

# INFORMAL MIGRANT SETTLEMENTS BETWEEN IRREGULAR CONDITION AND RIGHT TO THE CITY. NEW CHALLENGES FOR PLANNING IN CROSS-BORDER EURO-MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXTS

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of migratory flows, which has been growing exponentially in Europe for more than two decades and is recently reaching its peak also as an effect of the political and economic instability in North-Africa and the Middle-East, represents a major element of change in the European social framework.

Over the last fifty years, many European regions in the Mediterranean area, historically considered areas of origin of international migratory flows, have been transformed into places of reception. Underlying this mobility is the demand, by a variable and globalized economy, for 'easy' labour, mostly made up of new immigrants (Ambrosini and Abbatecola, 2004), instrumental to that particular economic system (Berlan, 2008; Keskinen, Norocel and Jorgensen, 2016).

Over the last ten years, the most significant percentage changes in Europe's resident foreign population have been recorded mainly in the Southern regions (especially in Italy, Greece and Spain), where (see Tab.1), despite the economic crisis, substantial increases in the number of resident foreign citizens have been recorded (Eurostat, 2021).

Nation	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Italy</b>	3,648,128	3,879,224	4,052,081	4,387,721	4,922,085	5,014,437	5,026,153	5,047,028	5,144,440	4,996,158	5,039,637	5,171,894
<b>Greece</b>	931,424	934,395	921,447	886,450	854,998	821,969	798,357	810,034	816,059	831,692	906,345	921,485
<b>Spain</b>	5,402,575	5,312,439	5,236,030	5,072,680	6,477,059	4,454,354	4,417,517	4,419,621	4,562,962	4,840,207	5,226,906	5,360,271

Tab. 1/ Number of foreigners habitually resident. Source: Eurostat 2021 [online]: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00157/default/table?lang=en>

## 2. Migration Flows in Italy and Scope of the Study

According to ISTAT (Census of Population and Housing, 2001, 2011, 2021), Italy has experienced a significant increase in the presence of migrants in the last 15 years, with the foreign resident population more than tripling (1,334,889 migrants in 2001, 5,171,894 in 2021). To these numbers are added those related to irregular presences, which are around 670,000 (ISPI, 2018). In particular, the regions of Northern Italy host 58.5% of resident foreigners, followed by the regions of the Centre with 26.5%, the South with 10.5%, and finally the islands with 4.5%. Despite these percentage values, the most significant increase in presences (+235% from 2001 to 2021) is precisely recorded in the Southern regions (Eurostat, 2021).

