



# UNICORE

UNiversity COrridors for REfugees

## THE VOICES OF THE PROTAGONISTS

By Giulia Tringali - 9 June 2022

WACC EUROPE  
CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION

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# CAMPUS MARTINITT

“I have studied from primary to high school in the refugee camp in the Somali region in Ethiopia and I’ve attended my bachelor’s degree in medical laboratory and technology science there. When I graduated, I got this scholarship called UNICORE and on the 15th of September I arrived in Italy and I started my master program in Biotechnology and Molecular medicine at the University Statale of Milan,” says Fathi.

The project UNiversity COrridors for REfugees, is promoted by Italian universities, with the support of UNHCR, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Caritas Italiana, Diaconia Valdese, Centro Astalli, and other partners. It aims to increase opportunities for refugees currently residing in refugee camps to continue their higher education in Italy.

The project, explains Daniele Albanese, Programme Manager at the national level of Caritas Italiana, started in 2019 from the idea of humanitarian corridors.

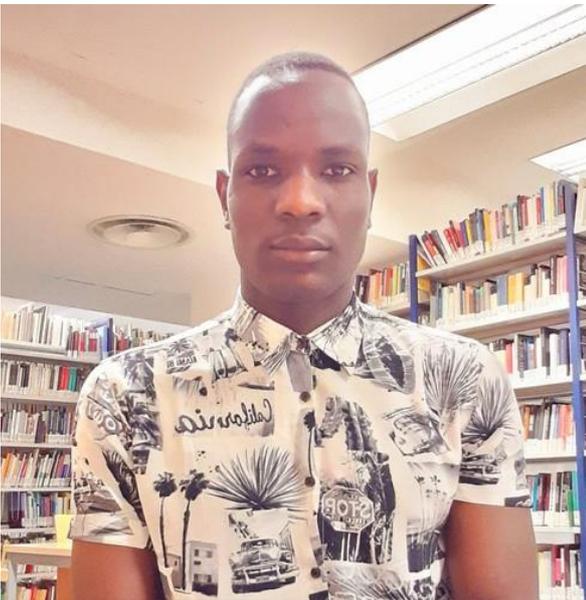
In 2019 the pilot project started with 6 students from Ethiopia and two participating universities; then in 2020, there were 20 students from Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, DR Congo, and ten universities that welcomed them. In 2021 there was a third edition and there were 45 students and 24 partner universities.

THIS YEAR, IN SEPTEMBER 2022, 32 UNIVERSITIES WILL WELCOME 69 STUDENTS FROM CAMEROON, NIGER, NIGERIA, MALAWI, MOZAMBIQUE, SOUTH AFRICA, ZAMBIA, AND ZIMBABWE.





Fathi Mohamed is a 21-year-old student. He arrived with the third edition of the project, and he now lives at Campus Martinitt, a student's residence near the center of Milan, in Lambrate. He is rooming with Saber, another student who came to Italy with a UNICORE scholarship.



"I'm 24 years old," says Saber Hamed, "and I'm from Kordofan, Nuba tribe. I left Sudan because of the civil war and then I studied in Ethiopia for my bachelor in sociology. I chose sociology because I like to understand social problems and how to solve them with collective action. When I arrived here, I started the course of International Cooperation and Human Rights at the University Statale of Milan. So I continue my path because I believe that collaboration could help us to approach the problems of our planet and also to take care of our future generations."

With Fathi and Saber also lives Bisrat Sium Gebreamlak, an Eritrean woman who was living in a refugee camp in Ethiopia with her cousin. She now studies biotechnology for the bioeconomy at the University Statale of Milan. "I did my bachelor's degree in applied biology in Eritrea," says Bisrat, "then, I lived for two years far from my family in an Ethiopian refugee camp. I wanted to find a job there, but it's not easy if you are a refugee. So, I started to teach English in Ethiopian houses. One day a friend of mine told me about this program and I applied. Imagine the happiness when I received the results. It was a dream come true!"



