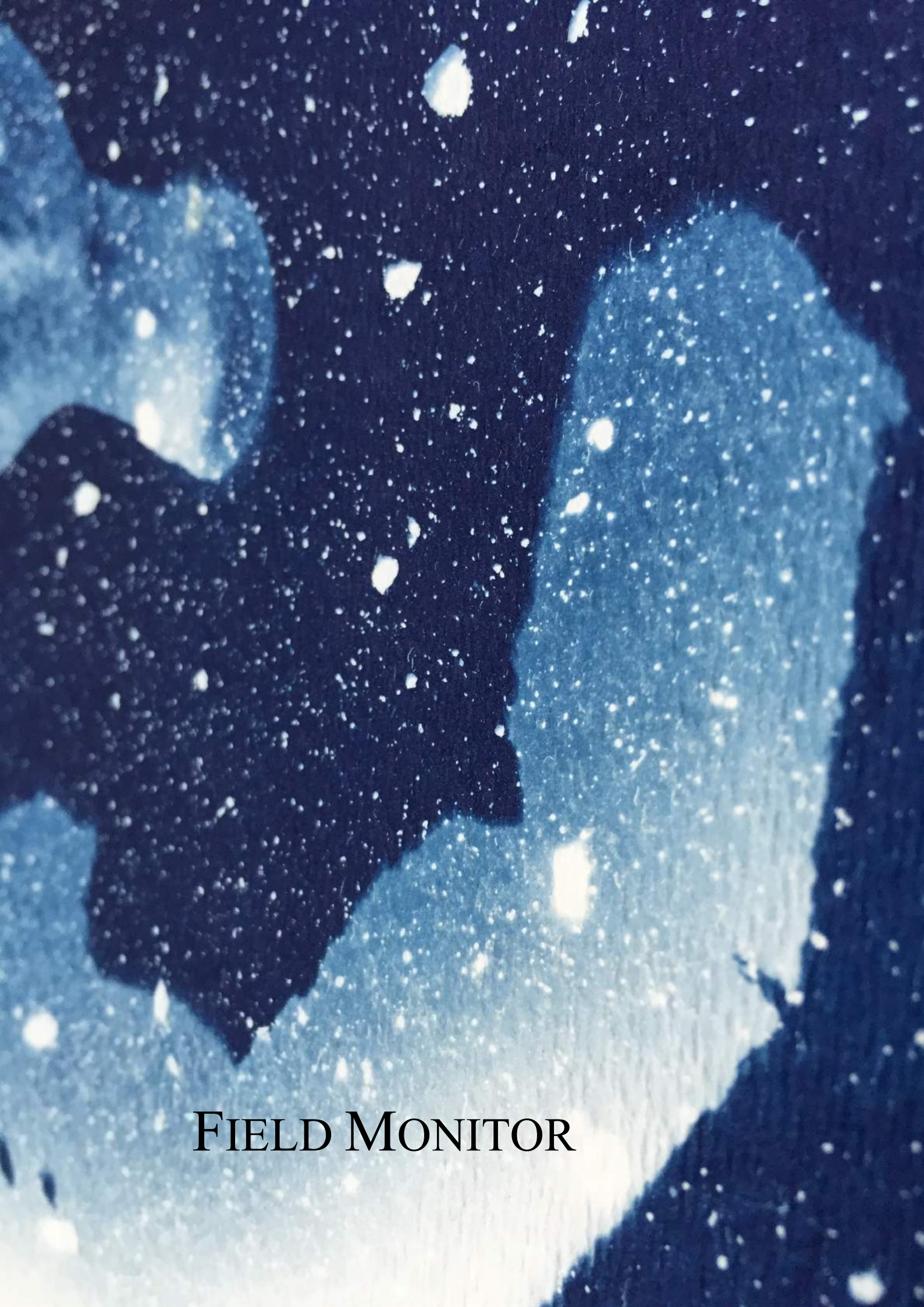




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The Italian reception system in the context of southern Sicily

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Is there a way to more effectively receive the thousands of migrants reaching Europe every day? This article shows how Europe's main arrival point in Italy is coping with the reception of migrants. Based on my observations during six months of work experience in a refugee centre in Vittoria, southern Sicily, I analyse the outcomes of reception and integration policies developed by the Italian government. This analysis demonstrates that, although some fundamental concerns still need to be addressed, asylum seekers can experience effective "local settlement" even in a poor region such as Sicily.

