

## Challenging Interculturalism: The Inclusion of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy

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### Abstract

*Albeit through contradictory policies, Italy has adopted an intercultural approach for the management of cultural diversity. The recent significant increase in the number of refugees arriving in Italy deeply challenges this paradigm. There are 93,000 people in Italy today who have been forced to leave their country of origin due to persecution, war or violations of human rights. Although many of them would prefer to get to northern Europe, under the current legislation they cannot choose the country in Europe in which to settle and they are often obliged to remain in a country they have not chosen as their final destination. Analysing some key elements of Italian intercultural policies, this paper highlights critical issues surrounding the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in the Italian context in which inadequate responses to the complex needs of this particularly vulnerable population have been shown. Finally, concluding implications include the issue of the inclusion of refugees for an intercultural approach able to offer opportunities of interaction and integration in the Italian context are presented.*

**Keywords:** Interculturalism, Education, Refugees, Inclusion, Italy.

### Interculturalism in Italy

In Italy, intercultural policies developed after large numbers of immigrants arrived in Italy from the mid-1970s. In particular, 1973 was the 'turning point' whereby more immigrants arrived in Italy than those departing. From a country of emigration, Italy quickly turned into one of immigration. Today there are 5 million immigrants in Italy, 8.2 per cent of the overall population. The top five immigration countries of origin represented are: Romania, Albania, Morocco, China, and the Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> As in other Mediterranean countries (i.e. Greece, Portugal, Spain), this phenomenon arose later than in northern European countries (i.e. France, Germany, the United Kingdom), and where as a consequence multicultural policies were implemented throughout the twentieth century.

Based on the debate that has taken place in those countries with more consolidated immigration, the approach adopted in Italy towards immigrants was one where interculturalism was examined from the outset. Multiculturalism is generally

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<sup>1</sup> IDOS—Study and Research Centre / Statistical Dossier on Immigration and UNAR – National Office Against Racial Discrimination, *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2015*. Rome: IDOS, 2015, p. 8.

understood as an approach acknowledging different cultural and ethnic groups coexisting with each other. In terms of the Italian context, interculturalism is intended as a deliberate approach to build opportunities for interaction between the different ethnic and cultural groups in society, and thereby promoting the construction of cultural relationships and exchange.

However, the current international debate has highlighted that interculturalism can be considered as complementary to multiculturalism. In key aspects of interculturalism, such as encouraging communication, recognising dynamic identities and promoting unity, are also important features of multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, often the differences between multiculturalism and interculturalism do not lie in policies and approaches but in the stories of the contexts in which those approaches are developed. Canada, for example, represents an emblematic case. Here, the term multiculturalism is used for policies adopted in the 'English' Canadian context, while interculturalism as a term is adopted in Quebec (French Canada)<sup>3</sup>.

The problem of managing cultural diversity arose in Italy long before the increase in the number of immigrants arriving in the 1970s. The emergence of this phenomenon can be better understood if placed within the perspective of some major events in the history of the country. These can be summarized as follows: the historical presence of linguistic and cultural minorities (which today includes 2.5 million Italians)<sup>4</sup>; the long history of Italian emigration (which by the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries recorded approximately 28 million Italians abroad)<sup>5</sup>; the Italian colonial experience (mainly in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia)<sup>6</sup>; and the state's racism towards and persecution of the Jewish community during the fascist regime<sup>7</sup>— all historical events that led to the construction of an image, often conflicting, of the 'other' in the Italian national consciousness and of refusal of cultural difference in current time when policies towards immigrants are set up. Indeed, these events contribute to building and reinforcing negative views of migration in Italy.

An analysis of the current national approach to interculturalism requires a specific focus on the case of asylum seekers and refugees. This is becoming a crucial issue in Italy as a result of the increased number of arrivals of people fleeing the indiscriminate effects of persecution or generalized violence around the world. By using the Mediterranean Sea in recent years (and mainly passing through Libya), their numbers have tripled moving from 60,000 before 2011 to 170,000 in 2016. This paper focuses on the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in the Italian context, highlighting how the characteristics of the inclusion of these particularly vulnerable subjects show up criticalities in Italian intercultural policies.

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<sup>2</sup> W. Kymlicka, 'Comment on Meer and Modood', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2012, pp. 214-215; N. Meer and T. Modood, 'How does interculturalism contrast with multiculturalism?', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2012, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> C. Taylor, 'Interculturalism or Multiculturalism?', *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, Vol. 24, 2013, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000022267>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> G. Campani, *Dalle minoranze agli immigrati. La questione del pluralismo culturale e religioso in Italia*, Milano: Unicopli, 2008, pp. 56-57.