# THE ELEVATOR



**YOU'RE JUST THERE  
WAITING FOR ANY  
KIND OF  
OPPORTUNITY TO  
CONTINUE TO LIVE,  
AND THIS PROJECT  
GAVE US HOPE. I  
START TO DREAM  
AGAIN, TO LIVE  
AGAIN.**

—Bisrat

“When I applied, there were 500 other students who applied for the same project from all the different refugee camps in Ethiopia,” says Fathi.

“It was tough, out of more than 500 only 45 were selected. The selection was based on several criteria: academic merit, age, previous work experience, and family situation. *Inshallah*, I won. I first won the documentation and then I went for the interviews. I was worried and excited at the same time, because it was one of my plans to be in Europe and to study in a very advanced educational system to become a great doctor one day.”

Bisrat also remembers the results day as one of the best days of her life, a day of hope and big dreams.

“It was two years that I was wondering for a scholarship opportunity,” she says “so, immediately when I found it, I applied. This project means a lot for us all because when you are in Ethiopia, you just wait for an opportunity to get out of the country. Being a refugee is difficult: you can’t study, you can’t work because you don’t have the permit, and you don’t have money either.”

It’s a huge deal for us and there are still a lot of refugees out there, so I wanna remind whoever reads or listens to this message that there are other people waiting for opportunities. Moreover, if you are a girl, it is much more difficult to find a good job; some get married at a very young age just to move out of the country, others try to cross the sea.”



“When I arrived here,” she continues, “the first day I was talking with my classmates and lots of them were really young, they were 21 or 22 years old. I was 27 at that time. I felt like I wasted five years before getting this opportunity and in the camps, there are people who waste like ten years. This difference touched me so deeply.”

According to the UNHCR, only 3% of refugee people pursue education courses at a higher level, compared to the 37% of non-refugees. The effect of low enrollment rates at the secondary level - especially at the upper levels - has been to keep refugee people's enrollment in higher education at abysmally low levels.

For those refugees who have succeeded in making it all the way through secondary school, there are some recurrent barriers keeping them from progressing: certification, language, and cost.

Educational certification is often lost during the chaos of the displacements, or it may not be recognised for entry into an institution in another country. Advanced courses call for advanced language skills. And the high cost of tertiary education can deter or exclude many students - especially if, as is the case in some countries, refugees are required to pay the higher international student rates.

The UNICORE project seems to overcome these obstacles and to guarantee the right to tertiary education as fully as possible.

“I FIND THIS PROJECT A KIND OF ELEVATOR. BEING IN A MARGINALIZED AREA AND THEN COMING TO ITALY TO STUDY, I'VE NEVER IMAGINED HAVING A CHANCE LIKE THIS, IT IS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY. THIS PROJECT IS ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ELEVATE OTHER PEOPLE.”

—Saber

## THE FULL PACKAGE



UNICORE is carried out in close contact with local communities. On one hand, students are guaranteed a scholarship that covers university expenses. But on the other hand, aspects of social life are also taken into account.

Grazia Maniacco, one of the projects' two national tutors, affirms that a facilitating context for integration and inclusion in the area is created for the students, thanks to the widespread presence of Caritas and the universities' institutional mandate to welcome them into the community. "There are aspects that the local partner takes care of, such as documentary support, but also relational support. They are people far from their families and their countries, so they may need human closeness."



Sister Cristina Ripamonti, contact person for Caritas in the Milan area, who interfaces with Grazia at the national level and with the educators at the local level, says that all the students are also introduced to a family, so they won't feel left alone.

"I feel included in this great part of Milan society," comments Fathi. "I often go to the family and of course I miss mine, but I should be strong."



Bisrat is also in touch with an Italian family: "Sometimes we make video calls all together with my Italian family and the Eritrean one. It's great because the family here knows about Eritrea, and in Milan there is also a huge Ethiopian and Eritrean community, so I feel at home. Moreover, Italian people are like Eritreans, very welcoming and loud. They always say hi! So coming here with the project was kind of a full package. It wasn't only for studying, but to meet and be part of a community."

## ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

“Of course, there are difficulties in this project: first of all, the economic sustainability,” says Daniele. The contributions from the universities are different, there isn’t a single standard. “It would be useful”, she says, “to standardize the provision of services and promote fundraising for the sustainability of the project. Today the universities are the ones that finance the scholarships. It could be interesting to imitate the Canadian model, which withholds \$5 per year from university fees to finance projects that protect the right to study.”



“At the same time,” adds Grazia, “we continue to work on the involvement of an increasing number of Italian universities, from departments to professors, and then we also focus on civil society, associations, and families; but Covid has certainly affected the involvement of the university community and decreased the number of meetings with students.”

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the legal one. “I’ve entered with a travel permit from the transit country,” says Saber, “but my permit will expire soon, so I’m waiting for an answer about the renewal process, because until now our permit is not renewable yet.”

The national coordinator of the project says that once the permit expires, it’s no longer renewable and so in the meantime they have to apply for asylum. Caritas and UNHCR are currently addressing this issue with the government.



Finally, not everyone of the selected students finishes his or her master's degree courses. The national tutor affirms that some students start the course and then drop it without much explanation. This is often because the migration project is not always shared with the staff members. "Sometimes the student doesn't want to stay in Italy, for example," says Grazia. "Clearly we always hope that those who enter the programme will take advantage of the opportunity that is given, but on the other hand the self-determination of a person is such that they are sometimes brought to leave the project. Maybe because of their age or because of the demands of their families back home, which always have a great influence on them. Some want to work because they may have left their wives and children in their country. Finally, it is not always easy to gain their trust, because they have got used to living in a place where you cannot trust anyone, so some don't share their migration project for personal safety," concludes Grazia.

Lastly, the students do not know exactly when and how they will see their families again.

"I'm far away from my family," says Fathi, "and it's difficult because I don't know when I will reunite with them. It's challenging. I spend all my time reading and studying, the educational system here is very different from the African one. Studying needs all my energy and concentration, sometimes I also forget to eat. So it's really tough and sometimes I feel like giving up, but it's impossible for me to give up and I will never give up for sure."



## THE DREAMS



“The academic challenge is tough, because I’ve graduated in 2017 so for five years I was away from the academic world,” says Bisrat, “and I had to face the oral exams, which I wasn’t used to. But I struggled, studying at night and luckily, I’ve passed all my exams of the first semester.”

“After this master’s degree I hope I can find an opportunity where I can do my PhD, then I will go back to Eritrea and I will work there, teaching what I’ve learnt. Moreover, I also love writing books, so I hope to write as many books as I can,” she says.



Saber also wishes he could do a PhD and then get a job and help his family. He likes project design and evaluation and the course on international human rights law. He wishes he could become a policymaker, or a migration policy manager, to find a job in the field of international cooperation, because he firmly believes in common actions for a common goal. “It will be good that we come together and cooperate with respect for everyone. Life is full of challenges and to understand the problems of people suffering, you should put yourself in other’s shoes. Coming from Sudan I’ve experienced a lot of things and what I’ve learned is that you have to interact with people, don’t fear each other, and be cooperative,”



It is not always easy to interact; the migration path is a complex process, especially when it comes to changing continents, as well as countries. Cultural shocks can occur and the stereotypes and prejudices one had about a certain place can change.

**“WHEN I WAS IN AFRICA I SAW EUROPE DIFFERENTLY, AS A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN DO AND HAVE EVERYTHING. ACTUALLY, WHEN I GOT HERE MY PERCEPTION CHANGED”.**

—Fathi



“You have to study hard, think critically, nothing is guaranteed, but with education you can be part of this great world in a positive way,” says Fathi.

“I want to advise the teenagers back in Ethiopia, saying that they should study hard and they should focus more on their future in order to have a brighter and better life, to be part of this great world and contribute in a positive way. Education was the only thing I had and it gave me the chance to come here. I wasn’t economically strong, but I had education and it gave me one of my dreams.”