

Housing as inclusion: the GRANDE! project and the challenge of autonomy for unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy

Abitare come strumento di inclusione: il progetto GRANDE! e la sfida dell'autonomia per i minori stranieri non accompagnati in Italia

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Abstract

The *GRANDE! Giovani stranieri Accompagnati Nei percorsi Di Inclusione* project was developed to support unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) in their transition to educational, employment, social, and housing autonomy in Italy. Funded by *Con i Bambini* as part of the *National fund for the fight against child educational poverty*, it focused on the regions of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, with particular attention to Bologna, Florence, and Lucca. This article explores one of the most critical aspects of UFMs' inclusion: access to housing. Using a qualitative methodology involving focus groups, interviews, and roundtable discussions, the research highlights the main barriers to housing inclusion and presents an innovative solution: hosting young adults in the co-housing community *Il Giardino dei Folli*. Initial findings suggest that this model supports not only residential stability but also social integration and employment access. The article concludes with critical reflections on housing policies and proposes replicable strategies to support UFMs in their transition to adulthood, emphasizing the importance of community-based, personalized, and sustainable housing solutions for effective long-term inclusion.

Keywords: unaccompanied foreign minors, housing inclusion, GRANDE! project, transition to autonomy, social co-housing.

Sommario

Il progetto *GRANDE! Giovani stranieri Accompagnati Nei percorsi Di Inclusione* nasce con l'obiettivo di accompagnare i minori stranieri non accompagnati (MSNA) verso l'autonomia educativa, lavorativa, sociale e abitativa in Italia. Finanziato da *Con i Bambini* nell'ambito del *Fondo per il contrasto della povertà educativa minorile*, ha coinvolto i territori di Emilia-Romagna e Toscana, con focus su Bologna, Firenze e Lucca. Questo articolo approfondisce uno degli aspetti più critici dell'inclusione dei MSNA: l'abitare. Attraverso una metodologia qualitativa che include focus group, interviste e tavole rotonde, si evidenziano i principali ostacoli all'inclusione abitativa e si presenta una pratica innovativa: l'accoglienza dei neomaggiorenni presso il co-housing *Il Giardino dei Folli*. Le prime analisi indicano che questo modello favorisce non solo la stabilità residenziale ma anche la socializzazione e l'inserimento lavorativo. L'articolo si conclude con alcune riflessioni critiche sulle politiche abitative, suggerendo percorsi replicabili per sostenere la transizione dei MSNA verso l'età adulta.

Parole chiave: minori stranieri non accompagnati, inclusione abitativa, progetto GRANDE!, transizione all'autonomia, co-housing sociale.

Introduction: unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) between vulnerability and housing transitions

In recent years, the number of unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) in Italy has remained significantly high, underscoring the structural nature of this phenomenon. While previously reported at over 22,000 as of December 2023, more recent statistics show 18,625 UFMs registered as of December 31, 2024 (Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2025). The majority are older male adolescents – primarily 17-year-olds – and arrive from countries such as Egypt, Ukraine, Gambia, and Tunisia. These young people often endure long and traumatic journeys fleeing conflict, poverty, separation, or exploitation (Agostinetti, 2017; Sayad, 2004). For them, housing isn't just a roof overhead – it's a foundational right that shapes their ability to rebuild life with dignity and stability (UNHCR, 2023a and 2023b; Rigon, Mengoli, 2013). In Italy, an extensive scholarly debate has long investigated the experiences, vulnerabilities and transition pathways of unaccompanied foreign minors, documenting both the achievements and the structural limits of the reception system (Bertozzi, 2005; Bichi, 2008; Valtolina, 2016; Segatto, 2018; Granata and Granata, 2019; De Filippo, Iermano and Tizzi, 2024). This consolidated body of literature has shown that the shift to legal adulthood often represents a fragile turning point, where protection weakens precisely as young people still require guidance, relational stability and access to dignified living conditions. This article aims to explore housing as a critical factor in the inclusion and transition pathways to adulthood for UFMs. It focuses particularly on a delicate and under-researched phase: the moment these youth turn eighteen, when many risk suddenly exiting protection systems without real support for achieving autonomy (Giovannetti and Accorinti, 2017; Lorenzini, 2018 and 2019). The Italian reception system provides specific safeguards for UFMs until the age of eighteen, notably through law 47/2017 (commonly known as the *Zampa law*), which introduced major innovations such as the role of voluntary guardians and a ban on border pushbacks. However, turning eighteen represents a legal and existential threshold. In the absence of administrative continuation measures (Article 32 of Legislative Decree 286/1998), many young people find themselves abruptly excluded from protective circuits and lacking stable housing. In this context, having a home becomes not only a basic necessity but also a symbol of social recognition: an official address is essential for work, healthcare, and applying for a residence permit (De Angelis and Vitale, 2020).

