



FORUM INTERNAZIONALE ED EUROPEO DI RICERCHE SULL'IMMIGRAZIONE
FORUM OF INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON IMMIGRATION

Victims or resources? Migrants and shrinking areas in the post-Covid-19 society

Irene Ponso and Ferruccio Pastore

30th May 2020

This brief analysis has been produced in the framework of the H2020 project Welcoming Spaces (*Investing in “welcoming spaces” in Europe: revitalising shrinking areas by hosting non-EU migrants*, <https://www.welcomingspaces.eu/>) which investigates local, bottom-up initiatives that stimulate the integration of migrants, while revitalising rural regions that currently face severe population and economic decline. With the purpose of better understanding how the current pandemic could impact the dynamics addressed by the project, this contribution highlights some major challenges and opportunities generated by Covid-19 for migrants’ mobility and integration and for the revitalization of shrinking areas.

Pandemic-induced migrant labour shortages

The pandemic has revealed to the wider public a structural fragility that makes more globalised societies and communities more vulnerable. Along with the challenges concerning the supply of medical stuff to cope with Covid-19, the difficulties in ensuring migrant work supply has entered the public debate at the very first stage of the health crisis. European societies have suddenly become aware that their economies largely depend on migrant workers both moving within the country and coming back and forth to carry out seasonal activities.

Already on March 30 the European Commission released a Guidance with a list of ‘critical workers’ that must be allowed continued freedom of movement across EU internal borders, despite emergency coronavirus measures (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_545). The list includes health workers, child and elderly care workers and seasonal workers in agriculture. Besides that, States such as Germany, France, Ireland and Spain hired migrant health professionals already living in those countries, accepting also those who were awaiting the recognition of non-EU credentials in order to fill the shortage in health staff (<https://www.odi.org/migrant-key-workers-covid-19/>).

On March 23 the EU Commission launched the opening of ‘green lanes’ for the free movement of agricultural workers within the European Union to ensure agricultural production and food supplies to families (https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/legislation/2020-03-23-communication-green-lanes_en.pdf). Countries like Germany immediately exploited the opportunity by organizing charter flights from Romania, not without rising criticism about the safety of journey and living conditions (<https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148055>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/apr/16/western-europe-food-east-european-workers-coronavirus>). At the same time, Germany started to tentatively relax employment bans for asylum seekers as a means to fill agricultural shortages.

Even though the main Italian farmers’ association (Coldiretti) was the first to call for the opening of these corridors, Italy has so far not used them, also due to a reluctance of Eastern European workers to enter Italy at the height of the pandemic. Instead, to cope with labour shortages, a regularisation of irregular agricultural, domestic and care workers was adopted at mid-May

(<http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Notizie/Pagine/Regolarizzazione,-ecco-le-procedure-previste-dal-Decreto-Rilancio.aspx>). Regularisation applications can be submitted by employers or irregular foreigners. In the first case, the employer can regularise Italian and regular foreign persons employed on irregular basis or recruit irregular foreigners already present in Italy before March 8 2020 by paying 400 euro for the bureaucratic procedures and an additional amount to be defined as a compensation for evaded taxes. In the second case, foreigners whose residence permits expired before October 31 2019 and who, while still regular, had worked in one of the sectors targeted by the amnesty, can apply for a job seeking permit by paying 190 euros. This type of permit will last 6 months and will have to be converted into a work permit within this time span, otherwise the person will fall back into an irregular status. Around 200,000 migrants are expected to be regularised through one of these two channels, far less than the estimated 500-600,000 irregular migrants living in Italy (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/migrazioni-italia-tutti-i-numeri-24893>). This is the result of the amnesty's exclusive focus on sectors regarded as particularly under pressure in this contingency (i.e., agriculture, breeding and fishery, domestic work and care work). Yet, other sectors in Italy largely rely on migrant work such as construction, tourism and logistics – with the latter working at full capacity during the lockdown for ensuring good supply. Furthermore, the costs might turn out to be too burdensome for employers who are facing substantial economic losses and the amnesty could not offer a good value for money especially in agriculture where a large share of workers are hired for just a few weeks or months. Finally, migrant work supply for tourism is not an issue of public debate yet since the high season has not yet started and the lockdown and safety rules to contain the contagion are posing more pressing challenges. Still, when this highly migrant-intensive sector will somehow restart, shortages will emerge there too.

