



© Route55 / Shutterstock.com

EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – ITALY
18 AND 19 JANUARY 2016



European Economic and Social Committee

Mission Report – Italy, 18-19 January 2016

In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited 11 EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practice of the various players in the current refugee crisis, with the final aim of providing input for EU policy making. The delegation to Italy was composed of Vladimira Drbalová (Czech Republic, Employers Group), José Antonio Moreno Díaz (Spain, Workers Group) and Antonio Longo (Italy, Various interests Group), supported by Valeria Atzori, EESC secretariat, and Daniela Rondinelli, Office of the President.

1. Situation in Italy

Italy is facing huge challenges since it is a country of reception, transit and final destination for refugees and migrants. Most of the work is being done within the framework of emergency management.

The major entry points are:

- Southern Italy and its islands (mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa)
- The Port of Ancona (mainly from Greece and Albania)
- The North-Eastern borders with Austria and Slovenia
- Milan's Airports (Linate and Malpensa)

The Italian system for the reception of asylum seekers consists, on one hand, of what is referred to as SPRAR (the system of protection for asylum seekers and refugees) and, on the other, of CAS (centres for extraordinary hospitality).

SPRAR is the usual channel and is managed by the Ministry for the Interior. Public funds are granted to municipalities that participate on a voluntary basis and set up hospitality projects.

The CAS were set up following the arrival *en masse* of migrants in Lampedusa in 2013. These centres are designed to operate in emergency situations and are managed by the prefecture.

The asylum requests are dealt by a system of 20 territorial commissions, spread all over the country.

There are also three hotspots where migrant identification takes place: Lampedusa, Trapani and Pozzallo. Another three are to be opened in Salerno, Taranto and Augusta. A discussion is currently ongoing as to whether to open one in Milan for the increasing number of people arriving via the Balkan route.

In 2015, fewer immigrants arrived than in 2014 (-7.4%), but figures for the month of January seem to be pointing to a potential upwards trend.

The refugees and migrants span about 30 different nationalities; most are from Senegal, Gambia, Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Mali and Syria. 65% are from Libya.

Italy has taken big steps forward in terms of its reception capacity but a lot remains to be done on integration (jobs, houses, health, recognition of professional skills, registered residence, etc.).

2. A description of the meetings

Casa Suraya Reception Centre

An overview of the origin and main activities of Casa Suraya highlighted its added value (centre for families, legal assistance, Italian language classes, psychological support) and limitations (many immigrants leave without notice and for the reception centres this represents a big waste of work, time and money).

Women are particularly exposed to exploitation through prostitution and trafficking, especially those from Nigeria. The gangs contact them, especially if they have meanwhile filed an asylum request; they promise good jobs and convince them to leave the reception centres. Local authorities are aware of this terrible plague, which has an international dimension.

Two families of asylum seekers also attended the meeting, demonstrating the limitations of the relocation system: one of them wants to stay in Italy but has been relocated to another Member State in accordance with the European Reallocation System and the other one would like to go back to Finland but has been sent to Italy because of the Dublin Convention.

In many towns of the region, social cooperatives and Caritas are launching innovative initiatives to host refugees in families, especially young people and minors.

Federsolidarieta Lombardia

Taking advantage of the situation of need and emergency, many cooperatives have been set up but some of them lack experience and professionalism to offer valid services. To help tackle this problem, Confcooperative has promoted the adoption of a Code of Good Hospitality, that outlines basic criteria that cooperatives must respect in order to be granted a framework contract for hospitality. The Prefecture of Milan is using the code and some contracts have been repealed because of failure to uphold those standards.

Representatives of trade unions from Lombardia (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and NGOs (Anolf Bergamo, Cooperative Nazareth, Il segno del Consorzio, CGM and ASGI)

The three trade unions described the activities they carry out at regional level: mainly support and work orientation for immigrants. They pointed out the need to de-politicise the question of immigration and denounced some cases of institutional discrimination.

The NGOs touched on different issues, such as the critical aspects of existing legislation in the field of work (the residency permit is linked to having a regular work contract with consequences for black market labour) and outlined some successful examples of labour integration, in particular in the social-agriculture sector. Other points raised included wage discrimination and the importance of granting the right to vote in local and municipal elections.

The Cooperative Nazareth presented two examples of good practice: first, the integration of five or six young people in small towns where they are following professional training courses matching local employment needs and can then get a job; second, migrants developing farm cooperative projects to grow organic vegetables.

UNHCR

Presentation of the hotspot system and of the state of Italian hosting capacity. There is some evidence of ethnic filters being applied to access to asylum seeking procedures in hotspots, in clear violation of the Geneva Convention. Other points raised included the need for a common European Asylum system, for relocation to be made effective, to address the root causes of migration in the countries of origin and to create safe channels for entry.