Research has consistently shown that housing instability among newly-adult foreign youths often results in precarious living conditions, dependence on informal networks, squatting, and in the most extreme cases, housing marginality or homelessness (Fondazione ISMU, 2025; Penninx *et al.*, 2004). This is a form of vulnerability that frequently remains invisible – not captured by standard poverty indicators – but profoundly linked to the absence of sustainable and dignified housing alternatives for young people who, though still in a formative stage, are treated as fully autonomous adults by legal standards. It is within this framework that the GRANDE! project was launched, funded by *Impresa Sociale Con i Bambini* and implemented in three key territories: Lucca and Florence in Tuscany, and Bologna in Emilia-Romagna. The initiative was born from the awareness that many UFMs, upon leaving the minor reception system, face abrupt loss of structured support and often fall into precarious or marginal situations. GRANDE! seeks to intervene precisely at this vulnerable juncture testing innovative model to labor inclusion such as the *Training in Situation* (TiS) model (in Italian, *Formazione in Situazione*, FIS) as well as innovative solution for housing, as for instance co-housing, shared apartments with light educational support, and activation of local support networks and communities. Alongside direct aid to UFMs, the project aims to develop scalable and

replicable intervention strategies. This article will present one experience developed in Bologna metropolitan area, where a co-housing experience not only met housing needs but also created a meaningful relational environment, fostering empowerment, participation, and active citizenship. This initiative, a collaboration between the GRANDE! project and the *Giardino dei Folli* co-housing offers a concrete example of how housing can be reimagined as a space for accompaniment, growth, and self-reliance for youth navigating complex migratory trajectories. By focusing on this specific intervention, the article aims to illustrate an innovative and promising practice by describing the concrete actions implemented and their perceived effects, while also highlighting the potential and the challenges of co-housing as a support mechanism for youths transitioning out of protection systems.

1. The GRANDE! project and its core tool: the path for autonomy and inclusion (PPAI)

GRANDE! Giovani stranieri Accompagnati Nei percorsi Di InclusionE is an integrated and long-term support model for young unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) approaching or surpassing legal adulthood. It addresses the crucial phase of transition from protected reception to independent living. The project lasted 48 months and was implemented in three strategic areas: Bologna (Emilia-Romagna), Florence, and Lucca (Tuscany). This geographic focus is particularly relevant when considered alongside national and regional trends. As of December 31, 2024, 18,625 UFMs were recorded nationwide in Italy (Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2025). Tuscany accounted for 1,062 UFMs, while Emilia-Romagna recorded 1,619 as of mid-2024 (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024; Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2024). These figures reflect the ongoing structural significance of the phenomenon, particularly in regions like Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, which combine high migration flows with well-developed but pressured social service networks. The high concentration of UFMs in these territories, especially in urban centers like Bologna and Florence, underscores the importance of targeted, context-sensitive responses like those tested by GRANDE!. The heart of the intervention lies in the co-construction of an individual path for autonomy and inclusion (PPAI: in Italian, PIAI – Percorso Individuale di Autonomia e Integrazione), a tailored plan developed with each youth based on their aspirations, needs, and potential. Each PPAI is coordinated by a social tutor or designated professional and integrates activities across key domains such as education, employment, housing, and community engagement. As the project's core operational tool, the PPAI aligns the personal trajectories of UFMs and ex-UFMs with the broader capacities of the multi-stakeholder network, providing a structured yet adaptable pathway toward autonomy. Practically, the process begins with outreach to reception centers where unaccompanied foreign minors are either approaching their 18th birthday or have recently turned 18. Working closely with their educators, tutors, or social workers, the project team seeks to identify those young people who appear ready and motivated to embark on a first structured path toward independence. Through targeted interviews and motivational conversations, the youth are encouraged to reflect on their aspirations, personal skills, professional experiences, and current limitations. Above all, the evaluation seeks to understand whether the youth demonstrates a real willingness to engage actively in the process. Once identified, the youth are actively involved in drafting their PPAI, which can have short- or medium-term objectives. These plans typically outline immediate needs – e.g. obtaining a driver's license to access a distant job, completing educational qualifications, or acquiring key technical skills – as well as long-term goals such as

