

Editorial

Migration, agriculture and rurality: dynamics, experiences and policies in Europe

The themes of migration and mobility have become particularly relevant with respect to the analysis of the transformation of rural areas and agriculture in the European context, in the light of demographic and socio-economic dynamics, which have drawn new maps of development, inequalities and disintegration, also with relevant political repercussions (e.g. in terms of the growth of right-wing populist movements), but also of moments of crisis that have imprinted new rhythms to the trends in place and have produced new scenarios. The economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008, the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 and the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 have in fact produced important consequences not only on employment, but also on residential dynamics and mobility, both nationally and in Europe.

In the current phase, despite the tentative of analysis and reflection, we are faced with the real difficulty of deciphering with precision what the post-Covid-19 world will be like and what effects the pandemic crisis will produce on the geographical latitudes and longitudes of territorial mobility. Cersosimo and Nisticò (in this issue), for example, building on the processes of mobility from the urban centres to the rural and mountain areas recorded in Italy during the pandemic, debate the signs of reversal of consolidated migration trends, wondering whether they should be read as temporary phenomena or as indications of a structural crisis of the urban-centric model, both at the cultural-representational level and at the policy level. In Italy, as in other contexts, in-depth research and political-institutional interventions are underway aimed at questioning the changes in rural, peripheral, marginal or internal areas, through different epistemic approaches, starting from the questioning of conventional and unilinear perspectives of development. The cognitive and political challenge is big: this awareness also serves to question us in a new way regarding migration.

Over the last thirty years, the economic restructuring, of the agri-food system in particular, together with geo-political and environmental dynamics (conflicts, climate change and natural disasters, poverty) and migration governance, have contributed to generating the presence of a foreign population with a complex composition, by virtue of differences in nationality, legal-administrative status, gender and class membership, in European territorial contexts that are heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic structure and geographical conformation. The outcomes generated are also different, in terms of mobility patterns, recognition of rights, declination of services, use of resources, conflict or coexistence with the local population, inclusion and exclusion. Emerging critical aspects have certainly contributed to questioning the “rural idyll”, exacerbating existing inequalities or creating new ones, on ethnic-racial basis. The diversity, complexity, multi-functionality, multi-spatiality and multi-dimensionality of the forms of mobility that have taken shape over time, while contradicting the idea of the static nature of rural areas themselves, also highlight their specificities, with respect to migrations.

The academic debate on migration patterns in Southern Europe has found in the analysis of migrants’ work in agriculture an enormous wealth of data and perspectives, useful to understand not only the transformations of social relations, linked to the processes of defamiliarization of agricultural labour and the growth in wage labour in agriculture, but the transformations of the agricultural model itself and the implications for rural territories. Papadopoulos *et al.*, in this issue, present a broad overview of migrant labour in Greek agriculture in the last decades. Pointing out the increasing demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrant waged labour force, the structural causes influencing their entry and permanence in the agricultural sector are also noticed, in particular the important

changes in Greek agriculture, turning to a more intensive and industrial agricultural model.

However, research has shown how the role of migrant labour is also important for the reproduction of family farming, thus forming part of the heterogeneous restructuring strategies of the European and Mediterranean agriculture. This is what emerges, for example, from the literature on the employment of migrants in the pastoral sector in Euro-Mediterranean countries, which is still an under-researched issue. Facing the challenges of global competition, many pastoral farms have been forced to abandon their herds and those who have remained have had to review their practices, turning to an intensification of flocks. Analysing these changes, in this special issue, Nori points out that although pastoralism is increasingly appreciated by society for the products and eco-systemic services it provides, it is less and less practiced by European native populations, while the contribution of migrants plays an increasingly strategic role in the survival of pastoral enterprises.

Although limited in number, migrant employment models in the agricultural sector evaluated positively exist. Marongiu, in this issue, describes the model of governance adopted in the Autonomous Province of Trento to manage the employment of migrants in the agricultural sector. The author, through the analysis of empirical data, highlights how a local regulatory framework has been developed that favours consultation between farmers and local institutions in order to meet the temporarily concentrated demand for labour in Trentino's agriculture while minimizing the use of irregular labour.

