legal support needed to sustain the network. Compared with the earlier arrangements, the current configuration appears more relational and collaborative, although hierarchical and contractual mechanisms remain in place.

The NPO's crucial administrative leadership in leveraging expertise, networks, and resources for service delivery clearly demonstrates the "mobilization of operational capabilities" dimension (Cheng, 2019; Ottmann et al., 2011). The NPO acts as a PV entrepreneur (Bryson et al., 2017), shaping public service delivery through its boundary-spanning capacity. It leads project design and application, influences ministerial policies through advocacy, and thereby guides the local SAI (Conteh & Harding, 2023).

This study also addresses the "broader environment and public sphere" by acknowledging the influence of national policies and the values of equity and democratic accountability (Torfing et al., 2024); however, community-level accountability faces some limitations. The "instrumental and prime values" dimension reveals a strong focus on procedural legitimacy and relational value. It also highlights difficulties for actors in systematically measuring the effectiveness of coproduction (prime value), a challenge discussed in the literature (Grossi & Argento, 2022; Marsilio et al., 2021) regarding the context-dependent nature of coproduction initiatives (Sorrentino et al., 2024; Brix et al., 2020; Yang & Northcott, 2019). Indeed, financial

accountability is prioritized to justify the use of public funds and the delivery of public services by both PSOs and NPOs.

Aligning services with refugees' expectations is challenging due to insufficient impact assessment; nevertheless, direct observation by the NPO through multi-agency desks allows the network to respond to refugees' emergent needs and overcome limitations linked to the temporary support provided by SAI-related projects. Furthermore, the NPO monitors emergent social issues by participating in observatories and networks, enabling it to gather reliable data for evidence-based advocacy initiatives. These data inform the NPO's strategies while expanding its understanding of local needs through projects in impoverished areas. By collaborating in national networks, the NPO can influence policies and contribute to guidelines to orient European funding for poverty alleviation.

This study also revealed several criticalities within the PVsG framework that may create tensions when the theoretical ideal of collaborative value creation collides with the pragmatism of institutional survival. PVsG emphasizes aligning cross-sectoral resources to generate public interest; however, the structural financial dependency of NPOs may distort the collaborative process. This dynamic transforms the voluntary role of NPOs as boundary spanners into strategic entrepreneurs, forcing them to navigate rigid, top-down milestones while trying to generate qualitative social impacts for their beneficiaries. NPOs can attempt to mitigate this issue through advocacy and autonomous data collection; however, the PVsG framework forces them to balance their core values against the precariousness of their economic survival. This shift can threaten mission drift (Cordery et al., 2019) through the depersonalization of the care path for beneficiaries (McMullin, 2021; Yi et al., 2025) and foster a capacity-building paradox. By substituting (rather than supplementing) municipal functions when managing public tenders, NPOs can also inadvertently reinforce a structural dependency that undermines the long-term resilience of small municipalities, ultimately challenging the sustainability of the PV.

6 Conclusions

This study provides a context-specific empirical case study of PVsG within the challenging domain of refugee reception and integration. The analysis shows that the SAI governance arrangement has shifted from a rigid, fragmented, and hierarchical approach toward a relational and multi-actor governance framework. In this environment, NPOs bridge jurisdictional and operational boundaries and create opportunities for greater participation by beneficiaries and residents as coproducers of PV through institutionalized social quality and mutual administrative resilience; however, this development remains constrained by administrative dependency, limited impact assessment, and weak horizontal accountability.

From a theoretical perspective, this research responds to calls for more qualitative research on complex networks (Palumbo & Manesh, 2023). This study examines the interactions between PSOs (municipalities, government) and NPOs, providing a con-

crete example of how the PVsG framework manifests in practice within a humanitarian setting (Thabit et al., 2024). Specifically, the study proposes refining the PVsG framework by highlighting the NPO's role in reconciling social and jurisdictional disconnects within the reception and integration system. In traditional governance models, NPOs are secondary actors. In contrast, applying the PVsG in fragile administrative contexts reveals that NPOs serve as the primary engine for strategic alignment. Without a PVsG lens, administrative gaps in small municipalities would lead to service failure; however, within it, NPOs bridge these gaps through specialized mediation. This research also identifies a possible paradox: PVsG facilitates immediate value creation, but it simultaneously risks institutionalizing a dependency trap. Consequently, the PVsG framework must integrate public sector administrative resilience as a core “instrumental and prime value” to ensure that leveraging NPO resources complements, rather than erodes, the advancement and preservation of public sector internal competences. These findings are context-specific; however, they offer critical insights for resource-constrained local authorities, particularly small municipalities characterized by chronic structural understaffing. Thus, this paper's theoretical contribution lies in moving PVsG beyond a collaboration model toward a resilience model in low-capacity jurisdictions.

From a practical perspective, this paper provides recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Italy's migration governance and to transition from a model of reactive containment toward one of proactive, structural integration, as emphasized by interviewees. First, harmonizing inter-ministerial objectives is essential to eliminate existing policy incoherence (Nabatchi & AbouAssi, 2025). The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour must synthesize their respective mandates and transform first-level reception centers from passive holding facilities into active centers for sociolinguistic and legal orientation. This approach can ensure that integration processes are initiated immediately upon arrival, rather than being deferred during the status determination phase.

Second, robust administrative capacity-building must support the decentralization of integration services. National authorities should provide targeted technical assistance to help municipalities facilitate the complex management of European financial instruments, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. This goal can be achieved through mutual learning frameworks that can leverage the specialized expertise of NPOs to enhance the technical proficiency of local government officials.

Finally, the system must adopt a multidimensional, ecosystem approach to integration. Labor market inclusion is inextricably linked to housing stability and physical mobility; consequently, the resettlement of migrants in rural areas remains nonviable without significant infrastructural investment in transport. Moreover, legal integration pathways must be economically competitive relative to the informal labor market, supported by qualitative assessments that prioritize long-term social cohesion over superficial quantitative metrics.

This paper is not without limitations. First, the findings are context-specific and not generalizable, although they provide analytical insights that may inform similar governance settings. Second, interviews focused on PSOs and NPOs involved in the

coproduction of SAI-related services, without directly including refugees' perspectives. As a result, the study captures refugees' perspectives indirectly, through the interpretations and practices of the actors involved in service design and delivery. Third, the comparison between earlier and current governance arrangements relies on interviewees' retrospective accounts and contextual documents. This study was not designed as a longitudinal evaluation; thus, it does not establish causal changes over time. Given this study's exploratory nature, future research could build on these insights by adopting comparative or multi-case designs to examine how the role of NPOs as intermediaries varies across different institutional and geographical contexts. Further research is also needed to explore the perspectives of service recipients (refugees) in NPO-mediated coproduction to inform the design and implementation of reception and integration services (Eseonu, 2022; Fonseca Peso et al., 2020). Furthermore, longitudinal research could explore how reliance on NPOs evolves over time and whether such reliance leads to sustained capacity building or reinforces dependency dynamics within PSOs. Finally, future research could operationalize and test the concept of administrative resilience within the PVsG framework, contributing to its theoretical refinement and empirical validation across various governance settings.

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Declarations

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