securing stable housing or sustainable employment. The PPAI specifies clear actions, timelines, and responsibilities. Each task is assigned to a relevant project partner or institution based on thematic expertise. Once completed, the plan is formalized through a mutual agreement signed by the youth and project representatives. The PPAI is then activated with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the territorial support network. This structured yet flexible tool has proven crucial for guiding young people in the delicate phase of exiting protection systems and stepping into adult roles. The PPAI formalizes commitment, facilitates inter-agency coordination, and empowers the youth to play an active role in shaping their future. Up till now, 193 male UFM's have benefited from individualized support plans, each tailored to provide structure and purpose in the transition to adulthood. These individualised paths resonate with previous Italian studies that have documented both institutional approaches and criticalities in supporting UFM's transition to adulthood (Bertozzi, 2018; De Filippo, Iermano and Tizzi, 2024). Four pillars structure the GRANDE! strategy according to the Personalized Autonomy Paths – PPAI, all of them strictly interconnected: education and training, work inclusion, community integration and territorial network and housing support.

Unaccompanied minors arrive in Italy with an immediate need to support themselves and, very often, to send remittances to family members in their countries of origin (Cerrocchi and Porcaro, 2023). This urgency can make long-term education appear secondary or out of reach. However, as the GRANDE! project has demonstrated, access to training and education – particularly Italian language acquisition – is essential for achieving stable employment and meaningful inclusion. The project guided participants to understand the foundational role of education in preparing for the labor market. Tailored educational support focused on strengthening language skills, basic literacy, and vocational orientation. For instance, in Tuscany, 26 young people completed career profiling and skills assessments, supporting informed choices about future employment pathways. The second critical axis was the inclusion in the world of work. In total, 63 young people joined orientation and skills development paths. One of the most effective approaches used by the project was the Training in Situation model (TiS, in Italia FIS – *Formazione in Situazione*), – a dynamic learning format developed by the Bolognese partner CSAPSA that bridged classroom learning with real-world, on-the-job practice and continuous support and orientation. Topics covered included digital literacy, labor rights, workplace safety, and soft skills. The project team responded to language and educational barriers by reshaping lessons into interactive and visual formats, including workshops, games and simulations (Audino and Bianchi, 2021; Biagioli, 2018). In Bologna alone, 30 youth completed the TiS program, resulting in internships and 12 job contracts. Tuscany reported 26 career profiles and skills assessments. The success of TiS lies not only in its technical training but in restoring dignity and rhythm to the lives of young people who had experienced discontinuity and marginality. This dual approach – practical skills and personal empowerment—proved key to transitioning from uncertainty to active agency: the TiS pathway proved to be not just a tool for employability, but a powerful mechanism for activating confidence, structure, and future orientation in young people navigating life transitions. Regarding the pillar of community integration and territorial networks, each city activated strong local coalitions between public services, NGOs, and informal actors to ensure a consistent support structure. Thank to this network, 90 inclusion paths were activated: peer activities, recreational outings, cineforums, language support workshops, sporting activities, and driving school access. Beyond individuals, GRANDE! worked to strengthen the social links with the education community, a network of formal and informal actors – schools, municipalities, civil society, volunteers, tutors – able to offer integrated educational opportunities. In Lucca, this included cineforums and

conversational Italian sessions with volunteers as well as activities with young Europeans in international mobility experience; in Florence, driving lessons and cultural outings; and in Bologna, social and sporting activities combined with life coaching etc.. The project emphasized not only activities but proximity and relational consistency. Informal outings, peer mentoring, and monthly recreational days helped build trust and break social isolation. This social glue – often underestimated – was fundamental to preventing exclusion and dropout. Nevertheless, challenges remain. The educating community is still fragile in many territories, often underfunded or fragmented (Milana *et al.*, 2023). Strengthening this network is essential for systemic change, ensuring that inclusion is not dependent on short-term projects but embedded in long-term local strategies (Burgio *et al.*, 2023). Lastly, in terms of housing support, up till now, 62 beneficiaries received training on housing rights and responsibilities; 11 accessed transitional housing; 22 secured private rental contracts with tailored accompaniment. The issue of housing, as we will see, is crucial for the autonomy and stabilization of these young people, and will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs

2. Methodology: monitoring impact through quantitative and qualitative research

The GRANDE! project adopted a mixed-method approach to monitor its implementation and assess its impact across the three participating cities. The methodology integrated both quantitative analysis based on effective output and outcomes and qualitative research tools. For the aim of this article, the chosen methodological qualitative approach was adopted in order to document and analyse promising practices developed within the GRANDE! project, focusing on its processes, relational dynamics, and perceived effects on the young people involved. Since the project is an applied, practice-oriented intervention rather than a research programme, the data collection strategy was designed to capture the experiential dimension of the co-housing initiative and the perspectives of the different actors engaged in it. Empirical material was gathered through semi-structured interviews with educators, volunteers, social workers and young residents, through two focus groups involving project staff and external professionals collaborating in the Bologna area, and through field observations conducted both during formal project meetings and in informal interactions within the co-housing environment. Although no rigid observation grid was used, the documentation followed a shared internal memo protocol adopted across the broader GRANDE! initiative, which ensured continuity in recording relevant relational, organisational and contextual elements. The qualitative material was examined through a thematic content analysis. An initial phase of open coding allowed the research team to identify recurrent topics in the interviews and field notes; these were subsequently grouped into broader thematic areas that reflected the key dimensions of the experience, such as housing stability, everyday coexistence, educational and relational support, autonomy-building and the collaboration between services and community actors. A cross-reading of these thematic clusters made it possible to detect convergences and divergences among the viewpoints of professionals, volunteers and young people, thus highlighting both the strengths and the critical aspects of the intervention. Given the word-limit constraints established by the journal, only a small number of quotations could be included, selected on the basis of their capacity to clarify mechanisms, illustrate typical situations or foreground tensions that emerged more consistently across the dataset.

Qualitatively, the GRANDE! project evaluation was structured into five key components. SWOT Analysis conducted with project partners to identify internal

strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats. This participatory diagnostic tool (Pickton and Wright, 1998) helped refine local strategies and identify replicable models. Territorial and thematic roundtables: up till now, two local multi-stakeholder meetings focused on housing and the construction of territorial social networks. These sessions enabled institutional dialogue and contextual reflection. Focus groups carried out in Bologna, Florence, and Lucca, involving local partners and stakeholders, covering all four thematic axes of the project (education, housing, work, social integration). These were guided by best practices in qualitative fieldwork (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Twenty narrative in-depth interviews were conducted with tutors, volunteers, educators, job counselors, and trainers from all partner organizations. The aim was to gather deep experiential insight (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) into how institutional support and relational dynamics shaped outcomes. Field visit and observational research: a dedicated visit to the co-housing site *Il Giardino dei Folli* in Bologna metropolitan area enabled direct observation and contextual assessment of this innovative solution as well as the possibility to conduct four in-dept interviews. In addition to these, the evaluation took into consideration all the data gathered by the PPAI of all participants. This triangulated methodology ensured that both systemic dynamics and lived experiences were adequately represented. The housing component, in particular, emerged not only as a logistical challenge but as a complex relational and structural bottleneck, requiring sustained public attention.

Area	Description	Evidence collected
Access to transitional housing	Activation of personalised pathways to support the transition to adulthood	PPAI including housing modules implemented
Stability of housing trajectories	Support in managing rent, cohabitation, documentation and administrative requirements	Educators' field notes; follow-up meetings, SWOT analysis
Development of autonomy-related skills	Daily-life skills (budgeting, cleaning, time management, communication with landlords)	Thematic coding of FG and interviews
Community support	Involvement of local associations, volunteers and informal networks	Records from community meetings, SWOT analysis; Thematic coding of FG and interviews
Challenges encountered	Bureaucratic delays, difficulty accessing affordable housing, lack of guarantors	Cross-comparison of field notes and staff meetings (territorial, regional, inter-regional), inter-institutional tables, SWOT analysis; Thematic coding of FG and interviews

Table 2: qualitative tools.