Never before migration has posed such a challenge to the European Union (EU) as in the current historical phase, acting as a litmus test of its resilience and internal inequalities. Restrictive policies, increasingly oriented towards tackling the issue of migration in terms of emergency and security, have seen efforts concentrated above all on finding a balance on the age-old issue of responsibility and solidarity in the reception and relocation of migrants between Member States. However, it happened without succeeding in tackling a shared reform of the Dublin Regulation (signed in 1990, but entered into force in 1997, and amended in 2003 and 2013) – that regulates the matter of the system of reception and asylum requests within the European Union, establishing the criterion of the first country of entry into the Union, as responsible for the examination of the asylum request – and in adopting a structural criterion to share the responsibilities related to the reception of migrants. Each Member state, in fact, has stuck to its own positions, which are conditioned, in turn,

by the number of kilometres separating them from the ports of entry used by migrants to land in Europe. Thus, three blocks were defined: the Member States of Central and Northern Europe, interested in governing – with fluctuating applications of the principle of solidarity – the quotas for relocating migrants; the countries of the South (Greece, Italy and Spain) focused on facing and managing landings and first reception; the countries of the Visegrad bloc (Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary), which is distinguished by its closed positions both in terms of relocations (by appealing to the “principle of voluntariness” agreed upon in 2020 by the Council of Europe) and in terms of the management of arrivals and first reception (symbolized by the Hungarian government's erection of fences on its borders).

In fact, the focus of EU Institutions on emergency management has conditioned the lack of a clear and operational stance on the role of migration in the European economic and social future. Among others, the contribution of foreign immigration to a demographic refill, to halting demographic decline or to revitalizing rural areas is the subject of several studies. This issue, which has already been included in the debate on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), although mentioned, remains overlooked in the “New Pact on Migration and Asylum” (COM(2020) 609) adopted by the European Commission, which results still unbalanced in favour of instruments to strengthen the migration management system (a better balance between solidarity and responsibility, respect for fundamental rights, reduction of migration flows by strengthening partnerships with countries of origin, organized returns), rather than laying the foundations for the adoption of a long-term strategy that considers migration, not only in utilitarian terms, as a “resource”, but even more as a real opportunity for innovation and regeneration of territories.

The reconfiguration of social practices in rural contexts involved in migration dynamics is analysed by Urso, in this special issue. Through the study of two experiences in Southern Italy, the author investigates the impact that the foreign presence has had in the socio-economic regeneration of rural communities and in the readjustment of services and relations through processes of social innovation. However, she questions the sustainability of the cultural changes brought about by immigration in marginal rural contexts, characterized by the lack of consolidated social infrastructures and considering the important role of public funding.

Social inclusion of migrants is instead mentioned in the “Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027” (COM(2020) 758 final), adopted by the Euro-

pean Commission in November 2020 and considered, by the latter, as a component “of the comprehensive response to address migration challenges proposed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum” (EC, 2020b). The Action Plan, in addition to identifying the priority areas of action for the inclusion of migrants (education and training, work and skills, health, housing), also indicates, for the multiannual financial framework 2021-2027, the Funds that will be called to support, in whole or in part, the interventions for economic and social inclusion, inviting Member States to make full use of the financial resources available. Thus, reference is made to the new Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF), mainly to support measures to be implemented in the early stages of integration; integration into the labour market and social inclusion of migrants is instead covered by the renewed European Social Fund Plus - ESF+ (thematic concentration that will absorb 5% of the total budget of the Fund); the European Regional Development Fund - ERDF will promote inclusion through support for infrastructure, equipment and access to services in the areas of education, employment, housing, social, health and childcare. Furthermore, in areas relevant for inclusion, investments from the three Funds should be complementary and work in synergy with other EU funds and programs, such as Erasmus+ and the Plan for Recovery and Resilience. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) is also called upon to contribute, supporting the integration of migrants under the “priority 6 Striving for social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas” and also using the Leader (participatory local development) approach. The EAFRD Fund is particularly important as it calls on the Managing Authorities of the Rural Development Programs to take responsibility for the measures of the Plans, also in relation to overcoming the distortions that still characterize the employment of migrants in many rural areas, especially in the agri-food sector. However, to date these tools have been scarcely used in the Italian context, unlike in other member States (such as Austria or Sweden).

