

primacenters

Primacenters' Framework

Italian Country Report

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Executive Summary

The PRIMACENTERS Italian Country Report explores the essential yet highly vulnerable position of migrant workers in the Italian primary sector, with a specific focus on Sicily. Migrants are crucial to sustaining agricultural productivity, yet they are systematically subjected to informal labor arrangements, severe exploitation through the illegal "caporalato" (gangmaster) system, and inadequate living conditions. Despite recent legislative efforts to regulate migration flows and penalize exploitation, enforcement remains weak. The report emphasizes the need for actionable policies, including stronger labor inspections, accessible legal pathways for regularization, and the integration of social farming models to ensure human rights and socio-economic inclusion.

1.Introduction

This desk research investigates the challenges faced by migrant workers in Italy's primary sector, with a particular focus on Sicily. It explores the legal, institutional and socio-economic factors that influence migrant labor conditions, highlighting both structural gaps and exploitative practices within the agricultural sector. Given the prominence of informal labor arrangements and the widespread issue of worker exploitation - particularly through the illegal "caporalato system" - this research provides a contextual analysis to support policy development and stakeholder intervention strategies.

The key objectives of this research are:

- Mapping the Legal and Institutional Framework – Analyzing Italy's national labor laws, migration policies and regional regulations in Sicily to identify enforcement challenges, gaps in worker protections and barriers to accessing legal employment. This includes an examination of residence permits, labor rights, contractual conditions and social security entitlements.
- Assessing Migrant Labor Conditions – Investigating the realities of employment for migrant workers, including the prevalence of informal labor, exploitative recruitment practices, wage disparities and inadequate living conditions. The research also examines the role of organized crime and its influence on labor exploitation, particularly in southern regions like Sicily.

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- Reviewing Policy Initiatives and Support Mechanisms – Evaluating past and current initiatives by governmental institutions, NGOs, trade unions and local organizations aimed at addressing migrant labor rights and improving working conditions. This includes an analysis of multi-stakeholder strategies and best practices in labor market integration.
- Providing a Foundation for the PRIMACENTERS Framework – Offering evidence-based insights to inform the development of targeted policies and support structures. By identifying key gaps and vulnerabilities, the findings will contribute to shaping inclusive and sustainable labor practices in Sicily's agricultural sector.

This research aims to serve as a critical resource for policymakers, advocacy groups, and stakeholders working to enhance migrant worker protections. By addressing the most pressing legal and socio-economic challenges, the report supports efforts to create a fairer and more rights-based labor system in Sicily's primary sector.

2. The working perspectives of migrants and their integration in Italy

Italy is both a transit and destination country for migrants, particularly those from North Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia. People with migratory background often face challenges such as bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining residence permits, limited access to stable employment and precarious working conditions, especially in the agricultural, domestic and construction sectors. Irregular migration remains a significant issue, with many migrants being vulnerable to exploitation and undeclared work, particularly in southern regions like Sicily, Calabria and Puglia.

Despite these difficulties, migrants contribute significantly to Italy's economy, particularly in sectors with labor shortages. However, social integration remains uneven, with instances of discrimination, social exclusion and xenophobia (particularly towards African and Middle Eastern migrants). Many of them generally work in agriculture, and while most migrant farmworkers are legally present laborers from countries such as Romania, India and Morocco, hundreds of thousands are estimated to lack legal status. In addition to asylum seekers and other irregular arrivals, the population without authorization to live in Italy is swelled by immigrants who arrive legally and then overstay their visa.[2]

In the absence of adequate support from reception and integration systems, many people

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with migratory background enter the agricultural sector through the illegal "caporalato practice" which involves exploitative recruiters and employers that are prevalent primarily in Southern Italy (Puglia, Calabria, and Sicily). The risks of exploitation were especially pronounced during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, which struck Italy particularly early and severely. At the beginning of 2024, the death of Indian farmworker Satnam Singh, who was left to die after his arm was severed in a work accident southeast of Rome, galvanized public opinion against the exploitative and abusive conditions under which unauthorized migrants often work. Despite the expressed concerns of senior government leaders regarding irregular migration, there is evidence that parts of Italy's agricultural industry, one of Europe's largest, rely on the sizable number of asylum seekers and other migrants, who may provide the sector a comparative economic advantage.[3] The term "agro-mafia" is sometimes used to describe the exploitative and illegal practices of recruiters and employers in the extensive agricultural supply chain. The daily wages of migrant workers with special status, employed through this network, are often approximately 50 percent lower than those employed under nationally or regionally standard work contracts. The system's rigidity forces many migrant workers to rely on and pay recruiters for basic services, including food, housing and transportation, which may be costly and inadequate. Critics have condemned these conditions as a modern-day form of slavery.

