

## **Economic recession and the internal migration of immigrants in Italy**

**Elena de Filippo and Enrica Morlicchio**

Since the 1970s, international migration to Italy has accentuated the economic and social differences between the North and South of the country. The prevalence of informal jobs, the instability of work, the lack of social mobility have caused many parts of Southern Italy to become areas of “temporary presence” or area of “transition”, at least initially, for most of immigrants. This was the role both of immigrants with short-term migratory plans and those who considered their arrival in Southern regions as merely an intermediate stage in a long-term migratory strategy towards the final destination in the Central and Northern regions of Italy; these regions had a high demand for registered migrant workers and therefore offered the prospect of job stability. The migration of regularised migrants from the North to the South of Italy has continued unabated over the years and represents a sort of “migration within the migratory process”. However, an opposing trend has emerged since 2009 due to the economic crisis, especially among those who have lost their jobs, especially from small and medium-sized enterprises in the area known as the “Third Italy” (Central/North-Eastern Italy) and the main industrial cities (especially Turin)<sup>1</sup>.

The economic crisis – which has had more immediate and direct consequences in the areas of Central-northern Italy, the destinations of internal migration - has led to increased internal mobility. Migration is now taking place from the north to the south where the possibility of doing irregularly temporary work has re-emerged as a decisive factor.

This paper will look at some of the problems arising from the inversion of internal migration flows and will examine the links with the current crisis. In particular, it will try to identify specific processes of ‘skid row living’ (the transition to less well-paid, less skilled and more temporary jobs) or actual abandonment of the labour market by immigrants, compared to the situation for Italian workers, within the context of the new trend in their movements within Italy. We shall focus on the case of Campania in southern Italy, because it has played a dual role as an area of “transition” and area of “stable settlement”. As a result of the economic recession, the region has acquired a third role as the “refuge” for many immigrants who have lost their jobs in the North of Italy. Our analysis is based on the statistical data from official sources and on biographical interviews with “returning” migrants within Italian boundaries, in particular in the provinces of Naples and Caserta, as well as on interviews with privileged witnesses<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to Turin, as Antonella Meo wrote in the latest report of the National Commission on poverty “In 2009 foreigners were particularly hard-hit by sackings: the immigrants registered in the job mobility lists in the province of Turin in 2009 increased by 87% as opposed to 32% among Italians. At the beginning of 2010, 37 of every 100 people enrolled in the lists were foreigners (Cies 2010, 74).

<sup>2</sup> Besides the head of the Office for Foreigners of the Cgil Campania (Italian Confederation of Labour), the leaders of associations of immigrants and cultural mediators of the following national communities were

## 2. The impact of the economic crisis on immigrants

Finding a precise definition of the effects of the economic crisis on immigrant workers in Italy is no simple matter. Indeed, as has been pointed out by one of the leading experts on immigration in Italy, it is only possible to base suggestions on the scanty data currently available, which distinguish the nationality or country of origin of the workers and the unemployed, and on direct observation of the specific contexts (Reyneri 2010). The information in the latest annual report of ISTAT (Italian National Statistical Institute) clearly show that immigrants are more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis. "Since summer 2009 the number of employed foreign women has begun to fall while that of foreign men has noticeably declined; by comparison, the reduction in the employment rates of Italians, which fell from 58.1% in 2008 to 56.9% in 2009, is significantly less than that of foreigners, falling from 67.1% to 64.5%" (ISTAT report 2009, 125). Moreover, between the end of 2008 and the end of 2009, the rate of immigrant unemployment has increased more than that of Italian workers: the unemployment among the former group has risen from 8.8% to 12.6%, while the rate for the latter group has risen from 6.9 % to 8.2%: the increase is therefore three times greater<sup>3</sup>.

In general, the international literature on the subject shows that not all immigrants are prepared to act as a "buffer" for Italian workers, bearing the entire burden of the risks of the recession, for example by returning to their native countries. There are various reasons for this situation. Firstly, their specific employment position in the context of labour market segmentation also creates employment niches which provide security from the crisis: examples include women who work in the care sector or seasonal workers who are employed in harvesting agricultural produce, or alternatively those immigrants who perform underpaid and/or unskilled jobs which are less sensitive to the economic cycle. A second reason regards the presence of other relatives – especially wives and children – which complicates a forced return to their native country, a solution which was used in internal intra-European migration in the sixties and seventies. Lastly, it is necessary to recall the difficult conditions of the countries of origin, afflicted by conflict and economic poverty, which discourage workers from making the return journey (Dobson, Latham, and Salt 2009) .