Beni *et al.* in this special issue, illustrate the results of some training courses in agriculture carried out in the Lazio region in Italy, through a project financed by ESF funds, aimed at offering rehabilitation and work opportunities to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. The courses were characterized by the active participation of ten farms located in the different provinces of Lazio. The added value of the contribution is not simply in the presentation of the training results achieved by the courses, but in the account for the occupational outlets for the participants by applying a longitudinal analysis.

In addition, it is important to point out how the debate on the conditions of exploitation of migrant workers has finally been included in the CAP reform process, by virtue of the position adopted by the European Parliament to make CAP direct payments conditional on respect for the applicable working and employment conditions under relevant collective agreements, national and EU law as well as ILO conventions, and not just for basic environmental standards, public health and animal welfare. The conditionality would cover various areas such as declared employment, equal treatment, remuneration, working time, health and safety, housing, gender equality, social security and fair conditions for all workers employed in agriculture, including mobile and migrant laborers. A part from the ethical aspects it is important to consider social dumping effects, and to ensure that the CAP can protect all those farmers who do respect workers' rights, but suffer unfair competition from those that do not.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the role of migrant workers as “essential workers” – an important and growing share of the EU's 10 million agricultural workers in the European agri-food – as fully recognized by European Institutions and Member States. However, many of them are vulnerable to exploitation, modern-day slavery, and health emergency. Most work under precarious conditions, as seasonal workers, day labourers or in other insecure statuses.

The reforms in the perspective of ecological transition and digitalization, in the framework of the “European Green Deal” (COM(2019) 640 final) stated as the new model for economic growth of the European Union, lead to questioning the future of work in agriculture and therefore also the role and condition of migrant workers. In particular, the “From Farm to Fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system” (COM(2020) 381 final) is a key component of the European Green Deal, aiming to make European food as the global standard for sustainability. In this special issue, an original way, Alarcon reframes the debate on the agrarian question, in the light of the official discourses on rural development, the changes resulting from the increasing use of digital technologies in agriculture, and the employment prospects of migrants in the Uppsala region, Sweden. This is a hitherto under-researched issue, which adds complexity and broadens the scope of observation to the studies carried out so far – especially in Southern Europe – on the use of low-cost migrant labour to ensure the competitiveness of agricultural production. The author specifically analyses the role of agricultural automation and digitalization in the changing processes of local agricultural models, focusing on

why and how it has become a barrier to the integration of migrants in Uppsala – by requiring the use of highly skilled labour.

Uncertainty about the effects of the pandemic crisis on the employment of migrants in agriculture and rural areas runs through the contributions in this special issue of REA. It is difficult to make predictions about how the post-pandemic period will unfold: what kind of society will take hold in Europe? A society that is more open, supportive, and welcoming, or one that is increasingly inward-looking? And above all, will the European Union succeed in adopting a clear and shared strategy for the inclusion of migrants? The signals from some political and technical initiatives of the European Union seem promising, even if scepticism and doubts about the possibility to turn statements of principle in actions are hard to overcome. The battle will especially be played out at national level, in translating the European Institutions' plans into operational programs and measures aimed at integrating migrants and adopting equal treatment in economic terms and in terms of civil rights to that enjoyed by European workers and citizens, and at supporting the innovative drive that could descending for rural areas.

Socio-economic research is focusing on different aspects related to migrations in rural areas: this special issue is proof of this. However, at a time of unprecedented mobilization of public resources, this research should be strengthened, also by adopting a European comparative perspective. Moreover, the resulting body of knowledge would support policy makers in the design of tools for the governance of migrations in rural areas in order to promote social inclusion, rural revitalization, and human and workers' rights.

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