According to a research conducted by Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, an organization that investigates the connection between organized crime and the agricultural industry, approximately 400,000 farmworkers - 80 percent of whom were migrants - were informally recruited through caporalato channels in 2020. Last year, Italian premier Giorgia Meloni alleged that criminal groups had manipulated the seasonal work visa system to illicitly bring migrants to Italy without employment contracts. Despite the existence of legislation in Italy that aims to address the exploitation of agricultural laborers by "gangmasters", the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms has been called into question. Furthermore, migrant agricultural workers frequently encounter challenges such as discrimination, social isolation and racism. The caporalato network operates within a context characterized by a significant demand for short-term seasonal agricultural work and a considerable degree of labor flexibility.[5]

Despite the considerable decrease in agricultural production and employment that accompanied the pandemic, Italy maintained its position as the EU leader in terms of net agricultural production gains, with a total of 31.3 billion euros. This outcome was partly attributable to the integration of asylum seekers and other people with migratory

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background into the agricultural sector. However, the Italian government also implemented additional measures to address the issue. Many EU Member States encountered difficulties in recruiting seasonal workers, leading national farmers' organizations to call for the establishment of "green corridors" to streamline the movement of seasonal laborers. The Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests endorsed the unimpeded movement of workers, and some arrived through an agreement with Morocco. However, endeavors to establish a comparable pathway with Romania proved unsuccessful.

Even though there is not a well-structured integration policy discourse in Italy, in political and public discourses some immigrants' groups are considered more problematic than others. African Muslims, Chinese nationals and Roma are mostly discriminated against: they are perceived as being different because of their religious claims (Muslims), their alleged unfair participation in the labour market (Chinese) and their cultural differences (Roma). Integration policies had mostly concentrated on economic integration until the 2000s, whereas social and cultural policies remained marginal.[7] A shift towards a more cultural concept of integration first occurred in 2006, with the drafting of the Charter of the Values and Citizenship and Integration, and then in 2010, with the "Piano per l'integrazione nella sicurezza". It is worth noting here that the Plan was proposed by the Ministry of Interior Maroni (in accordance with the Ministry of Labour). Maroni was a politician of the Northern League party and it gave emphasis to the need to combine immigrant integration with the preservation of public security emphasizing immigrants' duties, for example in terms of public order and the basic rules of cohabitation.

The Plan identifies five areas of integration, in which intervention is considered necessary. Firstly, the educational system is tasked with fostering Italian values and civic culture; language courses are also planned for adults, with a particular focus on women, and training courses promoting Italian civic culture, laws and values are promoted. The second area of focus pertains to the labour market, where the necessity to circumvent the proliferation of the black economy is emphasised, the importance of training programmes in the countries of origin is acknowledged, and the promotion of entrepreneurship among immigrants is underscored. Thirdly, housing policies are identified as a crucial instrument to support migrants in their search for accommodation and to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. Fourthly, access to social and health services is to be promoted through publicity, cultural mediators, training for health and social workers, and cooperation between the state, regions and municipalities. Finally, the fifth area regards children and second-generation migrants, where the right to education is to be guaranteed, with particular attention dedicated to

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unaccompanied minors.

A Committee for Foreign Minors is to be established to promote integration policies and it constitutes an Italian institutional entity entrusted with the safeguarding of unaccompanied foreign minors (MSNA), thereby ensuring the rights of said minors are upheld in accordance with both domestic and international regulations. The committee's remit includes monitoring the presence of these minors in Italy, registering their arrivals, and ensuring they receive proper care and protection.
From a legal perspective, the Committee oversees guardianship procedures, ensuring that minors are not arbitrarily detained or repatriated without a thorough assessment of their situation. The Committee's mandate extends to the coordination of efforts with local institutions, associations, and international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Through these collaborative endeavours, the Committee seeks to establish structured reception programmes and pathways for social inclusion. In this regard, the Committee guarantees access to education, vocational training, and healthcare while also facilitating the legal regularization process for these minors.