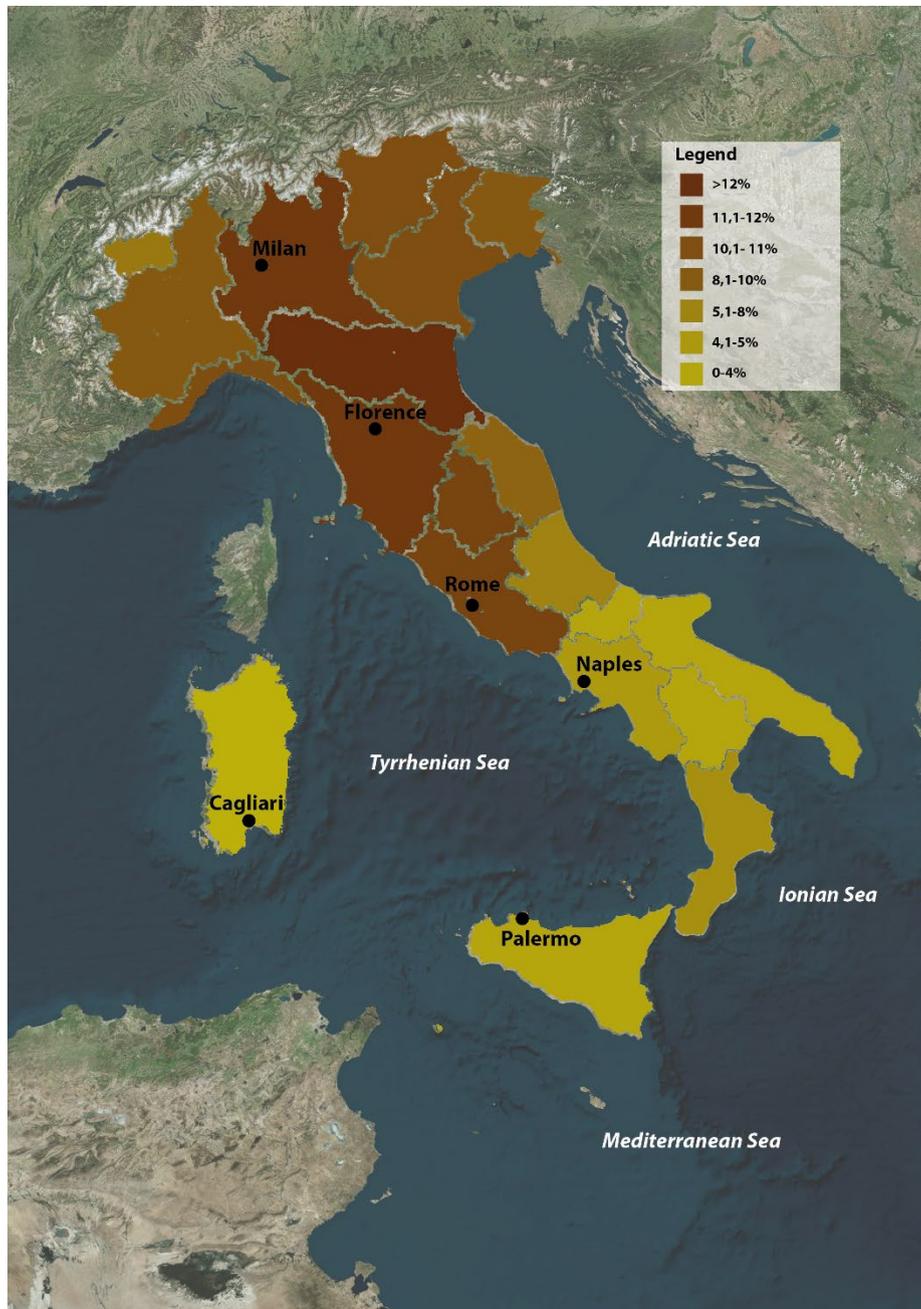


Figure 1/ Thematic map of the foreigners' incidence in the regions.  
Source: Istat.

With respect to the management of migratory flows and that of actual presences, with particular reference to the issue of refugees, we have also witnessed in recent years the rise of a political climate that is openly hostile to migrants, through increasingly restrictive entry and flow management policies; among these: the 2018 'Security Decrees' ('Decreti Sicurezza') that abolished 'humanitarian protection' and expelled over 100,000 people; the drastic reduction in recognition of protection applications submitted in Italy, from 32.2% in 2018 to just 19.7% in 2019 (Aversa, 2021).

Analyzing the spatial dimension of the phenomenon, which shows the inadequacy and insufficiency of the reception system, the increase in eviction phenomena, as well as the effects of post-Covid exclusion and marginalization whose territorial scope does not yet appear entirely clear (Prencipe and Sanfilippo, 2021), the constant growth of migration flows has in fact generated a significant increase in the phenomenon of informal migrant settlements outside cities.

In this sense, the recent results of investigations conducted in Italy in the planning's field on the territorial distribution of the foreign population in extra-urban contexts show how the traditional focus on urban contexts has left a relevant field of enquiry uncovered (Ponzo, 2017). With reference to the international literature, contributions that focus on the extra-urban field of investigation include those by Kofman (1995), Osti (2010), Kasimis et al. (2010).

The issue of informality on the Italian national territory has been extensively studied especially in the contexts of Northern Italy and the Centre (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015; Chiodelli et al., 2020; Esposito and Chiodelli, 2020). Moreover, a number of studies have been conducted, which have addressed the same issues by linking them to the right to housing with particular reference to rural contexts (Todaro, 2016; 2017, 2020; Lo Piccolo and Todaro, 2019, 2022; MediciSenzaFrontiere, 2018; Cesareo, 2021).