The Italian reception system

Since 2001 Italy has developed a unique system for the reception of migrants based on a national "burden sharing" strategy between central government and local authorities. This has resulted in a smarter distribution of migration management.

This system is defined as an "integrated reception" programme, linking reception of migrants with temporary integration. According to this programme, the reception process is not just temporary support whilst an individual's legal status is being determined; it is also an opportunity to equip migrants with skills and knowledge needed for long-term, "self-sufficient" integration.⁵

Every year the Ministry of the Interior publishes a call for tenders open to local municipalities. If a municipality is able to provide adequate facilities, personnel, and basic activities to facilitate migrants' social inclusion, they receive funding to open a reception centre. Each centre is run by the local municipality under the supervision of the central government.

Based on the main Italian law referring to integration, De Rita (2014) defines integration as a mix of "five pillars": "work, housing, schooling, training and social services".⁶ The main aims of the "integrated reception" programme are based on these five pillars, but only during the period in which migrants await the assessment of their legal status. Below I evaluate the programme according to the five pillars. I argue that the temporary character of the

⁵ For a complete definition of the reception system please refer to the "History" section of the website www.sprar.it.

⁶ Article 42 of the "Testo Unico sull'Immigrazione": "The State, regions, local municipalities, in collaboration with civil society association and the authorities of the countries of origin, favour the integration of the regular immigrants throughout programmes that: provide information about integration opportunities and rights or about the resettlement in the country of origin; promote linguistic, civic and professional education; favour the inclusion in the job market."

Part of the speech at the 5th ministerial conference "Migration and Integration: a global approach to human mobility. A well-managed migration for a better integration" held in November 2014, Milan

programme, coupled with a lack of structured follow-up policies, more accurately reflects concepts of “local settlement” (Da Costa 2006; Crisp 2004), “social inclusion” (Joppke, 2007) and “self-reliance” (Joppke, Crisp) than concepts of local integration.⁷

The case of Vittoria, southern Sicily

I work as a volunteer in a reception centre in Vittoria, a town of 60,000 inhabitants in Ragusa province, Southern Sicily, one of the main landing point for migrants who survive the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. The town is accustomed to the presence of migrants. Tunisians and Romanians came here to work in the agricultural sector many years ago and they are now part of the local society. The centre is run by the Evangelical Church and is a shelter for the elderly. Last year the Evangelical Church agreed to become part of the integrated reception programme, offering the shelter’s space and personnel support to migrants.

In the centre, basic services such as housing and language tuition (two of the five “pillars”) are offered freely. However, the most important activities relate to social participation. Migrants go into local schools and share their stories, giving students a first-hand experience of the journey they have gone through to reach Italy. Migrants are also invited to develop skills in music, sports or drama with local people. In Vittoria it is not unusual to see music shows with Gambians playing djembe or Nigerians rapping alongside Italian musicians. Participation in local social activities, such as beach cleaning, marathons, and cooking classes, is also common.

From a legal perspective, the centre’s partner association is in charge of managing files for each migrant. Partner associations provide legal support to obtain documentation required to live in Italy, including I.D. and medical cards, and a residence permit. One of the most important duties of this association is to give migrants information about their status determination interview. This is a direct interview with the migrant, who has to show the reasons for their application, in order to establish whether they can be considered in need of international protection according to the Geneva Convention, international law, and Italian legislation.

Progress towards the five pillars

Among the migrants whom I interviewed, impressions of the “integrated reception” programme were mixed. On one hand, migrants feel that the centre’s personnel are welcoming and treat them well, that the accommodation is comfortable, the food is good, and they appreciate that there is a television room and an internet connection. In addition, the centre witnesses peaceful cohabitation between the various residents. Pakistanis, Afghans, Nigerians, Gambians and Ivorians live together without incident, despite the notable cultural and linguistic differences between them. A final positive aspect of cohabitation is specific to the Vittoria centre, as this facility acts as both a shelter for the elderly and a reception centre. To a great extent, older residents have engaged positively with their new young African and Asian neighbours. It is a daily routine to witness a 65-year-old woman teaching Italian to two Pakistanis in their twenties, or to see a 20-year-old Senegalese man hugging a 70-year-old

⁷ Local settlement is defined by Crisp and Da Costa as “a temporary phase during which refugees are allowed to become self-reliant until they can voluntarily repatriate.” This differs from the concept of local integration, which is defined as a long-term process leading towards permanent residency in the host country and eventually to citizenship.