As far as the Sicilian context is concerned, from the 1990s to the present day, people from the Middle East (after the Gulf wars), Eastern Europe (Albania, Kosovo) and Asia have been the main source of immigrants to Italy's largest island. The number of foreigners living in Sicily at the end of December 2023, according to ISTAT, reached 200,320; Palermo is the main centre of immigration, with 17.6% of the total.

Despite Sicily's high unemployment rate, the departure of fishermen, farmers and the poorest sections of the population to richer European countries has left gaps in the workforce - but gaps at the margins of legality and in the most menial jobs, such as subsistence farming, construction, caretaking and roles in small businesses that can more easily evade regulation. These gaps have been filled by people with migratory background, whose often vulnerable conditions are heavily exploited, leaving them underpaid and "in nero" (i.e. salaries paid in cash and without a regular contract). Often arriving undocumented, migrants find it difficult to obtain residence permits and have limited power to negotiate for decent pay and workplace rights. These same factors make them easy targets for organised crime. Cities such as Cefalù, Mazara del Vallo, Palermo, Termini Imerese and Trapani are identified as the places where migration has had the greatest impact, and multi-purpose centres have been set up in Mazara del Vallo, Palermo and Termini Imerese. These centres provided legal and tax advice,

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vocational guidance, entrepreneurship training and Italian language courses for immigrants, as well as training for integration professionals. Communications on the integration of foreign citizens in the labour market were addressed to local authorities, police forces, NGOs, business associations and trade unions.

Agricultural work by immigrants in Sicily is widespread in the most productive and intensive areas, corresponding to land characterised by specialised and high value-added agriculture linked to the cultivation of vegetables, vines, olives and citrus fruits. In Sicily, due to its strategic position and the high level of immigration, many situations of serious labour exploitation can be observed during the recruitment phase in agriculture. The majority of these cases can be attributed to three main factors: (a) the increasing restrictions on legal entry into Italy for work, imposed by immigration policy; (b) the increasing randomisation of labour relations, exacerbated by the economic crisis; (c) the racial segregation of the labour market. The route of exploitation is drawn from the seasonality of crops along Italy and Europe, exploitation is often accompanied by living conditions "unethical" and from the legal measures to be little effective to control the phenomenon.

In recent years, in order to deal with the extraordinarily high level of immigration in our country, both public institutions and private associations have paid increasing attention to improving the national reception system and socio-occupational integration, including in the agricultural context. The rural world has historically been the most privileged place for social, educational and/or professional activities with people in difficulty. With Law 141/2015, which lays down the provisions on social farming, this type of activity finds regulatory recognition in a specific law. At the national level, there is an increasing number of initiatives that offer integration opportunities for immigrants from EU or non-EU countries. These initiatives vary according to the nature of the initiative (public or private) and, consequently, the source of funding, the target group (trapped women, immigrants with international protection, etc.) and, finally, the type of activities planned (direct farming, participation in processing, packaging and marketing, urban gardens, etc.). Given the importance of this phenomenon in the Italian context, and as a result of the focus and workshops organised on the subject within the National Rural Network 2014-2020, a specific survey was also launched to identify national social farming projects aimed at the socio-occupational integration of people with migratory background. The survey, launched within the framework of the "Rural Excellence" project, aimed to share experiences on the good use of Community funds in support of rural development, where agriculture is seen not only in its economic dimension, but as the main thread of a scenario made up of farms and courageous entrepreneurial choices, on the one

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hand, and the lives of immigrants, on the other.

In addition to the various initiatives promoted by direct stakeholders, there are also integration projects supported by public institutions and non-profit organisations. The “Sicilia Integra project”, born from a meeting between the London-based NGO Gaia Education and a professor from the Di3A department of the University of Catania, is a case in point. The main idea is to provide a response to the migrant crisis by supporting their socio-economic integration, offering a training and employment opportunity also to young unemployed Sicilians. Sicilia Integra, by linking to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, COP21 and Europe 2020, aims to contribute to the equitable and sustainable development of Sicily by supporting the integration and active inclusion of young Sicilians and migrants, based on the idea that the migration crisis (humanitarian crisis) and the high level of unemployment among Sicilians (economic and financial crisis) could be a great opportunity to transform the Sicilian economy. The project's actions aim to create economic opportunities in organic farming through the implementation of capacity building activities for sustainable communities, agroecology and marketing of organic products. The project started in December 2015 with a training activity focused on the sustainability of organic agri-food systems. The project is divided into several actions: (a) Creating sustainable development training pathways to support the professionalisation of migrants and young Sicilians in the emerging European organic market; (b) Building an inclusive, decentralised and transparent system of governance and long-term relationships between the various actors involved; (c) Defining a circular economy scheme that can connect local food systems with European buyers and European organic markets.