<sup>5</sup> A. Golini, F. Amato, *Uno sguardo a un secolo e mezzo di emigrazione italiana*, in P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina (Eds), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Vol. I- Partenze*, Roma: Donzelli, 2001, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> G. Israel, P. Nastasi, *Scienza e razza nell'Italia fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999.

Intercultural policies adopted in Italy, which remain far too fragmentary, are unable to answer the entire complexity of the needs of these people and, above all, are singularly oriented towards simple inclusion rather than being disposed towards building opportunities for interaction between natives and immigrants. For instance, while actions and responsibilities are expected of immigrants in terms of regulations, it is less clear what is expected from Italians in order to establish intercultural relationships.

This issue is addressed in this paper along with the characteristics of Italian intercultural policies. The paper will also address the features of the population of asylum seekers and refugees in Italian society, making use of the most recent empirical data from institutional agencies dealing with refugee welcoming. Finally, implications for a long term settlement and intercultural approach for asylum seekers and refugees will be identified.

### **The Italian approach to interculturalism**

The Italian intercultural approach was made more explicit in an important document of the Italian Ministry of Education, named *The Italian Way to Intercultural Education and the Integration of Foreign Pupils*, which in the process also offered a good definition of interculturalism in the Italian context. According to this document, Italian schools have chosen to adopt an intercultural perspective by promoting dialogue and exchange between all students, regardless of their cultural background. This entails not only strategies of integration for migrant students, but also adopting diversity as the founding element of a school's pluralist identity<sup>8</sup>.

But the intercultural paradigm in Italian society appears as a fragmented patchwork. This mixture consists of advanced areas (i.e. the educational and health systems) in which an intentional approach for the promotion of dialogue and cultural exchange addressing all people (foreigners and Italians) has been consolidated over the years. At the same time, there are also numerous weak areas in this approach, highlighted by cultural closure, rigidity and assimilation as expressed in the labour market and the political voting system.

Signs of an authentic intercultural paradigm promoting equal relationships between natives and foreigners can undoubtedly be observed in the policies aimed at ensuring access to rights of education and health for all (also for those in a position of legal irregularity). This has occurred particularly through the implementation of a common learning environment by avoiding the construction of separate schools or classes for immigrants and including various forms of diversity (i.e. cultural, social origin, gender, disability) within the same context. Over the years, education has represented in Italy, a veritable laboratory of pluralism, allowing everyone to fulfil the fundamental right of basic education, thus building shared values of citizenship.

Hence, this strategy has led to a comprehensive, wide-ranging educational approach involving all students (native and foreigners), all levels (teaching, curricula, pedagogy, fields of study, relationships and class life) and all typologies of differences (of origin, gender, social level and educational history). It also avoids emphasising

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<sup>8</sup> Italian Ministry of Education, *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*. Rome: Italian Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 8-9.

cultural differences or reducing them to stereotypes<sup>9</sup>. Yet, a major current challenge for this perspective is to prevent cultural differences turning into socio-economic disadvantages not only in access to education but also in learning outcomes.

The Italian management of immigration has mainly been characterised over the years by an ‘emergency’ approach with stopgap measures rather than strategic long-term choices. This weakness is also portrayed in the current Italian immigration law no. 189/2002, which is influenced by a predominantly assimilationist and one-sided approach. In fact, this regulation provides a set of constraints that restricts the procedure for the release of residence permits to migrants (i.e. they must provide a job contract in order to renew their residence permit, which in turn forces them to accept dangerous and demeaning jobs). At the same time, existing legislation is lacking in social and cultural mediation (which should also be an expectation of Italians).

In particular, some critical elements hindering an intercultural approach and full inclusion of immigrants in Italian society can be identified in the restrictive measures aimed at placing the bearer of cultural diversity in a condition of non-recognition or even illegitimacy. The major concern can be summarised as follows: that of legal restrictions on immigrants, a lack of voting rights for immigrants and the non-recognition of Italian citizenship for second-generation subjects, even if they are born in the country. In this context, equipped with less substantial social opportunities, newcomers often live in a condition of what could be defined as *cittadinanza relativa* (relative citizenship). This involves a lack of recognition and opportunities for newcomers as there are for native citizens<sup>10</sup>.

