

MARTINA MANARA, Never Settled. The Informal Refugee Settlement of Borgo Mezzanone and its Effects on Asylum Seekers in the Reception Centre

The runway is an informal settlement next to the reception centre of Borgo Mezzanone in southern Italy. It results from temporary and permanent strategies of self-help housing and it is the place of an active informal economy. This paper shows that the runway has a crucial role for asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrants, which extends beyond the local area. In fact, the runway offers opportunities for resilience to migrants who could not settle successfully in other parts of the country. Moreover, the runway considerably affects the lives of asylum seekers living in the reception centre.

Directives by the European Union and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2015) have called for a shift in the Italian system of secondary reception, which follows the stay of entrants in first aid camps. They advocate the substitution of large-scale reception centres (CARA - *Centro di Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo*) for a system of dispersed reception. There are still fourteen medium and large-scale structures currently operating in secondary reception. Here entrants undergo the mandatory bureaucratic procedures concerning identification and the assembling of asylum claims. According to domestic law, asylum seekers must wait for a period of a maximum thirty-five days before receiving a temporary permit to stay. In practice, due to bureaucratic delays, their stay may last between one and two years (Bonzano and Pupolizio 2014).

The CARA of Borgo Mezzanone is situated in Puglia in southern Italy. It is close to a rural village, with the nearest urban centre being Foggia, 20 kilometres away. The CARA was erected from 2005 to 2010, through the conversion of a former military base, as it is typical of most camps (Diken 2004). Additionally, an informal settlement, called *runway*, exists outside the centre. It is composed of containers and prefabricated shelters, which were installed in 1999 on the runway of the former military base to host refugees fleeing Kosovo (Campesi 2014).

I visited the CARA in June 2015 and interviewed its director as part of a larger research project investigating systems of refugee reception in the Province of Foggia. The authorization process to enter the structure was troublesome; eventually, I was admitted to interview the director, while being strictly forbidden to speak with asylum seekers. I accessed those unofficially in the *runway*, where I conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews over a period of two months.

The Runway

Since March 2014, the CARA has been managed by the organisation Senis Hospes. It has a recognised capacity of 627, while during my visit it was hosting 636 individuals formally. Additionally, an indefinite number of migrants occupy the CARA informally. Also the *runway* hosts a flexible population, varying from five hundred people in wintertime to one thousand during summer. Here, I observed three categories of occupiers.

First, there are refugees and holders of humanitarian protection awaiting the issuance of documents; usually the renewal of their permits to stay in the country. Applicants need to get back to the local *Questura* (provincial police headquarters), which first issued their papers, if they have not acquired legal residence elsewhere in the country. In Foggia, bureaucracy is often inefficient, causing long and repeated delays for several months. Many applicants

cannot afford to rent a house during that period. For them, the *runway* becomes a space where they can wait for the issuance of documents without incurring living expenses.

Second, there are regular and irregular migrants who settled in the *runway* permanently, after failing to settle in other regions of Italy or Europe. Permanent squatters are generally easy to identify: their housing units have been refurbished over the years (e.g. with air conditioning systems); and they are key figures in the migrant community enjoying a relatively high economic stability. They may run small businesses including shops providing services such as bike repairs and hairdressing. Alternatively, they work as *capo-negri* (literally: black chiefs) operating as an intermediary for Italian bosses by recruiting illegal workforces among migrants in the runway and asylum seekers in the CARA.

Third, especially between May and September, some temporary squatters move into the *runway* to work throughout the agriculture season as tomato pickers. Temporary squatters are the largest group in the settlement and they mainly comprise of refugees, regular and irregular migrants who never integrated into the formal labour market. They constitute a mobile workforce migrating across different regions of Italy according to the employment needs of local productions. Temporary squatters usually occupy overcrowded prefabricated shelters and live in poor and precarious conditions. Households are formed according to criteria such as the country of origin or the language spoken.

Impacts on CARA

The CARA of Borgo Mezzanone can be considered an open camp (Guild 2005). Contrary to some literature on European reception centres (Korac 2003; Szczepanikova 2012), I found that asylum seekers in CARA have free agency because the imposed regulations are minor. There are few restrictions addressing the entering and exiting of the centre, so asylum seekers are able to access the *runway* on a regular base.

The *runway* provides asylum seekers with basic goods and the means to improve their material condition. Asylum seekers in CARA complain that the food supplied is scarce, poor and with little variation. In fact, the diet is repeated weekly and does not include traditional meals, which is especially unbearable to those staying for long periods. Another common complaint concerns their clothing. Many asylum seekers in CARA receive a one-off supply of equipment when they arrive, which has to cover winter and summer seasons. Therefore, shops and informal businesses in the *runway* supply goods responding to the material needs of asylum seekers in CARA. Here, they may exchange telephone top-ups and cigarettes for ethnic food, clothes as well access services like shoe repairs.

For asylum seekers in CARA, the *runway* also represents a source of information and emotional support. Some literature argues that social networks with people of similar background are essential for practical assistance and psychological recovery (Atfield et al. 2007). Often asylum seekers in CARA have little information about local services of reception, asylum law, and the status of their legal procedure. This is due to several factors: the overcrowding of CARA, issues of distrust between humanitarian operators and asylum seekers, and linguistic barriers (many operators are incompetent in English, French or Arabic). Thus, a refugee community in the *runway* with some previous experience of asylum law and bureaucracy is an essential source of information and advice.