3. Migrations’ flows overview

3.1 Statistics of migrants’ population in the country

The population of Italy was recorded at 58,997,000 as of 1 January 2023, comprising 53,856,000 nationals, 1,394,000 EU citizens and 3,748,000 non-EU citizens. Projections estimate a net migration of 117,000 people in Italy during 2022. This is attributable to a high level of immigration (411,000 people) and a low level of emigration (294,000 people). The majority of immigrants to Italy come from other EU countries, but there are also significant numbers of immigrants from outside the EU. In 2023, Italy issued 130,565 first residence

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permits, a slight increase on the previous year. The majority of these permits were issued for family reasons (48%), with significant numbers allocated for work (35%) and education (14%). In 2022, Italy received 77,200 first-time asylum applications, marking a substantial increase compared to the previous year. The majority of these applications were rejected (52%), however, a significant number were granted refugee status (14%) or subsidiary protection (23%).

Italy has been observed to demonstrate a high rate of social inclusion for people with migratory background, with the median equivalised net income for immigrants recorded at €15,896, which is higher than the median equivalised net income for nationals (€13,583). However, immigrants are more likely to reside in overcrowded housing, with the household overcrowding rate for immigrants standing at 50.7%, which is significantly higher than the rate for nationals (20.5%). Furthermore, immigrants are more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with the at-risk-of-poverty rate for immigrants standing at 41.1%, which is significantly higher than the rate for nationals (20.5%). A similar trend is observed in the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children, which is higher for immigrants (43.0%) than for nationals (20.6%). Moreover, migrants in Italy exhibit lower levels of educational attainment compared to nationals. A significant proportion of immigrants, 44.3%, possess a low level of education (ISCED levels 0-2), which is considerably higher than the rate for nationals (24.8%). Conversely, 22.7% of immigrants have attained a high level of education (ISCED levels 5-8), which is noticeably lower than the rate for nationals (53.9%). The NEET rate for people with migratory background is 29.6%, indicating a notable proportion of the immigrant population that is not engaged in education, employment or training. This figure is significantly higher than the rate for nationals (13.7%). The early school leaving rate for immigrants is 18.9%, which is significantly higher than the rate for nationals (9.0%).

The employment rate for people with migratory background in Italy is lower than the rate for nationals, with the employment rate for immigrants aged 15-64 standing at 56.6%, which is significantly lower than the rate for nationals (75.0%). Furthermore, the unemployment rate for immigrants is higher than the rate for nationals, with the unemployment rate for immigrants aged 15-64 standing at 16.5%, which is significantly higher than the rate for nationals (9.0%). Furthermore, the long-term unemployment rate for people with migratory background (11.8%) is also higher than the rate for nationals (4.3%). The data indicates a slight preponderance of female immigrants in Italy over male immigrants. In 2023, the female-to-male immigrant ratio was 1.03:1, indicating that for every 100 male immigrants, there were 103 female immigrants.

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The employment rate for female immigrants was marginally lower than that of their male counterparts, with the female-to-male employment ratio in 2023 standing at 0.93:1. This indicates that for every 100 male immigrants, there were 93 female immigrants in the workforce. This figure stands at 55.0%, which is marginally lower than the rate for male immigrants (58.0%). Conversely, the unemployment rate for female immigrants (17.0%) is slightly higher than the rate for male immigrants (16.0%). Furthermore, the long-term unemployment rate for female immigrants (17.0%) is marginally higher than the rate for male immigrants. In 2023, the long-term unemployment rate for female immigrants aged 15-64 was 12.0%, which is marginally higher than the rate for male immigrants (11.0%).[18] Between 2020 and 2023, Italy saw declining residence permits, persistent irregular migration, and significant gender disparities in employment and education. Non-EU migrants, particularly women, faced higher poverty risks, overcrowded housing, and lower employment rates, highlighting ongoing integration challenges.