## Refugees and asylum seekers in Italy

As spelled out by the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of ‘race’, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore, an asylum seeker is someone who has applied for international protection but is waiting to receive a response of his/her request. As the evaluation of a request for international protection in Italy can last from about a month up to a year, the condition of the asylum seeker often implies a state of ‘suspension’, in which the person does not know if s/he will be allowed to stay in Italy.

In this context, in the current Italian regulations the terms ‘international protection seeker’ and ‘holder’ have respectively replaced the words ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’, including, more generally, people forced to leave their country, even when

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<sup>9</sup> M. Fiorucci (ed.). *Una scuola per tutti. Idee e proposte per una didattica interculturale delle discipline*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2008; A. Portera, *Globalizzazione e pedagogia interculturale. Interventi nella scuola*. Trento: Centro Studi Erickson, 2006; M. Santerini, *La qualità della scuola interculturale. Nuovi modelli per l'integrazione*. Trento: Centro Studi Erickson, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bonifazi, *L'immigrazione straniera in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007, pp. 216-217.

<sup>11</sup> UN—United Nations, *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*, New York: UN, 1951, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016, p. 6.

not legally recognised in the country of their arrival as refugees<sup>12</sup>. In contrast to ‘economic migrants’, who choose to move in order to improve their lives, refugees have been forced to leave their country without a real choice to save their lives from environments of humanitarian crisis, such as armed conflicts, persecution or violations of human rights. They usually flee even without choosing lucidly their ultimate destination.

The Constitution of the Italian Republic ensured the right for those in need to asylum in Italy as early as 1947 (thus even before the 1951 Refugee Convention). The Article 10.3 of this document clearly states: ‘A foreigner who, in his home country, is denied the actual exercise of the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian constitution shall be entitled to the right of asylum’<sup>13</sup>.

However, the gap between the statement and the reality is evident. Even though the right to asylum is enshrined in the Italian Constitution, the complexity of the recognition procedure established in the Law no. 189/2002 hinders several among those fleeing war and persecution to access to international protection.

Furthermore, many of the asylum seekers arriving in Italy aim to reach northern European countries in search of better working and social conditions, but the European Dublin Regulation imposes that the state through which the asylum seeker first entered becomes the member state responsible for the examination of his or her asylum claim in Europe<sup>14</sup>. For this reason, they are often forced to stay in a country they did not choose.

Similar events occur in other southern or eastern European countries, such as Greece (with arrivals of asylum seekers across the Aegean Sea), Spain (in particular, through the Spanish cities Ceuta and Melilla on North Africa’s Mediterranean coast), Bulgaria (across the border with Turkey) and Hungary (across the border with Serbia), thereby highlighting the European nature of the problem.

This issue pertains to strengthening the coordination of national and European policies. In fact, critical issues related to the arrival of refugees cannot be managed effectively by a single European country. A real cooperation between member states and neighbouring countries, along with clear choices by European institutions, is essential for an open, supportive and inclusive Europe. In this sense, the question of the inclusion of refugees draws attention to the issue of on ‘what’ Europe is progressively built.

Today in Italy there are 93,715 refugees and 45,749 asylum seekers<sup>15</sup>. Although this figure remains low in comparison with several other European countries (216,973 refugees in Germany, 252,264 in France, 142,207 in Sweden, 117,161 in the United Kingdom), it has increased rapidly in recent years, principally due to arrivals across

<sup>12</sup> EMN—European Migration Network, *Asylum and Migration Glossary*. Rome: IDOS, 2011, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> *Constitution of the Italian Republic*, 1947.

<sup>14</sup> EU—European Union, ‘Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person’, 2013, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR—United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2014*, Geneva: UNHCR, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016, p. 45.

the Mediterranean Sea. It is worth noting that this route has also caused about 20,000 deaths in the last 30 years<sup>16</sup>. According to the Italian Interior Ministry, the number of people arriving via the Mediterranean Sea in recent years reached 170,000 in 2014, 154,000 in 2015 and 170,000 in 2016<sup>17</sup>. This population is composed not only of adults, but also of unaccompanied minors (13,000 in 2014, 12,000 in 2015 and 16,000 in 2016)<sup>18</sup>.

Despite this situation, Italy has not created clear instructions in terms of the area of reception of asylum seekers and refugees. The different systems, each one with advantages (i.e. the construction of individualized projects of inclusion in structures with limited numbers of people) and constraints (i.e. the need to receive a high number of people living in emergency conditions), ultimately coexist.