Italian man sitting in the garden. This kind of exchange might be very useful for the social inclusion of young people. Listening to stories and sharing experiences with elderly people is one of the fastest ways to learn the culture and history of a country.⁸ Finally, migrants' responses to language courses have been very positive. Almost every person who attends classes learns their chosen language effectively, and this has a strong impact on social inclusion. Referring back to De Rita's five pillars, I suggest that two have been implemented effectively: housing and schooling.

Areas to be addressed

On the other hand, it is clear that implementation of the pillars of work and social services is ineffective, and there is a total absence of training. The main problems I observed are the lack of available jobs and the slow procedures for obtaining legal documents, which are ironically two of the most significant features of integration for the EU (Council of the European Union, 2015). The main economic activity in Vittoria is agriculture, and both skilled and unskilled migrants often work in this sector, harvesting and building greenhouses, which are abundant in this area. These jobs are often seasonal and irregular, and thus this cannot be considered a long-term employment option for migrants' integration. This lack of opportunity often pushes people to go elsewhere to find a job (Korac, 2003).

The most critical social services provided are legal and administrative assistance. The waiting period for a status determination interview varies from six months to two years, and the time needed to obtain other documents such as I.D. or residence permit is the same or longer.⁹ In addition, under Italian law, a newly arrived undocumented migrant cannot work for the first six months after their arrival. All these bureaucratic hurdles result in uncertainty and frustration among migrants. There have been public protests on this issue nationwide and my personal experience suggests that these inefficiencies are the main causes of irritability and depression inside the centre, particularly among the youngest migrants.¹⁰

One final remark concerns the training of the centres' personnel. In the centre where I work, no staff member had ever worked with migrants before their current position and they are still training to cope with this context. No staff can speak English, despite the fact that minimum language requirements for work in this context include a basic level of English or French, if not Arabic.

Recommendations and conclusion

My experience of the Vittoria reception centre suggests that the government's integrated reception programme should be viewed as a major step forward, compared to the total absence of reception programmes in the past (Guolo, 2009). However, many actions have to be taken for the system to be truly effective in achieving temporary social inclusion.

First, there should be more structured programmes for job training. One of the aims of the system is to help migrants achieve independence by finding sustainable employment, but in reality very little is happening to ensure this. For example, there could be a network of small

⁸ For further reading on the benefits of intergenerational exchange in promoting local integration, see Kessler-staudinger (2007) "Intergenerational Potential: Effects of Social Interaction Between Older Adults and Adolescents"; Esser (2003) "Does the new immigration require a new theory of intergenerational integration?"

⁹ This document enables to work and live regularly in Italy

¹⁰ *Riot police confront protesting refugees in Milan*, Al Jazeera, 24 Aug 2015 (online). Available from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/riot-police-confront-hundreds-refugees-milan-150824143738710.html>

local businesses, supported by central state funding to take one or two migrants each and provide training and employment.

The state, together with local authorities, should also focus more on the training of migrants, which is currently altogether missing from the response to migrants. There is a whole network of cooperatives in Italy that aim to train the most marginal social groups, including migrants (Nardella, 2013; Campomori & Mottura, 2006). Stronger ties with these networks should be developed by state actors.

Second, the procedures for the release of legal documents should be quicker and should be standardised across the country to avoid the discrepancies witnessed in Sicily where one can wait for two months to a year to obtain the same document depending on the area where the migrant lives.

These two aspects are the main reasons why asylum seekers see Italy as a temporary stop towards northern Europe: they find themselves stuck in limbo, which may take years to end, and in many cases their asylum claims are unsuccessful.

Finally, a big step forward would be to strengthen the knowledge and skills of reception centre personnel. A deeper assessment of language skills and expertise among staff, combined with training where required, would improve the social inclusion of migrants. Staff's inability to communicate and lack of knowledge about different cultures and social contexts has been one of the main causes of misunderstandings in many of the centres.

If these steps are taken, then this model of an "integrated reception" system could become pivotal in Europe as a whole, and could allow Italy to successfully face the challenge of mass arrivals on a long term basis. If not, migrants will continue to try and reach other countries and consider Italy only a temporary stop, breaking the ties between reception and integration that these policies seek to establish.

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