New obstacles (and some opportunities) for migrant integration

The pandemic generates both new risks and opportunities for migrant integration. Higher-than-natives propensity to mobility (both across and within national borders) is a key resource for many migrant workers. Hence, mobility restrictions are likely to affect migrants more than the more sedentary strata of the population. Irregular status of a share of the migrant population may create further difficulties in moving across localities and in accessing health services and social benefits. Living in poor housing conditions, informal settlements, squatted buildings or collective accommodations is more frequent among migrants than among natives, thus exposing the first to comparatively higher risks of contagion. In Germany a relatively high share of asylum seekers accommodated in collective facilities test Covid19 positive (https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148072?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email) and in the UK ethnic minorities are turning out to be more likely to die from Covid-19 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/black-people-four-times-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-ons-finds>).

On the other hand, new integration opportunities can open up, as it is here and there with more or less extensive regularisation procedures that were hardly imaginable until just a few months ago. This is particularly relevant if we consider that the high rate of rejection of asylum claims all over Europe has generated large basins of irregular migrants in the main asylum seekers' destination countries over the last years (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/11/13/europes-unauthorized-immigrant-population-peaks-in-2016-then-levels-off/>). Furthermore, the need to strengthen controls over working conditions to ensure the respect of safety rules could produce, as a side effect, a mitigation in the level of exploitation of migrant (and native) workers.

Finally, health systems are being partially (and will have to be more structurally) reshuffled in order to strengthen domiciliary care that has proved to be more effective than hospitalization to

limit the contagion. This implies that patients have to be assisted at home. In this scenario, care workers, a large share of which, especially in southern Europe, are immigrants, may assume a pivotal role in connecting the health services with families. Such role might result even more crucial in peripheral non-urban areas more difficult to reach and monitor on regular basis for the public health services. This could emerge as another opportunity for migrant care workers to become a recognised and structural component of national health systems.

Migrants as pioneers of revitalisation of shrinking communities?

On this backdrop, we can ask ourselves whether migrants can become a key resource to cope with the current pandemic and contribute to trigger innovative solutions, especially with regard to rural shrinking areas.

First, given the freezing of international mobility, European countries have to make full use of internal resources. This might lead to value more territories and citizens too often regarded as second-class or as a burden, among which shrinking areas and migrants.

Second, Covid-19 has turned proximity into an economic and social asset, much more than it used to be. Creatively exploiting proximity (for instance to shorten food supply chains, see <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1272077/icode/>, and <https://time.com/5820381/coronavirus-food-shortages-hunger/>, or touristic trajectories, see <https://www.leggiscomodo.org/il-paese-remoto/>) is becoming a key condition for recovery, especially in countries, such as Italy, where agriculture and tourism are crucial sectors.

If rural shrinking areas have to become tourist destinations and large-scale production sites for zero-kilometer food (i.e. produced, sold and eaten locally), migrants may turn out to be a critical resource for them. In fact, if such a productive upgrade of inner, peripheral and shrinking areas is adopted as a strategic goal, we can hardly expect that the necessary workforce will come from young natives flocking out of the cities. An example of this kind of development is *Barikama*, a cooperative of young African migrants in Campagnano di Roma, that is growing, packing, and delivering boxes of fresh food to the residents of Rome during the Covid-19 outbreak (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/a-beautiful-thing-the-african-migrants-getting-healthy-food-to-italians>). Similarly, *Progetto Agriculture* (www.agri-culture.it), though not specifically addressing Covid-19 emergency, employs migrants who grow and distribute biological zero-kilometer food in the province of Bari. This kind of initiatives are multiplying in Italy. The current pandemic could turn them from praised small avant-garde experiments into mainstream solutions for a post-Covid-19 proximity society.

Unfortunately, the outlook is still very bleak and no positive outcome is to be expected unless it is painstakingly and strategically pursued. Opposite scenarios are all too plausible: the massive asymmetrical crisis unleashed by Covid-19 could give a final blow to shrinking, economically and demographically fragile areas by further reinforcing urbanisation trends. In the meantime, there are clear symptoms that it could widen gaps and deepen inequalities between (less protected) migrants and (more sheltered) natives (<https://www.lavoce.info/archives/66360/lavoratori-stranieri-con-tre-svantaggi-in-piu-nella-fase-2/>). The main recent precedent suggests that this might indeed be the outcome, as natives and cities proved to be more resilient to the Great Recession started in 2008. But there are also some signs pointing in an opposite direction. Much will depend on politics and policies, on whether and how they will be able to steer a rethinking of our modes of production and our way of living together.