Ministry for the Interior

Presentation of the Italian hosting system (Territorial Commissions and the Ministry for the Interior) and of the main challenges to be tackled in 2016: review of the Dublin Convention, a common EU Asylum Policy, review of the relocation system to make it work, a realistic approach to the hosting capacity of each Member State and effective control of EU external borders to preserve Schengen. There are currently discussions at European level concerning a common border defence policy and more particularly a proposal for a European Coast Guard in the Mediterranean.

Representatives of trade unions at national level (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and NGOs from the "Tavolo Asilo" (CIR, Migrantes, Anolf Nazionale, ACLI and Centro Astalli)

Main points discussed: the impact of the flow of migrants in the labour market, the situation in the hotspots, the different treatment given, or not, to refugees and economic migrants, public opinion on the humanitarian crisis and on the threat to the Schengen system.

Rising unemployment is caused not by migrants arriving but by the economic crisis.

Migrants have been worse hit by unemployment and have emigrated elsewhere or fallen into the black labour market. The sectors that provide jobs are mainly services (cleaning, catering, tourism, commerce, house and domestic work), agriculture and construction. The procedure to get a residency permit for the purposes of employment takes at least ten months. There is no fast track for people with qualifications and skills. Actually there is no system for surveying professional skills or measuring employment needs in the labour market. As regarding public opinion, the media have often played an alarmist role, but no significant rise in xenophobia has been recorded. On the different treatment to give to refugees and economic migrants, the situation is complex and existing laws are inadequate. A temporary humanitarian permit could be introduced as a possible measure. Finally, the NGOs present confirmed that discrimination on the basis of country of origin is happening at the Hotspots. These situations have been denounced at all levels and also thanks to this the Ministry for Internal Affairs, Civil Freedoms and Immigration has written a binding recommendation to local prefects urging them to abolish this bad practice. In Italy there is not the humanitarian crisis there is in Greece, but, because of this profiling, people are being left without basic assistance and falling victim to organised crime.

3. Conclusions

There is general concern that the extent of the refugee crisis is jeopardising the European project itself. Many Member States are now closing their borders. The Schengen system, together with freedom of movement, one of the fundamental pillars of the EU, is seriously threatened.

The Dublin system for asylum is no longer working because the instrument is unable to respond to the massive migrant flows and to the European decision to relocate people in the various Member States. The type and scale of migration has changed, becoming massive, and differences in the asylum systems between Member States have deepened.

The procedure for applying for asylum is still too cumbersome and lengthy. It takes one year or more in cases of refusal and appeal. During this time, migrants are kept waiting and not allowed to work. After a second refusal, they lose their right to stay in the hospitality centres, which exposes them to exploitation and black market work. Migrants are not allowed to receive legal aid from the social system for the appeal procedure, which reduces their chances of having their request accepted.

Regarding the hotspot system, there is plentiful evidence of profiling: migrants from countries whose asylum acceptance rate is low are sometimes prevented from presenting asylum requests, in clear violation of the Geneva Convention. Moreover, frequently the hotspots are not well or sufficiently staffed.

Relocation is showing weak points too. So far only 200 relocations have taken place. The Member States impose too many restrictive criteria and asylum seekers are only told the country of relocation when about to take their flight. Their personal preferences are not taken into account.

Increasingly, Italy is becoming a country of transit, with migrants and asylum seekers wishing to reach northern countries for better perspectives. Therefore, migrants often refuse identification because they would then be obliged to present their asylum request in Italy. This also implies that efforts made and services offered to migrants (language classes, assistance in finding a job and various types of training) are wasted.

Particularly worrying is the very high number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Italy. The accommodation offered is not adequate and they risk losing protection and their residency permits once they turn 18. School attendance and the opportunity to build skills for their future working lives are thus endangered.

The unemployment rate among migrants has increased sharply as result of the economic crisis. As in Italy the residency permit is linked to having a job, the result is an increase in undeclared work and exploitation, especially in the agricultural sector (the *caporalato* system involving gangs of seasonal workers).

The public debate on migration is often manipulated for political purposes before the elections and the media tend to present an alarmistic viewpoint, presenting migrants as invaders, stealing work, committing crimes, etc. Individual cases are portrayed as general rule.

There is no European System for monitoring missing people or those who have lost their lives and nobody is responsible for recovering bodies; no one is taking responsibility for attempting to reunite people who have become separated from family members or relatives during shipwrecks.

The entry of refugees and immigrants in large numbers in urban areas or small towns causes problems in terms of social cohesion because the process is not properly managed by the local authorities, which need time to promote integration policies.