Immigrant labour is an important resource for the national economy; between 2011 and 2016, the increase in immigrant crafts (+8.3%), also represented by gardening companies (+74.5%), mainly Romanian and Albanian, has fought against the decline of the sector as a whole (-7.8%). This is linked to the growth of the foreign resident population, which increased by about 1.4 million units (+37.5%) between 2010 and 2015, reaching a total of 5,014 million people, equivalent to 8.2% of the Italian population. The positive trend is also maintained in the field of employment, where in the biennium 2014-2015 there was an increase of more than 34,000 units of open-ended employment contracts for foreigners of Community origin and more than 30,000 units for foreigners from non-EU countries, which is definitely related to the incentives provided by the 2015 Stability Act, art. 1, paragraph 118, and by l. 23/2015. Foreigners who work regularly in Italy, according to the data of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), are more than one million and are mainly made up of people who are transferred to their family or other people of the same ethnicity. In terms of occupation, most people with migratory background (52%) are employed in so-called 'low-skilled' jobs, which are almost non-managerial. They are mostly employed in subordinate jobs, in 80% of cases foreign workers have the status of worker and only 0.9% have a managerial or general qualification; 10.2% of non-EU workers are self-employed, mostly in small and medium-sized commercial enterprises

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4. The importance of the Primary Sector to Italy economy

4.1 The Primary Sector in Italy and Sicily

Italy plays a significant role in the European Union's agricultural sector, ranking as the leading European producer of rice, fruits, vegetables and wine. The agricultural sector contributes 1.9% of Italy's GDP, while the broader agri-food system is estimated to account for 15% of GDP. The primary sector employs approximately 4% of the Italian workforce, with around 1.1 million farms operating across the country. Almost half of these farms have small agricultural outputs.

The country's main agricultural products include cereals such as wheat, corn, barley, rice and oats. Italy is also the world's leading producer of wine and the top producer of tobacco in Europe. According to figures by ISTAT, in 2024, agricultural production and value added increased by 1.4% and 3.5% in volume, respectively. Production volumes rose notably in crop farming (+1.5%) and the livestock sector (+0.6%), while agricultural service activities declined (-1.5%). Secondary activities maintained a positive trend (+5.2%). Fruit (+5.4%), fresh vegetables (+3.8%), and wine (+3.5%) exhibited a favourable year, while cereals (-7.1%), olive oil (-5%), and forage (-2.5%) experienced a decline.

Italy's broader economy is highly industrialised, with the secondary sector contributing 22.9% of GDP and employing 27% of the active population. The country's manufacturing sector accounts for 15% of GDP, making Italy the second-largest manufacturing power in Europe and the eighth-largest globally. The Italian food-processing industry, which is closely tied to the agricultural sector, remains highly fragmented. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading companies in the industry have embraced multichannel strategies, balancing losses in the food-service sector with growth in retail sales. The pandemic has also strengthened trends toward healthier eating and locally sourced food consumption.

Sicily's agricultural sector plays a pivotal role in both the regional and national economies. Approximately 11% of the island's population is employed in agriculture, representing a significant decrease from approximately 50% in the 1950s. Despite this decline, agriculture remains integral to Sicily's identity, with nearly 75% of its land dedicated to agricultural use.[31] The island's fertile soil and favourable climate support a diverse range of crops. Indeed, Sicily is

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renowned for producing high-quality citrus fruits, particularly oranges and lemons, as well as olives, grapes, almonds and pistachios. Moreover, the region also cultivates cereals such as wheat and barley, alongside various vegetables.[32] In recent years, Sicilian farmers have adapted to changing climatic conditions by introducing tropical fruits such as mangoes and avocados, thereby transforming the island into a significant producer of these crops. However, the agricultural sector faces significant challenges, including droughts and the risk of desertification. In 2023, Sicily experienced an unprecedented drought, with rainfall in the latter half of the year totalling only 150mm, leading to a state of emergency. This severe water scarcity poses a threat not only to the continued existence of traditional farming practices, but also to the livelihoods of local farmers.