In recent years, again with reference to the Italian context, in conjunction with the growth of migration flows, there has been a significant settlement distribution of migrant presences with evident phenomena of territorial dispersion (Balbo, 2015).

With respect to the described investigation's field, suburban contexts therefore generally remain scarcely analyzed with respect to migratory phenomena. In these cases, the territorial diffusion of foreign presences appears mainly connected to the seasonal dimension of agricultural production, particularly in the regions of Southern Italy, where this presence increasingly tends to convert from temporary into a permanent and stable condition.

In fact, INPS (National Social Security Institute, 2018) data show that the regions with the highest number of migrant agricultural workers are mostly Apulia (16.8%), Sicily (14.1%) and Calabria (9.9%) (Macri, 2019).

The issue does not only concern the housing's dimension, but increasingly also access to services and health care and, more generally, the recognition of the most basic civil and citizenship rights (Netto, 2011). It is therefore clear that the extra-urban dimension of the migration phenomenon is not adequately investigated in relation to the different socio-spatial issues that it raises compared to the urban one. And equally clear is the need to reformulate the interpretative frameworks of the phenomenon in a context that is not urban.

In relation to these aspects, this line of research intends to demonstrate how the presence of migrants is not exclusively an urban fact, but increasingly takes on an extra-urban territorial dimension, generally less known and, therefore, scarcely investigated (Balbo, 2015).

Of course, the physical conditions of suburban settlements present different characteristics to those of urban contexts: deterioration of the character of the 'urban' (with the loss of the rights it brings with it), physical and relational distance from local communities with the aggravating increase in the phenomena of labour exploitation of migrants; permanence of the informal settlement model that tends to persist over time, albeit with some variations, regardless of the replacement of immigrant groups.

### 3. Sicily: a case study

The shift from the urban to the extra-urban dimension of the migration phenomenon thus seems to evoke a transition from a situation of 'hypervisibility' (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015) to one of 'invisibility'.

Assuming the Sicilian regional context (a cross-border region that intercepts intercontinental migratory flows) as a case study, as of 1 January 2021 there were 186,195 foreign citizens resident in Sicily (98,211 males and 87,984 females), representing 3% of the total foreign population resident in Italy, placing Sicily in 8th place in the ranking of Italian regions (ISTAT, 2021).

The presence of foreign population in Sicily shows that among the first nationalities are Romanian (24,78%), Tunisian (11,49%) and Moroccan (8,47%), followed by Sri Lanka (6,88%) Albania (5,56%) and Bangladesh (5,14%).

Province	Romania	Tunisia	Marocco	Sri Lanka	Albania	Bangladesh
<b>Agrigento</b>	6,356	932	1,795	17	269	259
<b>Caltanissetta</b>	3,058	331	1,127	8	92	116
<b>Catania</b>	8,732	1,063	1,489	3,832	2,114	1,486
<b>Enna</b>	1,380	156	392	7	38	47
<b>Messina</b>	5,789	794	3,421	4,154	1,398	586

<b>Palermo</b>	5,787	1,593	1,976	3,261	657	5,928
<b>Ragusa</b>	7,359	8,720	1,678	19	5,227	270
<b>Syracuse</b>	2,855	1,304	2,285	1,495	421	273
<b>Trapani</b>	4,588	6,579	1,607	16	137	607
<b>Total</b>	46,141	21,402	15,770	12,809	10,353	9,572

Tab.2 / Foreign population resident in the Sicilian provinces as of 1 January 2021 - first citizenships. Source: ISTAT, resident foreigners as of 1 January 2021.

From an initial observation it is evident how, from the point of view of territorial distribution, the phenomenon of informal settlements is the result of the overlap between the routes of the main migratory flows along the international South-North axis and the areas of high agricultural production.

In Sicily migrant labour appears, in fact, to be mainly engaged in agricultural production (with over 16%), followed by the services and industry sector (with about 10%), and trade (with about 8%) (Ministry of Labour, 2020).

In areas with a strong agricultural vocation, the most commonly practised 'informal housing solutions' are those represented by the squatting of abandoned ruins in the countryside or improvised encampments. To these are added the reception structures in tent-camps organized by institutions or voluntary associations in correspondence with the areas affected by the main seasonal productions.