Area	Result
Personalized Inclusion Plans (PPAI)	193 implemented
Housing Education	62 youth involved
Access to Social Housing	11 temporary housing placements
Private Rental Contracts	22 youth secured rental contracts
Cultural/Social Activities	90 initiatives organized
Employment/Training Paths	63 internships and orientation programs
Community Partnerships	Multiple collaborations with landlords and local associations

Table 1: key achievements of the GRANDE! Project (31 May 2025).

3. Housing vulnerabilities and the UFM's situation: from difficulties to solutions

The housing crisis in Italy's major urban and touristic centers is no longer confined to marginalized groups since it has become a generalized emergency affecting low- and middle-income residents alike. In cities such as Florence, Venice, Rome, and Bologna, processes of gentrification and over-tourism have transformed the residential fabric, reducing affordable long-term rentals and displacing vulnerable populations (Tocci and Cittadini, 2022; INU, 2023). Interviews conducted within the GRANDE! project in the three targeted cities confirm that access to appropriate housing solutions is one of the most pressing challenges for UFM's in the post-reception phase. The issue is not solely the material availability of housing, but also bureaucratic barriers, discrimination, lack of guidance, and an unclear framework of rights. As emphasized by social workers and educators involved in the project, it is crucial for public policies to recognize the unique nature of these transitional paths and avoid allowing service exits to equate to a return to invisibility (Bourdieu, 1999; Sayad, 2004). The housing crisis for UFM's is compounded by gentrification and over-tourism, particularly in Florence and Bologna, but increasingly in Lucca, too, as a general global phenomenon. As noted by the National Institute of Urban Planning (2023), tourist demand reduces long-term housing stock and drives rental prices up, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. This macroeconomic dynamic intersects with micro-level discrimination and precarity, highlighting the need for public intervention.

Gentrification and over-tourism: structural drivers of exclusion

Gentrification, fueled by speculative real estate investment and the redevelopment of central neighborhoods, has progressively raised rental costs and excluded non-affluent tenants from access to urban cores. The proliferation of short-term rentals – especially through platforms like Airbnb – has further reduced the availability of permanent housing stock, transforming former residential areas into transient, tourist-driven zones (Celata and Romano, 2020). Over-tourism intensifies this effect. As tourism-related services dominate the housing economy, entire blocks are removed from local use, and prices skyrocket. For unaccompanied minors – often without income stability, guarantors, or a social network – these conditions are insurmountable. Even those with employment or training pathways are perceived as *high-risk tenants*, and face explicit discrimination by landlords (ANOLF, 2023; Caritas Italiana, 2024). These overlapping dynamics render housing inaccessible to many Italians with stable jobs – and nearly impossible for young migrants navigating adulthood alone. The situation reveals how systemic vulnerabilities multiply in the absence of proactive policy and community-based safeguards.

Among all areas tackled by the GRANDE! project, housing remains the most structurally fragile. For unaccompanied minors approaching or surpassing the age of 18, finding safe, stable accommodation is a pivotal – yet often missing – step in their path to autonomy. Interventions such as education and job training can be completely effective when the basic condition of having a place to live is met. Interviews conducted in Lucca, Florence, and Bologna with UFM's exiting the reception system highlight a constellation of housing-related vulnerabilities, spanning structural, economic, and relational dimensions. In addition, housing insecurity significantly undermines access to work. Several employers involved in the project expressed reluctance to formalize contracts with youth whose housing status was undefined, fearing discontinuity or legal complications. In other cases, young people had to decline job offers due to the inaccessibility of workplaces from distant or poorly connected housing units, often the

only ones affordable in tourist-saturated cities like Florence and Bologna. Housing is often not only an important prerequisite for job access but also a bureaucratic anchor. A fixed residence is required for obtaining or renewing legal documents such as residence permits, which in turn are necessary for employment contracts. The system creates a circular dilemma: one cannot rent a home without a job, but one cannot be hired without legal residence, and one cannot secure residency without an address – an institutional catch-22 that disproportionately affects youth without family networks, economic guarantees, or cultural capital.

The GRANDE! project recognized this as a core challenge and responded with targeted support mechanisms: transition apartments, regeneration of underused housing stock, and the involvement of social tutors and community actors. These efforts sought not only to offer shelter, but to embed young people in relational ecosystems capable of sustaining their path toward full inclusion.