On the negative side, the presence of an active community in the *runway* may increase the isolation of asylum seekers in CARA from the Italian population. In fact, asylum seekers

spend most of their time in the immediate surroundings of the CARA. As in most camps and reception centres (Rahola 2005; Szczepanikova 2012), there is a tendency towards voluntary confinement, which especially progresses the longer a refugee stays. Economic restrictions prevent refugees from many activities in the city. Further, refugees report difficulties in interacting with the local population. Certainly, the *runway* provides a range of services and entertainment activities that reduce the need to interact with the nearby city and its local community. There were for instance two Mosques, a 'pub', a 'disco' at the time of my visit.

Yet, the runway provides alternatives to the integration of asylum seekers into formal opportunities for education and training. Many choose to enter the seasonal agriculture labour force as a temporary solution to make a small living and save money to fund their journey toward other regions of Italy or Europe. However, there is a high risk that asylum seekers will not exit this kind of informal and insecure labour market, where workers are hired daily, payments are exploitative, and injuries occur frequently. This risk is particularly high in the area of Foggia where, given the state of the local labour market, opportunities for education, training and inclusion into the formal economy are rare.

Conclusions

The *runway* has a crucial role for migrants, which extends beyond the local area. It offers opportunities for resilience to those who could not settle successfully in other parts of the country. Moreover, the *runway* considerably affects the lives of asylum seekers in CARA. On the positive side, it is an essential source of material and emotional support as well as informational support. Alternatively, it hinders the progress of asylum seekers towards social and economic integration in the host territory. The runway can be seen as the product of adaptive responses to the inefficiencies of the Italian system of reception.

Recommendations

My recommendations are the following:

First, continual monitoring of CARA, rather than sporadic visits, by government and UNCHR representatives would prevent asylum seekers from seeking self-help solutions relative to food and equipment.

Second, there should be improvements to the systems of communication and information in CARA. For example, all operators should be competent in English, French or Arabic, and have some basic knowledge of asylum law.

Last, local authorities should recognize the existence of the *runway* and ensure that minimum living standards are met through providing basic services and waste management. Equally, it is important to raise public awareness on the local *agromafia* (literally: agricultural mafia), which extracts enormous profits by exploiting asylum seekers and other forced migrants living in CARA and in the *runway*.

More broadly, asylum seekers should not be allocated to areas suffering from multiple deprivations, where opportunities for social and economic integration are scarce, if not absent. When placed in such dire locations, asylum seekers respond with bottom-up strategies of self- help. However, these strategies may force asylum seekers to be relegated into the informal settlements and the informal economy permanently.

Martina Manara is an Italian national who holds a Masters Degree in Regional and Urban Planning Studies from the London School of Economics. Her dissertation analysed the Italian

systems of reception. Martina is co-founder of HI HERE, a project assisting refugees in Italy towards psychological recovery, empowerment and integration (www.hihere.eu).

Bibliography

ATFIELD, G., BRAHMBHATT, K. and O'TOOLE, T. (2007) *Refugees' Experiences of Integration*, Birmingham, Refugee Council and University of Birmingham.

BONZANO, L. and PUPOLIZIO, I. (2014) 'Tra accoglienza e integrazione. Il Sistema di protezione dei richiedenti asilo e dei rifugiati in Puglia', PANNARALE, L. ed. *Paesaggi di Frontiera. Osservatorio sulla detenzione amministrativa degli immigrati e l'accoglienza dei richiedenti asilo in Puglia*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 73-110.

CAMPESI, G. (2014) 'Confinati sulla soglia. Etnografia dei centri per richiedenti asilo in Puglia', PANNARALE, L. ed. *Paesaggi di Frontiera. Osservatorio sulla detenzione amministrativa degli immigrati e l'accoglienza dei richiedenti asilo in Puglia*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 37-72.

DIKEN, B. (2004) 'From refugee camps to gated communities: biopolitics and the end of the city', *Citizenship Studies* 8(1): 83-106.

GUILD, E. (2005) 'A typology of different types of centres for third country nationals in Europe', European Parliament Briefing Paper, Brussels, European Parliament. Available from: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2006/378268/IPOL-LIBE_NT\(2006\)378268_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2006/378268/IPOL-LIBE_NT(2006)378268_EN.pdf)

KORAC, M. (2003) 'Integration and How We Facilitate It: A Comparative Study of the Settlement Experiences of Refugees in Italy and the Netherlands', *Sociology* 37(1): 51-68.

RAHOLA, F. (2005) 'Rappresentare gli "spazi del fuori". Note per un'etnografia dei campi profughi', *Antropologia*, 5: 67-83.

SZCZEPANIKOVA, A. (2012) 'Between Control and Assistance: The Problem of European Accommodation Centres for Asylum Seekers', *International Migration*, 51(4): 130-143.

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES - UNHCR (2015) *Nota UNHCR sul recepimento delle Direttive 2013/32/UE del Parlamento Europeo e del Consiglio del 26 giugno 2013, recante procedure comuni ai fini del riconoscimento dello status di protezione internazionale (rifusione) e 2013/33/UE del Parlamento Europeo e del Consiglio del 26 giugno 2013 recante norme relative all'accoglienza dei richiedenti protezione internazionale (rifusione)*. Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5519068a4.html>