Getting to the heart of the matter, it is evident that the presence of migrants is mainly concentrated in areas classified as 'intensive agriculture' by the Sixth Census of Agriculture (2010). In the regional territory, agricultural areas (Utilised Agricultural Area, UAA) are mainly dedicated to the cultivation of durum wheat (20.5%), olives for oil (9.9%) and vines (8.2%). While vine cultivation prevails in Western Sicily (Trapani with 45%), in Eastern Sicily citrus fruit cultivation prevails (with Syracuse with 19.1% and Catania with 17.9%). Durum wheat then emerges, reaching around 25% of the SUA in Palermo, Agrigento, Enna, Catania and Caltanissetta, where it stands at 40%. With respect to the agricultural sector, it is noted that in Ragusa and Syracuse migrant labour is mainly employed in the greenhouse sector, while in Trapani, it is mainly concentrated in wine production (ISTAT, 2010; Three-year plan to combat labour exploitation in agriculture and caporalato 2020 - 2022).

The logic behind these locational choices of the main migrant settlements also takes into account their proximity to those urban nuclei (often of small-medium size) that allow migrants, with a certain ease in terms of distances to be covered (essentially on foot or by bicycle), to access the main urban services.

Therefore, from an initial survey it is possible to consider how the key indicators for studying the location choices of informal migrant settlements in Sicily are: the main routes of supra-local migratory flows, areas of intensive agricultural production and proximity to medium-sized urban nuclei.

### 3.1. The Castelvetro's 'ghetto'

The so-called Castelvetro's 'ghetto' is actually an informal settlement that, although it is located in the municipal territory of Castelvetro (a municipality of about 23,000 inhabitants in the province of Trapani), is about 4 km from the town of Campobello di Mazara (another municipality of about 10,000 inhabitants). The territorial context, extremely marginal with respect to the main economic-commercial flows of the Island, is characterized by extensive monoculture agricultural production of olives, with a high fragmentation of holdings (about 5,000), 90% of which have a surface area of about 2 hectares. (ISTAT, 2010). The area is also located along one of the main routes that intercepts international migratory flows and moves from the Southern coast of Sicily towards Palermo, the Island's capital.

The main local economies are concentrated in the hands of processing companies and large-scale commercial distribution, with a downward effect on production costs, including the economic recognition of migrant labour (Lo Cascio, 2019), until 2000 Tunisian, then mainly Senegalese. Large-scale production therefore periodically attracts significant flows of migrant workers who are nevertheless exploited and underpaid.

The proximity to the towns of Campobello di Mazara (1 km) and Castelvetro (3 km) allows migrants to take advantage of the main services available in the nearby towns.

The Castelvetro's 'ghetto' originated in Erbe Bianche's zone as a spontaneous camp, probably between 2008 and 2009 (Lo Cascio, 2019) in which around 700 seasonal migrant workers would gather every year from the beginning of October for the olive harvest. Due to protests from local residents and inadequate sanitary conditions, in 2018 the settlement was abandoned by the migrants (to avoid being reported), before it was cleared by order of the Prefecture of Trapani. The migrants moved to the former 'Calcestruzzi Selinunte' factory, not far from the previous settlement, where around 400 migrants were concentrated (becoming around 700 in the following years) in inhuman housing conditions.



Figure 2 | View of the 'Ghetto' at Ex 'Cementificio Selinunte', Castelvetrano (Trapani province).

Source: <https://www.castelvetranoselinunte.it/video-dentro-il-ghetto-di-migranti-a-castelvetrano/103767/>.

In October 2021, a fire, which broke out accidentally, destroyed the camp, also causing the death of a man of sub-Saharan origin. The episode generated strong protests by the migrants, who were tired of living in desperate conditions, which were followed by the response of the Prefecture of Trapani through a 'relocation' plan for the displaced migrants, who were housed in mobile structures and in a tensile structure provided by the Sicilian Red Cross, located in the former oil mill 'Fontane d'oro', a property confiscated from the mafia.