- a) Access to housing: all the interviewees describe how nearly impossible it is to rent a home independently. Lack of financial guarantees, stable income, or family backing, combined with landlords' reluctance to rent to migrants or those coming from protected structures, creates a deadlock. Even those engaged in work or training often remain outside the formal housing market due to perceived unreliability.
- b) Discrimination: several respondents reported facing explicit refusals from landlords solely based on their migrant status or connection to reception facilities. In everyday life, particularly in crowded, diverse urban neighborhoods, some youth encounter suspicion, isolation, and social exclusion.
- c) Geographical isolation: affordable housing options are often located on the periphery of cities or in rural zones, far from public transport, schools, and job hubs. This spatial marginality severely limits educational and social opportunities, deepening the gap between formal autonomy and actual inclusion.
- d) Administrative and bureaucratic barriers: the bureaucratic requirements for leasing – residency registration, legal documents, rental history – often exclude UFM, especially in the delicate transition after they turn 18. Delays in permit renewals or incomplete records exacerbate this condition.

These factors create a condition of suspended autonomy: youths are no longer protected minors, but not yet self-sufficient adults. Without housing, their progress risks stalling. The GRANDE! project thus intervened not only by offering practical housing pathways but by weaving networks of relational support and legal-educational accompaniment. As noted by multiple interviewees, housing is *a point of no return*: the moment where, if unsupported, even well-structured educational and social inclusion paths risk collapse. Public policy must avoid equating service exits with invisibility and instead recognize the unique complexity of youth transitions in migration contexts (Bourdieu, 1999; Sayad, 2004).

4. Emerging Solutions: an inclusive co-housing experience

One of the most emblematic and innovative responses activated within the GRANDE! project is the collaboration with *Il Giardino dei Folli*, a co-housing community located in the San Lazzaro di Savena district on the outskirts of Bologna. This residential initiative, established in 2014 by 15 families through a participatory planning process, has grown into a sustainable and inclusive micro-village housing around 40 people across four wooden-frame prefabricated buildings arranged around a central courtyard. Shared spaces include a multipurpose hall, communal laundry, workshop, vegetable gardens, and green

areas. The architectural and social model promotes energy efficiency, collective life, and community participation. In 2023, a fifth building was initiated through a €75,000 grant from MAG6. This new structure is dedicated entirely to social purposes: it includes a multifunctional room used for assemblies, events, and neighborhood gatherings, as well as a self-contained apartment specifically intended for temporary housing projects with a strong social orientation. Following a series of internal discussions within the co-housing collective and in close coordination with the GRANDE! team, the community decided to allocate the new apartment for two years to two unaccompanied foreign minors transitioning into adulthood. This decision emerged from a collaborative evaluation of housing requests, aligning values of solidarity with practical feasibility.

The selected UFM's to try the efficacy of this solution – both of them of the same National origin and religion— had shown a strong drive toward autonomy during the interviews conducted for the PPAI. Both were already employed and had functional knowledge of Italian, although one had arrived in Italy only recently. The placement was deemed viable due to their demonstrated stability, motivation, and support from both a dedicated social tutor and an internal reference person from the co-housing community itself. Before entering the unit, the youth were invited to sign a formal Collaboration Pact between the GRANDE! project and the association managing the co-housing initiative. The agreement detailed shared rules for co-living, administrative responsibilities, maintenance duties, cost-sharing, and commitments to both private and communal space care. Scheduled check-ins were planned to ensure ongoing evaluation and support. However, what was repeatedly emphasized to the youth was that *Il Giardino dei Folli* is not simply a residential complex with private and common spaces – it is a living community. Residents participate in communal dinners, assemblies, shared laundry facilities, and informal social rituals. Early on, community members noticed the boys needed help with practical domestic tasks. Neighbors spontaneously taught them how to do laundry, which soap to use, and how to operate the machine. After an initial period of hesitation, the young residents began engaging actively. For instance, they proposed an intercultural evening to present an important Muslim holiday to the rest of the community. One of the youth, visibly enthusiastic during the signing of the agreement, immediately asked whether he could stay permanently. It was explained that the apartment is part of a rotating support program with a social mandate: short-term housing (18–24 months) combined with active support to secure long-term, autonomous accommodation. A potential challenge was the commuting distance to work, as neither of the young men lived near their place of employment. This issue was solved creatively: one already owned an electric scooter, while the second received one as a donation from the co-housing residents. Combined with access to public transport (train), this ensured full work attendance and supported autonomy.