In the Italian case, where 87% of foreigners live in Central-northern regions, the return flows caused by the crisis have witnessed movements from the North to the South of Italy rather than heading back to their native countries. Since 2009

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interviewed: Ukraine, Romania, Albania, Tunisia, Nigeria, Somalia, Senegal and Pakistan. The interviews were carried out by Ariane Madeleine Cécile Stoeveken.

<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, especially in the second half of 2009, the increase in the unemployed has affected immigrants in a way that is not proportional to their demographic weighting (+77,000 and +113,000, respectively). This process involves both men and women. Therefore, "the growth of the foreign population has been transformed into an increase in employment which is less than that of the recent past, due to the effect of increase in families coming to join their relative and due to the increasing difficulty of finding work" (Istat 2010, 127).

there has been a significant number - although difficult to quantify - of departures from Northern regions towards those of the South, which, in some cases, takes the form of a sort of “return migration”. The immediate effect of these internal movements was a lowering in wages and a worsening in working conditions in the Southern areas of arrival, with frequent relapses into begging. In this regard, the main source of information that exists for the moment has been referred to by Reyneri as “anecdotal evidence” (2010). For instance, it is worth mentioning the case of an Egyptian worker, described by a Moroccan cultural mediator. After living illegally in the province of Naples for many years, he finally regularised his position in the mid 1990s and moved to Vicenza where he found work in a factory. He arranged for his wife to come to Italy and they had three children. The economic crisis led him to lose not his job as well as the house that he had struggled to buy with a mortgage, and had jeopardised both his own and his relatives’ residence permits. Under pressure, he sent his family back to Morocco; he now helps to maintain them by working as a day labourer doing jobs in the province of Naples where he returned in search of employment. The case presented here is exemplary because the processes of impoverishment that have been caused by the crisis mainly concern foreign families, the most deeply rooted component of the immigrant community: they moved to Italy some time ago and had plans for stable settlement and do not belong to the sphere of social exclusion. Antonella Meo has outlined that “The so-called “new poor” – to use the terminology of social workers – belong, also among foreigners, to social categories who, until recently, regarded themselves as safe from the risk of falling into conditions of extreme hardship and considered themselves as involved in a plan of social integration and improvement in life style” (2010, 79). Moreover, the example of the Egyptian worker highlights the social vulnerability of immigrants with respect to Italian workers represented by the resort to illegal immigration. For immigrants, the loss of work does not just lead to a reduction in income, but also to the risk of losing their residence rights since the Bossi-Fini law (law no.189/2002, approved by a right-wing government) has made the link between regularised residence permits and the employment contract even tighter than it was in the past.

With the various indemnity measures or decrees of migrant flows, an employment contract had previously represented the beginning of a path towards social integration. Those immigrants who had taken years to reach a regularised, stable position and to emerge from illegal residence (where immigrants sometimes pay the costs of regularisation which should be borne by the employer), had often believed in social mobility, bringing their families to Italy or creating a family during the migratory experience; this had enabled them to lead lifestyles closer to those of Italians and even, in some cases, to stop identifying with the most recently arrived immigrants. As one cultural mediator reported in an interview, “I wanted to live an Italian lifestyle – said a Moroccan man who I met at the drop-in to have a shower – I thought that what I had managed to achieve in Milan would last forever but it didn’t work out...” Paradoxically, it is these “successful” immigrants who suffer the effects of the crisis more acutely than the immigrants with more marginal jobs; the latter were already in a situation of employment insecurity and were in some ways better equipped, even psychologically, to cope with the hardships. According to

another mediator who was interviewed, “those who were used to ‘getting by’ didn’t have problems ... those who had settled, and thought that they wouldn’t have to do certain things any more, are worse off now... Many of them thought they had had their opportunity and had taken advantage of their opportunity in time, leaving behind them their past as illegal immigrants, the insecurity, ‘getting by’, fear ...they are paying a higher price with the crisis; they feel disappointed and betrayed, but not by anyone in particular ... (but) by the system”.