Moreover, the system of reception for asylum seekers and refugees is guided by an emergency type of approach. According to the *Piano accoglienza* (national plan) dealing with the flow of migrants<sup>19</sup>, their reception should be carried out in three steps: a) rescue and first aid, to be realised in 'government structures'; b) initial reception, which should take place at regional or interregional level centres called 'hubs' (currently not yet developed); c) a second reception and integration, to be implemented in the National Protection System for asylum seekers and refugees, spread throughout the national territory.

The reality is, however, different, and often the first and second receptions overlap. For instance, it is not uncommon that, in cases of large migrant flows, recently arrived asylum seekers are housed in second step reception centres. Currently, the types of structures used in the reception system can be summarized as follows: *Centri di primo soccorso e accoglienza* (first aid and reception centres—CPSA) are large structures found mainly in the south of the country, where more arrivals occur; *Centri accoglienza richiedenti asilo* (reception centres for asylum seekers—CARA) and *Centri di accoglienza* (short-term reception centres—CDA) are large structures hosting thousands of asylum seekers; *Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati* (National System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees—SPRAR) is a network of small centres with reduced numbers of guests in each structure, widespread throughout the national territory; and *Centri di accoglienza straordinaria* (extraordinary reception centres—CAS) are structures set up in extraordinary forms (i.e. in hotels, former barracks and other buildings no longer in use) to cope with a large flux of arrivals that the ordinary system cannot absorb.

It must be observed that an intercultural approach requires that the reception of asylum seekers and refugees be developed in small and medium-sized contexts, where smaller numbers of subjects allow for the definition of an individualised inclusion plan and real possibilities for the subject to interact with the inhabitants of

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<sup>16</sup> G. Del Grande, *Un cimitero chiamato Mediterraneo*, 2014, <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Italian Ministry of the Interior, *Cruscotto statistico giornaliero 12 settembre 2016*, Rome: Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2016.  
[http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_12\\_settembre\\_2016.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_12_settembre_2016.pdf), accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Italian Interior Ministry, *Piano accoglienza 2016. Tavolo di coordinamento nazionale*, Rome: Italian Interior Ministry 2016. <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/verso-un-nuovo-sistema-accoglienza>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

the territory. Despite its evident limitations, the National System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) has been identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as a good Italian model of reception, because it provides individualised integration plans and educational support<sup>20</sup>.

However, this is only one model among the different types of structures of the overall Italian system of reception for asylum seekers and refugees, provided for 6 months for each person. The relevant critical issues regarding the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees will now be discussed, highlighting their implications for the whole Italian intercultural approach.

## **A critical node of the Italian intercultural approach: The inclusion of refugees**

A critical analysis of the pathways of social inclusion for refugees in Italy first requires consideration of the vulnerability factors this group has in addition to those typical of other immigrants. The consequences of their traumatic violence and persecution experienced in their countries of origin or during the dangerous journey (resulting also in physical or mental disorders). Equally the lack of a migratory project; the absence of a family or national support network in the society of arrival; the deficiency of prior (linguistic, cultural, legal) knowledge about the context of arrival. These factors are particularly significant in the case of the so-called 'vulnerable groups' of refugees: minors, disabled, the elderly, pregnant women, single parents with minors, and persons who have undergone torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence<sup>21</sup>. To give one example, the incidence of subjects with mental disorders and/or victims of torture in a given refugee population arriving in Italy has been estimated at between 20% and 30%<sup>22</sup>. This requires specific and advanced support tools, with which the Italian public system of reception is not always equipped<sup>23</sup>.

Some empirical data describing the characteristics of asylum seekers and refugees living in Italy are provided by the National System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. This represents the most important network for the reception of forced migrants in Italy, receiving about 30,000 people each year and guaranteeing what

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR—United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Nota UNHCR sul recepimento delle Direttive 2013/32/UE del Parlamento Europeo e del Consiglio del 26 giugno 2013 [...]*, Rome: UNHCR, 2016. [http://www.unhcr.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Nota\\_UNHCR\\_sul\\_recepimento\\_delle\\_Direttive\\_2013.32.UE-\\_e\\_2013.33.UE\\_.pdf](http://www.unhcr.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Nota_UNHCR_sul_recepimento_delle_Direttive_2013.32.UE-_e_2013.33.UE_.pdf), accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> EU—European Union, 'Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted', *Official Journal of the European Union*, Vol. 54, 2011, pp. 9-26; *Legislative Decree no. 140/2005. Attuazione della direttiva 2003/9/CE che stabilisce norme minime relative all'accoglienza dei richiedenti asilo negli Stati membri. Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 168, 21/7/2005; *Legislative Decree no. 18/2014. Attuazione della direttiva 2011/95/UE recante norme sull'attribuzione, a cittadini di paesi terzi o apolidi, della qualifica di beneficiario di protezione internazionale, su uno status uniforme per i rifugiati o per le persone aventi titolo a beneficiare della protezione sussidiaria, nonché sul contenuto della protezione riconosciuta. Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 55, 7/3/2014.