This structured yet welcoming approach – based on mutual commitment and multiple stakeholder engagement – is fostering a dynamic of growth, inclusion, and learning. Young residents are not only provided with housing, but also with a model of coexistence, shared responsibility, and access to informal mentorship that guides them in discovering how a home and a community function together. These efforts sought not only to offer shelter, but to embed young people in relational ecosystems capable of sustaining their path toward full inclusion. This experience illustrates a promising model of integration: not only providing housing, but embedding youth into a socially rich environment that fosters relationships, mutual responsibility, and collective care. As observed during the site visit, the presence of a *tutor for housing* the internal mentoring by community members, and the deliberate choice of hosting motivated youth contributed to a successful and dignified housing solution. *Il Giardino dei Folli* stands as a replicable model for other

territories – where housing policies and inclusion practices can intersect to offer transitional spaces that are both physically and relationally secure.

Conclusions: from pilot to policy: challenges, implications and limitations

The experience developed within the GRANDE! project confirms that housing constitutes a decisive and structurally neglected dimension in the transition to adulthood for unaccompanied foreign minors, particularly at the moment in which they leave the protection system and risk falling into sudden marginalisation. The co-housing initiative implemented in the Bologna metropolitan area shows that, when adequately supported, housing can become far more than a logistical arrangement: it can function as a relational, civic and educational space through which young people construct autonomy, rebuild trust, and gradually develop a sense of belonging. The daily presence of a housing tutor, the emergence of stable relationships with neighbours, and the integration of legal, social and labour-related support operated collectively as enabling conditions for meaningful inclusion. In this sense, the project demonstrates the necessity of integrated and localised responses to the housing crisis faced by UFM, revealing how targeted interventions can activate protective environments even within structurally adverse urban contexts. At the same time, the project brings to light a series of systemic obstacles that continue to limit housing opportunities for young migrants in Italy. Property owner reluctance, uneven municipal engagement, and the absence of coherent transitional housing regulations create discontinuities that make long-term stability difficult to achieve. These dynamics, which are hardly unique to Bologna, indicate that scaling and replicating co-housing models requires significant political will, intersectoral cooperation and adequate public investment. Housing, as the experience clearly shows, cannot be addressed in isolation. Rather, it must be linked to employment opportunities, legal accompaniment, mental-health and psychosocial support, and broader community engagement. Within this ecosystem, the role of the housing tutor emerges as particularly crucial: when properly trained and resourced, this figure becomes not merely a mediator, but a stabilising agent capable of fostering trust, supporting conflict management, and helping young adults navigate the complexities of independent living. Such roles, if structurally recognised, could markedly enhance the effectiveness of youth inclusion policies.

This contribution, however, does not present a comprehensive impact evaluation. The GRANDE! project is primarily an applied, practice-based intervention rather than a full research programme, and this inevitably introduces some limitations. Data were collected with the aim of documenting and understanding a pilot initiative rather than producing generalisable evidence. The qualitative material, though rich and coherent, reflects the situated nature of the experience in a specific local context and cannot be extrapolated uncritically to other territories. Furthermore, the housing component interacted with other strands of the initiative – such as counselling, community networking and labour inclusion pathways – making it difficult to analytically isolate causal mechanisms or to determine the specific effects of each component. These limitations also concern the scope and structure of the analysis: given the practice-oriented goals and the word-limit of the article, it was not possible to include a more extensive methodological section or a full set of quotations from interviews and observations. Despite these constraints, the analysis allows for the identification of some elements that appear essential for supporting future replicability. The Bologna case suggests that multi-level coordination between public institutions, third-sector organisations, private actors and volunteer networks is fundamental to create protective and enabling environments. Flexible transitional housing solutions, combined with continuous relational work and the stabilising presence of

professional tutors, seem to constitute core components of effective accompaniment. Replicability, however, requires not only technical capacity but also structural political commitment, adequate investment and the reduction of discriminatory barriers within local housing markets. The experience further points to the importance of treating transitional housing not as an emergency response, but as a civic entitlement that ensures continuity between the minor reception system and the early stages of adult life.