If attention is shifted from the institutional market of labour to its margins, then the picture changes significantly. Although the main position of immigrants in the secondary segment of the labour market has protected them from the crisis, the economic situation has led Italian workers to become more interested in a sector that had previously not been considered attractive (Staglianò 2010). In some ways, this has increased competition in lower levels of the market and created social conflict. Moreover, precisely because they are employed in more insecure and less protected activities, when they are expelled from the labour market, immigrants more frequently find themselves without a social security cushion that could reduce the impact of the economic effects. From this perspective, it should not be forgotten that the lack of family networks, and the reduced participation of women in the labour market, which is found in certain immigrant communities such as those from north Africa, magnify the consequences of the crisis. In cases where the head of the family loses his job, it becomes more difficult to draw on family solidarity and the integration represented by additional income from work. According to another mediator, “there are still many families, such as Moroccans but also Pakistanis, in which only the head of the family works, while the women look after the children... when there is a moment of difficulty... the only source of income dries up ...and the crisis intensifies, there’s no one to help you, sometimes there’s a brother who’s here, that is, if he’s not working with him...and is therefore in a difficult situation himself...”.

It is important not to underestimate the importance that the lack of work has for immigrant citizens, also in terms of their standing in the community: “the immigrant is considered a good person only when he or she works and unemployment can be interpreted as meaning an insufficient desire to integrate, to accept what others don’t want to do. If you don’t work, then you’re not a citizen, you’re not like other people, you become more sinister ...”. This leads to a sort of discouragement, a lowering of self-esteem and makes it more likely for an immigrant to slip into a situation of marginalisation. For example, L., from central Africa, after years of sacrifice, had opened a restaurant in Milan which was doing well. As a result of the crisis, he had to close the restaurant and returned to Naples. He now just wanders around trying to ‘get by’ and send money to his family, rummaging in rubbish skips to find something for himself. “I couldn’t go back to Milan where I used to have a restaurant...I’d’ve felt ashamed to be seen in this state, I’m known there as someone who worked hard, whose business was going well ... I always wore a jacket and tie ...”

Lastly, it should be stressed that the lack of certainty, the lack of job prospects for the future and regularised residence among migrants affected by the crisis, can heighten levels of anxiety and family insecurity, causing conflicts between immigrants and the local population.

### 3. The dual role of Campania as an area of transition and an area of definitive settlement

We shall now turn to the specific case of the Campania region, the main destination of flows of migrants who have been affected by the crisis. Campania represents a particularly interesting case within these dynamics because it played the dual role of transitional area and area of definitive settlement in the past. As early as the late eighties, Calvanese and Pugliese (1991) identified four different migratory plans in the region: stable residence, transfer to other areas, temporary residence and no plan. During the last decade, as can be seen in table 1, Campania has maintained, and indeed strengthened, its role as a transitional area in migration towards regions in northern Italy. However, at the same time, the importance of the more stable component (of the immigrant population), as a percentage of the total population, has increased sharply from 0.3 to 2.3%: this figure is fairly significant even though it is well below the national average (Strozza 2010). At the beginning of 2009 foreign residents in Campania exceeded 131,000 units, becoming almost eight times more numerous than just under twenty years ago (fig 1).

Another indicator of rootedness among immigrants in the Campania region is the rise in the number of so-called “long-term residents” from developing countries and central-eastern Europe; at the end of 2007, they were estimated at over 16,200 (resident permit holders who had arrived in Italy at least ten years previously). There has been a continual increase in residence permits for family reasons issued to foreign adults; at the end of 2007 they numbered almost 16,000 units, almost ten times the figure for 1991. The increase is undoubtedly lower than in the rest of Italy. However, 16,000 non-EU citizens from developing countries with residence permits for family reasons represent unequivocal evidence of how a substantial immigrant presence, increasingly made up of families, has settled in the region during this brief period. Although it is less marked than in the regions of northern and central Italy, the stabilisation of the immigrant community is gaining significant importance in Campania as well.

All these elements seem to support the hypothesis of the region’s twofold role, as in the rest of the south of Italy, as an area of temporary stay or transition for a significant part of the immigrant community but also as an area of stable settlement for a growing number of immigrants and their descendants (de Filippo, Ferrara, 2010; Strozza, 2010).

### 4. Campania : a “place of refuge” for immigrants during the crisis

Besides this dual role, a third role of the region has emerged since 2009. This regards the possibility of finding a means of survival in the social and economic context of Campania. The motives underlying the decision to return to the south are not merely related to economic factors, linked to the local labour market which offers many opportunities for illegal and underpaid employment, regarded as “suitable for immigrants”. In many cases, the motives also include the existence of an informal social capital that attracts immigrants: I didn’t find friendships in the north as I had done in Naples, where I had lots of friends; this is partly the reason I returned...and then up there you already began to feel the crisis ...everyone talked just about the

crisis and therefore you had to accept a particular job and be satisfied with it...without other possibilities...without being able to improve". Unfortunately, the earning opportunities provided by the illegal labour market and the protection ensured by informal social networks are almost never sufficient to make for the lack – in many cases a complete absence – of public services and income support in the case of unemployment. Indeed, there are many stories of immigrants who now live in the streets or in makeshift accommodation, working as day labourers, street sellers, beggars, or who just wander the streets, rummaging through rubbish skips and junk. These stories tell of small successes obtained with great effort, represented by the residence permit, a legal job, a real house and a family, which has collapsed as a result of the crisis, so that all hope of improvement has vanished.