<sup>22</sup> M. Germani, *Dal trauma dell'esilio al trauma catastrofico*, SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) Central Service, *Atti del seminario nazionale del 21-22 aprile 2010 'La salute mentale di richiedenti e titolari di protezione internazionale. Verso una definizione di standard comuni di accoglienza e presa in carico specialistica'*. Rome: SPRAR, 2010, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) Central Service, *La salute mentale dei rifugiati. Un nuovo disegno per l'accoglienza*. Rome: SPRAR, 2011.

was termed *accoglienza integrata* (integrated reception). This involves the provision of board and lodging, along with orientation measures, legal and social assistance, as well as the development of personalised programmes for the social-economic integration of individuals<sup>24</sup>.

According to this system, the most significant nationalities of origin of asylum seekers and refugees are in the areas of west sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa and Asia: Nigeria (15.2%), Pakistan (12.5%), Gambia (12.2%), Mali (10.6%), Afghanistan (10.1%), Senegal (6.2%), Somalia (4.9%), Eritrea (3%), Ghana (2.9%) and Bangladesh (2.8%)<sup>25</sup>. The predominant type of arrival in Italy is by sea (75.5%), followed by those crossing a land border (11.3%) and a frontier airport (5.9%) (SPRAR 2016: 43). With regard to gender, 88% of asylum seekers and refugees are male and only 12% are female (SPRAR 2016: 37). The most represented age group is between 18 and 25 years (47.2%), followed by adults aged 26 to 30 years (23.1%) and 31 to 35 years (11.4%)<sup>26</sup>.

Data on the level of education of this population show a wide-range schooling, wherein 37% have attended primary school, 22% lower secondary school and 19% higher secondary school, while 7% hold a university degree<sup>27</sup>. However, research shows that despite commonly elevated levels of qualifications and skills, refugees face serious problems with inclusion in Italy. These critical issues are discussed below with reference to the economic, social, cultural, and legal spheres.

#### *Economic level*

On an economic level, subjects who had qualified positions (such as teachers, journalists, engineers, doctors) in their country of origin now hold under-qualified positions in Italy and, consequently, experience a dramatic drop in socioeconomic status<sup>28</sup>.

The recurring disadvantages in the labour market, through access to an informal (even irregular) job network and the 'professional ethnicisation', relegates them to poorly paid and dangerous occupations no longer desired by Italians. These conditions have led to conceptualising the inclusion of migrants into the Italian society in terms of *integrazione subalterna* (subordinate integration)<sup>29</sup> or *inclusione subordinata* (conditional inclusion)<sup>30</sup>. These terms are used to highlight a condition in which migrants experience social and economic disadvantage in comparison to natives. An emblematic example is the case of asylum seekers and refugees enrolled

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<sup>24</sup> SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) Central Service, *Rapporto annuale Sprar. Atlante Sprar 2015*, Rome: SPRAR, 2016, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> M. Catarci, *Resource Project. Refugees' contribution to Europe. Country Report: Italy*, Trieste: Italian Consortium of Solidarity, 2004, pp. 7-12.

<sup>29</sup> M. Ambrosini, *Utiles invasori. L'inserimento degli immigrati nel mercato del lavoro*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1999; M. Ambrosini, *La fatica d'integrarsi. Immigrati e lavoro in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> V. Cotesta, *La cittadella assediata. Immigrazione e conflitti etnici in Italia*. Rome: Editori Riuniti 1992; V. Cotesta, *Sociologia dei conflitti etnici. Razzismo, immigrazione e società multiculturale*. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2009.

in Italy in irregular work, without social and health protection, and also exploited in agricultural work<sup>31</sup>.

In this sense, a major issue is the difficulty for refugees with high qualifications and skills to have them legally recognised in Italy, because the procedure of recognition of foreign qualifications is bureaucratic, time-consuming and expensive. Yet, previous personal skills, qualifications, experiences, interests and aspirations of refugees in the society of arrival cannot be forgotten or removed.