Figure 3 | View of the 'Ghetto' at Ex 'Cementificio Selinunte' Castelvetro (Trapani province) after the fire. Source: <https://www.tp24.it/2021/10/13/inchieste/reportage-campobello-nbsp/169426>.

In particular, a SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which has now become SIPROIMI (Protection System for Persons with International Protection and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors), was set up in what used to be the factory offices<sup>1</sup>. In the large car park of the former factory, on one side are housing modules provided by the Sicilian Region that can accommodate a little more than 100 migrants; on the other side is a shantytown, housing those who cannot fit inside the housing modules.

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<sup>1</sup> SIPROIMI consists of the network of local authorities that use the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services to implement integrated reception projects. The change from SPRAR to SIPROIMI was introduced by the 'Security Decree' which, by remodeling SPRAR, excludes that SIPROIMI can also benefit asylum seekers waiting for their application for international protection to be decided. The SPRAR/SIPROIMI currently accommodates about ten refugees.



Figure 4 | Satellite image former Oleificio 'Fontane d'Oro' to which migrants were moved after the fire which occurred in October 202. Source: Google earth.

The outcome of this story is an ambiguous and opaque institutional policy that, on the one hand, moves in the direction of restoring the conditions of legality (through squatters removing, construction of camps, etc.), according to the strict rules of 'reception' (residency permit and employment contract), while on the other hand this policy turns a blind eye to the conditions of illegality (probably incentivizing them at certain times), if they are maintained in full invisibility. The spatial result is the multiplication of camps (institutional and informal) that alternate or coexist, depending on the institutional balances achieved and the migrants' conditions of regularity/irregularity. Within the institutional and political debate migrants have no voice, remaining in the widest invisibility.

#### 4. Conclusions

Informal settlements are configured as insurgent forms of claiming certain rights, first and foremost that to housing, while at the same time highlighting the limits of the institutional reception system. As demands for 'normal life' by subjects who are institutionally excluded from it, these informal housing forms take the shape of implicit forms of citizenship even beyond the awareness of their protagonists themselves.

On the other hand, the mismatch between collective identity, privileges of political belonging, rights and social claims, is also the result of precise political choices made by institutional actors; these concern both the norms defining the status of refugee and/or asylum seeker and, more generally, those attributable to the condition of 'migrant' (Benhabib, 2006). According to this interpretative vision, migrants' informal settlements are configured as realities hovering between the legal and the illegal, between inclusion and exclusion, whose 'extraordinary' management is removed from the ordinary institutions and handed over to those in charge of public security (Tarsi and Vecchiarelli, 2020).

Investigating what are the localization logics of informal migrant settlements is therefore the first step towards a more general understanding of the forms of housing discomfort/emergency of the foreign population in the Southern Italian countryside, also in relation to the way in which the absence of the 'public' is manifested in the different settlement experiences. In this sense, the emergency (or rather 'exceptional') dimension of public intervention paradoxically appears to move in the direction of choices that clearly show the character of differentiation and exclusion, rather than that of integration and inclusion. On the socio-spatial level, such policies trigger phenomena of 'institutional production of housing marginality' (Lo Cascio and Piro, 2018) that move in the opposite direction to practices of inclusion. Paraphrasing in an inverse sense what we have argued elsewhere (Lo Piccolo and Todaro, 2022), it is necessary for the 'exception' to become

the 'rule' once again and for the extraordinary dimension of public intervention (of the State) to nourish a common local policy of real reception that cannot take on the character of the 'field'.

Finally, the informal settlement phenomena of migrants represent practices of socio-spatial innovation and dynamism (coming from the informal sphere, such as self-construction) that are configured as 'acts of citizenship' in claiming the right to housing and the right to the city in contexts that traditionally tend to deny them (Tarsi and Vecchiarelli, 2020; Vecchiarelli, 2021).

With respect to this scenario, the role of planning becomes crucial in defining intervention strategies that recognize (and then understand whether it is also possible to legitimize) some of these conditions with the twofold aim of giving dignity to the housing and working dimension of migrants and at the same time to act on the territory through interventions of recovery and redevelopment of abandoned building heritage, reused for social purposes, redefining the central role of the public subject.

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