In conclusion, although this study offers an insight into a pilot project rather than an extensive multi-site evaluation, it provides meaningful lessons for practitioners, policymakers and scholars. The GRANDE! initiative underlines that when housing is understood as a relational and civic right – rather than merely a material resource – it can become a catalyst for empowerment, social participation and belonging. Housing is not merely a place, but a relational and civic right – an essential entry point into adult citizenship. As one interviewee at *Il Giardino dei Folli* noted, the minors found there not only a house, but a community ready to support them on their journey. This perspective reminds us that for UFM, and former UFM, inclusion often begins where belonging becomes tangible: through stable relationships, shared responsibilities and everyday acts of care. Strengthening these relational infrastructures should therefore be considered a central objective of future policies supporting young migrants in their transition to adult life and, more broadly, in the construction of a socially just and inclusive society.

Notes

¹ The authors, Tiziana Chiappelli, Luca Bicocchi, Paolina Pistacchi e Davide Costantino, jointly conceived the article, drawing on regular exchanges with the project staff. In details, the Introduction, paragraph 1 and the Conclusions were co-written, while paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 were authored by Tiziana Chiappelli.

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Short bio

Tiziana Chiappelli

PhD, is a researcher in General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences (DISPOC), University of Siena, focusing on socio-educational and cultural inclusion/exclusion processes involving minorities, with particular attention to migrants, refugees, unaccompanied minors, gender and cultural differences, and active citizenship. She has carried out research and training activities in Italy, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Latin America adopting qualitative and participatory research methodologies.

PhD, ricercatrice in Pedagogia generale e sociale presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Sociali, Politiche e Cognitive (DISPOC) dell’Università di Siena. Si occupa di processi di inclusione/esclusione socio-educativa e culturale e cittadinanza attiva delle minoranze, con particolare attenzione a migranti, rifugiati, minori stranieri non accompagnati, adottando una ottica di genere. Ha svolto attività di ricerca e formazione in Italia, Nord e Africa Sub-Sahariana, Medio Oriente e America Latina, adottando metodologie qualitative e partecipative.

Paolina Pistacchi

Psychologist and psychotherapist registered with the Professional Association of Psychologists of Tuscany. Active in the field of developmental psychology, she is a researcher on childhood, adolescence, and family policies at the Istituto degli Innocenti, where she also serves as Head of the Planning, Development and International Activities Unit. She teaches Developmental Psychology in university degree programmes, master’s courses and advanced training programmes, and is the author of publications on educational planning and parental support paths.

Psicologa e psicoterapeuta iscritta all’Albo degli Psicologi della Toscana. Attiva nell’ambito della psicologia dello sviluppo, è ricercatrice sui temi dell’infanzia, dell’adolescenza e delle politiche familiari presso l’Istituto degli Innocenti, dove ricopre l’incarico di Responsabile del Servizio Progettazione, Sviluppo e Attività Internazionali. È docente di Psicologia dello sviluppo in corsi di laurea, master e

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Luca Bicocchi

Researcher at the Istituto degli Innocenti. He has long worked with national and international organisations in the fields of migration and social inclusion in Italy and Europe. He has been involved in research, training and international cooperation projects on childhood and adolescence developed by the Institute. Since 2020, he has served as Honorary Judge at the Juvenile Court of Florence.

Ricercatore presso l'Istituto degli Innocenti. Ha lavorato a lungo con associazioni e organizzazioni nazionali e internazionali nei campi dell'immigrazione e dell'inclusione sociale in Italia e in Europa. Ha seguito attività di ricerca, formazione e cooperazione internazionale sui temi dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza sviluppate dall'Istituto. Dal 2020 è Giudice Onorario presso il Tribunale per i Minorenni di Firenze.

Davide Costantino

Project Manager at COSPE ETS, working in the Third Sector on migration, minors, labour inclusion, community engagement, awareness-raising and advocacy. He has experience in reception facilities for unaccompanied minors and in residential rehabilitation communities for people with substance addictions. He is also involved in documentary photography on social and humanitarian projects, portraying stories of integration, sustainable development and human rights.

Project Manager presso COSPE ETS, attivo nel Terzo Settore nei campi della migrazione, dei minori, dell'inserimento lavorativo, del lavoro di comunità, della sensibilizzazione e dell'advocacy. Ha maturato esperienza nell'accoglienza dei MSNA e nelle comunità di recupero per persone con dipendenze. Si occupa anche di documentazione fotografica di progetti sociali e umanitari, raccontando storie di integrazione, sviluppo sostenibile e diritti umani.