In this respect, the debate has shown that 'lifelong learning' (an approach aimed at providing education throughout the lifetime of a person, within a personal, civic, social or employment perspective) represents a key strategy in facing these problems, because it enables the acquisition of new skills and the contextualisation of those acquired in other contexts<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, an integrated holistic approach, which includes additional resources for government-funded employment programmes, specifically addressing the category of refugees, combined with access to fully funded language tuition and work experience and internship opportunities, is also indispensable<sup>33</sup>.

#### *Social level*

On a social level, refugees often suffer from a lack of both a social support network (i.e., of nationals or family) and information and knowledge concerning the milieu of arrival. In this regard, Morrice has drawn attention to the need for social 'soft skills' in non-formal and formal contexts, related to the ability to engage in social interaction and have access to social networks and to develop cultural understanding and knowledge of the rules of social participation<sup>34</sup>.

Furthermore, the shortage of reception places in the Italian public system and the lack of effective supporting measures at the end of the first reception period (usually six months) cause further difficulties. In particular, the exclusion of refugees from the public system of reception and the increase of informal settlements (especially in metropolitan areas) have been described by recent studies<sup>35</sup>. Within the context of these informal establishments, non-governmental and voluntary organisations play an important role in providing their inhabitants with basic needs (food, shelter, essential legal guidance). Quite interestingly they are located mainly in large urban areas, often generating conflicts with natives and episodes of racism. This raises

<sup>31</sup> F. Gatti, 'Sette giorni all'inferno: diario di un finto rifugiato nel ghetto di Stato', *L'Espresso*, Vol. 37, 2016, pp. 46-54.

<sup>32</sup> G. Campani, N. Schlenzka, and L. Sommo, *Refugee Women. Hoping for a Better Future*. Berlin: Edition Parabolis, 2004; T. Threadgold, G. Court, *Refugee Inclusion: A Literature Review*. Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> T. O'Donovan, M. Sheikh, 'Welfare Reforms and the Refugee Resettlement Strategy: An Opportunity to Achieve Meaningful Employment Outcomes for New Zealanders from Refugee Backgrounds?', *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2014, pp. 82-88.

<sup>34</sup> L. Morrice, 'Lifelong Learning and the Social Integration of Refugees in the UK: The Significance of Social Capital', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2007, p. 159.

<sup>35</sup> Medici per i Diritti Umani, *Indagine sulle strade dell'esclusione*. Modena: Infinito Edizioni, 2011; CRS—Caritas Roma et al., "Mediazioni metropolitane": *Studio e sperimentazione di un modello di dialogo e intervento a favore dei richiedenti e titolari di protezione internazionale in situazione di marginalità*, Rome: Caritas, 2012; Fondazione IntegrA/Azione, *I rifugiati invisibili. L'accoglienza informale nella capitale. Dossier sulle occupazioni abitative di rifugiati, richiedenti asilo e beneficiari di protezione internazionale*. Rome: IntegrA/Azione, 2012.

further doubts about the quality of protection assured to the most vulnerable in these contexts.

### *Cultural level*

On a cultural level, it must be observed that a perspective of real integration presupposes a dynamic cultural exchange between refugees and Italians from a viewpoint of reciprocity and mutual understanding<sup>36</sup>. However, research has highlighted that perceptions of Italians about immigration (despite its presence in Italy for 40 years) generally have strong negative connotations, with a tendency for overestimation (even with a widespread perception of 'invasion' linked with the sea arrivals in southern Italy) and an association with issues of criminality<sup>37</sup>. In particular, mass media play a role in shaping the idea of an invasion posed by asylum seekers. On top of that, information concerning the arrival of asylum seekers in Italy is often characterised by the use of improper terms, such as 'illegal immigrant' instead of 'asylum seeker'<sup>38</sup>. Despite the adoption by the Association of Journalists and the National Federation of the Italian Press, in 2008, of a protocol of conduct concerning asylum seekers and refugees, called *Carta di Roma* (Charter of Rome), the problem still appears to be strongly rooted in the Italian mass media<sup>39</sup>.