At the same time, the agricultural sector in Sicily, including the areas surrounding Palermo, is heavily reliant on migrant labour, with foreign-born employees accounting for approximately 32% of the total labour days required on Italian farms. This sector employs over 362,000 foreign-born individuals engaged in seasonal agricultural work nationwide, with the most represented communities including Romanians, Indians, Moroccans, Albanians, Senegalese and Pakistanis.[34] However, the exploitation of migrant labour through the "caporalato" has been a significant issue in Sicily's agricultural sector. In response, the regional government has initiated campaigns to combat this exploitation and promote the integration of migrant workers. These efforts include the establishment of additional migrant centres to provide support and resources for these communities.

5. National legislation on migration and labour rights

5.1 Legal aspects affecting migrant labour

Italy's integration strategy has evolved from administrative regulations in the 1980s to more structured policies in the mid-1990s, such as the three-year Document of Migration Policy Planning. The last national integration strategy was in 2005, with regional governments now largely responsible for integration policies, leading to a multi-level governance framework. Italy's approach to migration and labour rights has evolved significantly over the decades. The

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legislative framework in Italy pertaining to unauthorized migrants was initially established through Law 943 of 1986, which instituted a process for their regularization. Subsequently, Law 40 of 1998 was enacted, encompassing three fundamental pillars: the mitigation of irregular migration, the regulation of legal immigration and the integration of immigrants into society. The 1998 legislation entailed the allocation of financial resources for the provision of integration services and programs, with a particular emphasis on sectors such as healthcare, housing and Italian language acquisition.

During the 1990s, Southern European countries experienced a confluence of economic growth and declining birth rates, resulting in significant labour shortages. In response, Italy implemented legislation, such as the 1998 Consolidated Immigration Act, which established quotas for the recruitment of foreign workers in the agricultural sector. In 2002, the Bossi-Fini Law (Law n.189) introduced stricter border controls, making it more challenging for people with migratory background to obtain permanent residency. The Charter of the Values and Citizenship and Integration (Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell'integrazione) in 2006 and The Integration Agreement (Patto per l'integrazione) in 2010 instigated newcomers to master the Italian language and embrace national values and civil culture, including through the provision of a civic education course. The policies also prioritized the inclusion of immigrants in the labor market by promoting training, skills development and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the policies encouraged immigrants to secure housing outside of ethnic enclaves and promoted the utilization of social and health services through cooperation with agencies at various levels. Additionally, the policies guaranteed education for the children of immigrants and unaccompanied minors. However, during the economic downturn of 2011, Italy temporarily suspended formal recruitment procedures and imposed restrictions on the employment of foreign seasonal and nonseasonal workers.

Since 2012, newly arrived immigrants have been required to sign an Integration Agreement, committing to achieving specific integration goals within two years, including language proficiency and knowledge of civic life. Fulfilment of these goals is necessary for residence permit renewal, although certain migrant categories are exempted.

The migration and asylum crisis of 2015 and 2016 prompted a shift in labour recruitment strategies, with employers increasingly perceiving asylum seekers as a potential workforce. In response, the government implemented Law 142 of 2015, allowing asylum seekers to legally work for a period of 60 days after filing an asylum application, with the aim of facilitating their entry into the labour force. However, numerous migrants continue to work without proper authorization or standard contracts, highlighting ongoing challenges and the

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need for more comprehensive policy measures to address this issue. According to recent estimates, approximately 230,000 workers were employed illegally in Italy's agricultural sector in 2021, constituting approximately 20% of the total labour force in this sector.

The 2015-2016 European migration crisis also led Italy to adopt the Security Decree of 2018 (Salvini Decree), which reduced refugee reception centres and temporarily abolished residence permits for humanitarian reasons. The "special protection" permit was reinstated in 2020 but restricted in 2023, limiting eligibility and preventing holders from obtaining work permits. An emergency law in 2020 attempted to regularise unauthorized migrants in essential sectors like agriculture and domestic care, requiring residency before March 8, 2020. By May 2023, 207,000 applications were received, with approximately 65,200 approved and 30,500 declined; a significant portion of these applications may still be under review or awaiting a decision. Bureaucratic procedures, background checks and document verification can take time.

Foreign workers in Italy can access the labour market either directly, if they have a regular residence permit and meet other legal requirements, or from abroad within annual entry quotas established by Flow Decrees. The European Directive 2011/98/EU introduced a single application procedure for issuing a permit that allows foreign nationals to reside and work in an EU Member State, granting rights similar to those of national workers. In Italy, this resulted in the "single work permit" ("permesso unico di lavoro") on residence permits that allow employment, so all legal foreign workers should enjoy equal treatment and full rights comparable to Italian workers.