One worker in a mobile unit for the homeless tells of a boy who "... lives in an abandoned house together with many other immigrants. He often comes over to our camper van in Gianturco (near Naples central railway station, editor's note) to have a chat with me and the other staff; he always carries a shoulder bag where he keeps his documents and his photo album, which he shows us with a mixture of pride and a bit of nostalgia, partly to demonstrate to us what he was like before and what he has become today, stressing that he is a "regularised" foreigner.

The hope of being able to restart from where they left off, as illegal and badly paid workers who could be found in the tiny niches of the labour market in Campania, has had to give way to a far harsher reality, as one privileged witness describes:

"...since the crisis began, you see scenes that didn't exist before. For instance, in the morning, the young African immigrants wait in the various slave markets that exist in the Naples area. They go there at five in the morning and at ten, or at midday, they are still sitting there, waiting. .. So the first day they return home, the second day as well, but then they begin to beg.. Previously, the Africans used not to beg while now, in the last year, there are many of them. This has led to a further deterioration in the standard of life. They used to do any type of job, day labourers, gardeners...nowadays, not even that type of job exists, the luckiest ones that get taken on for a day get paid 10/15 Euros. Today, the small owners haven't got the money to pay them. The crisis has affected everyone, but it has mainly affected the weakest ones".

Therefore one of the effects of internal migrant flows towards Campania has been to increase the burden of the most problematic component of immigration; this is represented by adult males with extremely insecure working and employment conditions who are on the verge of begging. The latter have entered a social context which is very different from the one that they left a few years ago when the Campania region had represented the first stage of their migratory journey. The economic recession, combined with the environmental crisis, has weakened the mechanisms of social integration that underlie the "Neapolitan model of survival" which had previously guaranteed a sort of subequilibrium amid the insecurity of the immigrants. In this situation, there is even a risk that conflicts between immigrants and the local population could explode.

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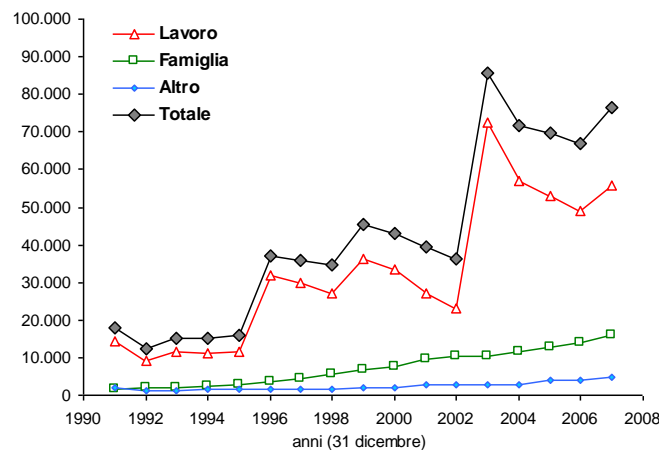
Rethinking Migration in Times of Economic Crisis in Europe, 9 – 10 Dec. 2010  
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Table. 1 – Migrant flows 2004-2006 to and from Campania grouped into broad categories in terms of origin or destination of the foreigners who have made use of the regularisation measures of 2002 (IBossi-Fini law).

Division according to origin or destination	Arrived in Campania	Left from Campania	Migratory balance
North	7,909	19,308	-11,399
Centre	4,941	7,032	-2,091
Rest of southern Italy	2,245	2,549	-304
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15,095</b>	<b>28,889</b>	<b>-13,794</b>

Source: Processing of data from the Italian Ministry of the interior revised by Istat (Strozza, 2010).

Fig. 1 – Evolution of the number of adult foreigners with residence permit from developing countries and Eastern Europe (except for new EU citizens) distinguished according to the motive for the residence permit. Campania, 31 December 1991-2007



Source: processing of data of the Italian Ministry reassessed by ISTAT.

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