### *Legal level*

On a legal level, Italy registers a moderate rate of full recognition of refugee status. According to Eurostat, positive decisions on asylum applications in Italy (29,630 in 2015 on a total of 71,345 applications, with a recognition rate of 41%) remain below countries like Germany (140,910 over 249,280; 57%) or Sweden (32,215 over 44,590; 72%)<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, it should be noted that many of these positive decisions in Italy refer to the recognition of a residence permit for subsidiary protection (34.7% of the Italian positive decisions) or humanitarian reasons<sup>41</sup> (53.2%) instead of refugee status (12.1%), while, for example, in Germany they are mainly refugee status (96%)<sup>42</sup>. This aspect is not secondary, because only refugee status offers wide guarantees of permanence in the host country, providing the same rights as natives<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> ECRE—European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *The Way Forward: Towards the Integration of Refugees in Europe*. Brussels: ECRE, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> B. Duffy and T. Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration*. London: IPSOS Mori Social Research Institute, 2014, [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1634\\_sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1634_sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf), accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016; National Institute for Statistics—ISTAT, *I migranti visti dai cittadini residenti in Italia*. Rome: ISTAT, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> M. Morcellini (ed.), *Ricerca nazionale su immigrazione e asilo nei media italiani*. Rome: Sapienza University, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Italian Association of Journalists and National Federation of the Italian Press. *Carta di Roma. Protocollo deontologico concernente richiedenti asilo, rifugiati, vittime della tratta e migranti. Protocollo d'intesa 13 giugno 2008*, Rome: Italian Association of Journalists-National Federation of the Italian Press, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Eurostat, *EU Member States granted protection to more than 330,000 asylum seekers in 2015*, 2016, p. 3, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7233417/3-20042016-AP-EN.pdf/34c4f5af-eb93-4ecd-984c-577a5271c8c5>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> According to EU directives 2004/83/EC and 2011/95/EU, 'subsidiary protection' is recognized when the applicant cannot demonstrate a personal persecution (as defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees), but it is believed that s/he would face a real risk of suffering serious harm if s/he returned to the country of origin. Furthermore, the residence permit for 'humanitarian reasons' is issued under national law and it includes persons who are not eligible for international protection, but are nonetheless protected under the obligations by international refugee or human rights instruments (i.e. ill persons or unaccompanied minors). Eurostat, *Glossary: Asylum decision*, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Asylum\\_decision](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Asylum_decision), accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> National Commission for the Right to Asylum, *Dati asilo 2013–2014*, Rome, 2014, [http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/dati\\_asilo\\_2013\\_-\\_2014.pdf](http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/dati_asilo_2013_-_2014.pdf), accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

This state of affairs particularly hinders the capacity to build a long-term life project in Italy. Such a set of critical elements leads refugees to live in Italy under conditions that, through the classic notion of Sayad<sup>44</sup>, can be defined as ‘double absence’: on the one hand, they are missing from the society of origin, and on the other hand, they remain in a liminal space in the host countries, where they are not acknowledged as ‘full citizens’.

## **Implications of the inclusion of refugees in Italy for the Italian intercultural approach**

Asylum seekers and refugees are often considered only in relation to their contribution to the economic development of the countries in which they live. This is in evident divergence from the peculiarity of the forced migrant that does not move in search of better economic conditions but in flight from humanitarian crises. Not only does this circumstance keep refugees in a condition of social weakness, but also it sometimes causes closure towards people potentially in need of protection. This was the case of the practices of indiscriminate *refoulements* (expulsions) of potential refugees to Libya carried out by Italy, and condemned on 23 February 2012 by the European Court of Human Rights for violating Article 3 (on torture and degrading treatment) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

From the analysis carried out on the inclusion of refugees in Italy, some key elements can be inferred, which require consideration in order to achieve a more effective intercultural paradigm and to create an approach able to offer effective responses to the most vulnerable people, like refugees, and to provide social cohesion and inclusive horizons for all.

Firstly, *enhancing the interconnections between natives and newcomers* is a fundamental element for implementing a real intercultural approach. The difficulties of social interaction for refugees in Italian society and their low ‘social capital’ (i.e. the complex of tangible and intangible resources) highlight that an effective intercultural paradigm requires more opportunities for social interaction between natives and newcomers. In this context, the use of intercultural mediators can facilitate the relation between immigrant users and operators in the welfare services (i.e. reception centres, social services, hospitals, counselling centres, schools).

At the same time, intercultural lifelong learning opportunities can provide new skills and qualify the previous ones to facilitate access to the labour market. Besides, strategies aimed at acquiring knowledge about different cultures would have to equip the entire population of that awareness of how to deal with cultural difference and to know the reasons and contexts of forced migration.