In response to a tragic shipwreck near Cutro (Calabria) in February 2023, the government enacted the Cutro Decree, which further limited the special protection permit and reduced services in reception centres. This exacerbated the difficulties faced by asylum seekers, who often endured prolonged processes and limited access to services, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. In an effort to enhance the management of migration and to provide protection to foreign workers from exploitation, the Italian government introduced Law No. 187/2024 on 11 December 2024. This law involved a revision of the entry rules for foreign workers, an enhancement of protections for victims of crimes such as human trafficking, and the introduction of measures for the management of migration flows and international protection. The law imposed significant restrictions on access to reception facilities for asylum seekers who had entered Italy more than 90 days prior to the enactment of the legislation. Those arriving via search and rescue operations

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were prioritised, and the required period of legal residence for family reunification applications was extended to a minimum of two years. Additionally, housing requirements were tightened, and efforts to combat labour exploitation were reinforced. The law enabled foreign workers who had been exploited to obtain special residence permits, valid for six months, renewable for up to a year or longer if necessary for judicial purposes, if they collaborated with the authorities.

Further reinforcing Italy's commitment to managing migration and combating labor exploitation, Decree Law No. 145/2024 introduced targeted measures to enhance labor protections and regulate the entry of foreign workers. This decree strengthens oversight of employment conditions, imposes stricter penalties on employers who exploit migrant labor and improves monitoring of recruitment agencies to prevent fraudulent practices. It also provides additional legal avenues for foreign workers who face abuse, ensuring they have access to protection mechanisms.

Individuals seeking asylum and other migrants who have recently arrived in Italy often find themselves in a state of limbo due to the application of the Dublin Regulation.[52] This regulatory framework, which determines the responsibility of a country's processing of an asylum seeker's case, leaves these individuals in a state of legal uncertainty. The prolonged nature of the asylum process in Italy, coupled with the limited access to services such as housing and healthcare, exposes these individuals to the risk of exploitation by unscrupulous employers.

6. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

From a broader perspective, migration remains a crucial component of Italy's economic landscape, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages, such as agriculture. While migrant labourers contribute significantly to the national economy, they also continue to encounter obstacles to full integration, ranging from bureaucratic impediments to social discrimination. Sicily, in particular, serves as a case in point, given its role as a major entry point for migrants and its own reliance on migrant labour within its agricultural sector. The challenges faced by migrants in Sicily mirror those experienced at the national level, particularly the tension between restrictive immigration policies and the economic reliance on foreign labour.

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In order to address these issues in the future, a multi-faceted approach will be required. In the short term, improvements to enforcement mechanisms against “caporalato”, enhanced labour inspections and the provision of legal pathways for regular employment could help mitigate exploitation. Furthermore, policies facilitating migrants' access to residence permits and secure contracts would serve to reduce their vulnerability to unscrupulous intermediaries and employers. Finally, the expansion of initiatives such as social farming and community-based integration projects, including Sicilia Integra, can offer sustainable employment opportunities while fostering social inclusion.

In the long term, a structural transformation of Italy's migration and labour policies is required. A transition from a reactive to a proactive stance, whereby integration policies encompass not only economic participation but also social and cultural inclusion, is imperative. The enhancement of the effectiveness of migrant integration efforts can be achieved through the strengthening of regional and national governance structures, with the aim of ensuring better coordination among governmental agencies, NGOs and local stakeholders. In addition, given the projected demographic decline in Italy, the strategic management of labour migration, incorporating equitable recruitment practices and the recognition of skills for migrant workers, could benefit both the economy and social cohesion.

The findings of this research demonstrate the necessity of balancing economic demands with ethical labour practices. It is essential that migration policies focus not only on control and restriction, but also on creating conditions of dignity for migrant workers. By addressing the structural issues that underpin labour exploitation and fostering a more inclusive approach to integration, Italy can move towards a system that both upholds human rights and sustains economic growth.

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7.Annex A: WP2 – Activities Numbers

County	**Italy**
Name of the event	**Number of participants**
Networking event 1	6
Networking event 2	7
Networking event 3	5
Networking event 4	7
Networking event 5	15
Focus group	20
Interviews	10
MoUs	inprogress

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