From this perspective, *providing the majority with opportunities to critically question themselves* represents an indispensable intercultural strategy. A lack of knowledge concerning the figure of the refugee, along with denial of an Italian multicultural past, appears to be widespread in Italian society. There is basically no trace of this painful history in the collective memory of the Italian people and it seems ‘psychologically’ removed. This implies that, by adopting a dynamic notion of national identity, native Italians might have the chance to critically understand the

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<sup>44</sup> A. Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004.

world in which they live and the multicultural processes that have always taken place throughout the country's history (i.e. the management of internal diversity among different regions<sup>45</sup>). At the same time, they can also gain an awareness of the global processes that today produce forced migration, together with real and symbolic processes of marginalisation. Moreover, the persistence of a negative 'collective imagination' about refugee arrivals among Italians calls for an effective effort to build an accurate perception of these events. In this sense, the role of lifelong intercultural education is strategic, in order to offer all the opportunity to critically question themselves, as well as to comprehend the geopolitical circumstances that determine the flow of forced migrants arriving in Italy.

Furthermore, the Italian society would benefit from increasing the impact of interculturalism in terms of real social opportunities (i.e. accessing appropriate work, education, accommodation) for newcomers. The critical results of the processes of refugee inclusion in Italy show that the intercultural paradigm cannot be restricted only to processes of cultural exchange (promoted, for example, through the school), but it also implies that social and economic opportunities should be promoted, and that opportunities for social mobility for the subjects should exist in order to assure equal positions between newcomers and natives—indispensable for authentic intercultural relationships.

Finally, it is vital to *achieve greater coherence between the principles expressed and the policies implemented*. To have an impact on social reality and a commitment to social change, an authentic intercultural perspective also requires coherence between the theoretical and practical dimensions. The question of the inclusion of refugees in Italy calls for a better understanding also of the existing dynamics causing marginalisation and social exclusion (a penalising labour market, difficulty in recognising previous qualifications and problems in finding an accommodation).

It must be observed that the vulnerability of refugees represents a valuable testing ground to understand the effectiveness of the intercultural policies implemented. From this point of view, the first conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis undertaken is that the formal recognition of a status, like that of refugee, even if apparently privileged compared to the conditions of economic migrants (who are not recipients of a national reception system) does not mean that such formal recognition is translated into actual reality. In other words, individuals who acquire legal status still experience poor conditions that make it difficult to demand their rights and obtain opportunities to improve their lives.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyse the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy, into the Italian intercultural approach. What emerges from the analysis is that policies addressing asylum seekers and refugees seem to be lacking of a wide-ranging approach. The absence of a response for responding to all the complex needs of the subjects and, mostly, at building opportunities for effective interaction with Italians. Instead, an intercultural perspective should provide chances for interaction between people from different cultural, social and biographical origins. This implies that interventions (including educational or cultural efforts) cannot be directed solely

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<sup>45</sup> The Italian state is administratively subdivided into twenty Regions, each characterised by a local regional administration endowed with some legislative powers.

towards asylum seekers and refugees but should be also address to the other side of the relationship: the natives.

In this sense, the Italian intercultural approach should avoid including new citizens not exclusively in an assimilationist perspective of simple one-way inclusion (usually through requests addressed only to newcomers) but in an interactional perspective, directed also at natives (in particular to promote mutual understanding). This calls for a comprehensive approach in intercultural policies. Indeed, migration should be considered as a total social fact, involving all the aspects of human existence.

In conclusion, inclusion policies should thus entail not just basic assistance (food, housing and health care) but also all those needs related to their social inclusion. First, *information and guidance* needs must be considered, in particular, regarding access to the local network of social, work, health, educational and cultural services. Furthermore, *employment support* must be taken into account, especially to facilitate these migrants from being forced to take on positions of social weakness, often due to legal and administrative restrictions (i.e. the lack of recognition of previous qualifications), through practices aimed at converting their skills and developing new abilities. Also, *cultural needs* in a broad sense are crucial and concern both the maintenance of relations with the cultural context of origin and the acquisition of indispensable connections in the society of arrival. Finally, *psychological support* is essential. For those who have abandoned people, places and social roles related to their previous life, time and space are vital to cope with these losses and to compose and come to terms with their stories, fragmented as they are by the experience of displacement<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> N. Losi, 'La struttura del trauma migratorio nel dispositivo etnopsichiatrico, nei riti d'iniziazione e nella fiaba', in N. Losi (ed.), *Vite altrove. Migrazione e disagio psichico*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 8; T. Nathan, *Non siamo soli al mondo*, Turin: Boringhieri, 2003, p. 45.