

# Post-migration living difficulties in Italy

## From first reception centres to squats

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### Abstract

In January 2018 I was assigned by Médecins du Monde to a new and challenging project in Rome, which, like all capitals, is one of the main points of arrival or transit for migrants landing in the south of Italy. This means it has one of the highest numbers of migrants of any city in the country. The focus of the intervention, which will last 26 months, has been the improvement of the access to healthcare for migrants living in Rome in several types of settlements by strengthening public services capacities and through the empowerment of migrants and people in the community.

In order to present both the positive aspects of the work that has been carried out by the civil society, and the daily difficulties, which arise in dealing with an unprepared system and an unfriendly environment, this paper will describe the chaos of the welcoming system in the area where I worked, and how it affected migrants' lives throughout the years.

La modernità ha a che fare con la bellezza, la pulizia e l'ordine. Ordine che per essere creato e mantenuto richiede regole che limitano la libertà del singolo. Ecco il disagio: ordine = sicurezza, ma sicurezza significa limiti precisi. L'impresa della costruzione dell'ordine diventa allora una guerra di logoramento dichiarata contro gli stranieri e tutto quello che é anomalo<sup>1</sup>.

Marco Aime – Eccessi di Culture (2004)

## Introduction

In 2016, 387,895 people crossed the Mediterranean, according to UNHCR. Of these, 181,000 landed in Italy. Due to the security-driven approaches put in place by European countries collaborating with Libya, the number of migrants decreased in 2017 and only 119,369 people arrived in Italy (Paravicini 2017). In 2018, 27,370 people arrived both from Libya and from Tunisia (Ministero dell'Interno 2018). Since the beginning of the year 2019, 3,896 migrants have arrived in Italy. The number of arrivals decreased by 80% compared to 2018. It is only in the month of June and July 2019 that more than 2,300 migrants arrived in Italy. Sea arrivals by gender and age are characterised mainly by men (76%), followed by unaccompanied and separated children (13%), women (7%) and accompanied children (4%). The most common sea arrivals nationalities in Italy are now people from Tunisia (23%), Pakistan (16%), Ivory Coast (11%), Algeria (9%), Iraq (8%), Bangladesh (5%) and Sudan (5%). An estimated 953 people have died or gone missing while trying to reach Europe by sea until September 2019 (IOM 2019).

Keeping all the aforementioned in mind, we must not forget that even if the number of arrivals decreased, 102,402 migrants are currently in the reception facilities in Italy as of August 15<sup>th</sup>, of which only about 25,132 are in SPRAR (Ministero dell'Interno 2018).

On June 11<sup>th</sup> 2019, the Italian government approved a new security decree that can fine NGOs rescue boats bringing migrants to Italy without permission up to 50,000Euro. This new decree follows another controversial immigration and security decree, D.L. 113/2018, approved by the Italian parliament in December 2018 (GU 2018). Indeed, it reinforces once again the powers of the Ministry of the Interior on migration issues, aims to put an end to NGOs rescue missions in the central Mediterranean, and changes enormously the asylum procedures in Italy (Tondo 2019). Notwithstanding the high number of migrants, many reception centres, including large ones, have closed recently. In fact, following the new law on immigration and security, many restrictions have been introduced, both for access to forms of protection and for the inclusion in the reception system. A study by the ISPI (Italian research institute) has estimated that over the course of 2019 over 180,000 people will suddenly find themselves outside the reception system or illegal (Villa 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from Italian to English: Modernity has to do with beauty, cleanliness and order. Order that to be created and maintained requires rules that limit the freedom of the individual. Here is the discomfort: order = security, but security means precise limits. The order-building feat then becomes a war of attrition declared against foreigners and all that is anomalous.

Some consequences of these regulations/laws are already appearing on the ground. In fact, since the beginning of the year, we have been witnessing an increase of undocumented migrants stuck in the country (Villa M. 2018), Dublined people, evictions from squats and makeshift dwellings, and consequently a deterioration of physical and mental health conditions of migrants affected directly by the new laws (Steel Z., Liddell B. J., Bateman-Steel K., Zwi A. B. 2011). Clearly, we are still dealing with a system based on fragmented legislation layered in a series of laws and decrees, which do not fit the size, uniformity, and articulation needed to cope with the challenge of welcoming, hosting and integrating migrants, asylum seekers and refugees be they adults, minors, female or male within the Italian society. Seeing the current state of affairs, we can understand that the decline did not start suddenly with the change of government elected June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018, but it goes way before that, as for instance with the Turco-Napolitano and Bossi-Fini law on immigration of March 1998 and July 2002 (Scotto 2018, Colucci 2018).

Thus, to set the scene of the argument, it is essential to present first the legal framework of welcoming migrants in Europe. The essay will begin focusing on asylum seekers intending to ask protection in Italy, the very long waiting procedures, and the lack of effective integration phases in order to highlight why some of these migrants end up living in the outskirts of cities squatting in places or living rough on the streets.

Above all, this essay wants to emphasize how, due to inconsistencies, misguided and stereotyped narratives, there has been a strategic and coordinated attack against migrants and those who help and support them. I came to realize that in the past decade, the administrations have been criminalising and vilifying people simply for how they show up in the world and consequently those associations, civil society organizations and individuals who help them. We have no say in where we are born, and the system is criminalising these people for seeking asylum, which is a human right that must be respected always.

## First Médecins du Monde project in Rome: January 2018 to December 2018

Despite the alleged efforts to expand the reception network by the Ministry of Interior with the provision of funds for the opening of new second reception centres (SPRAR), in July 2017, the total number of reception places available at a national level was inadequate to the needs. Indeed 77.4% of migrants were guested in CAS (Extraordinary reception centres) for a longer time than expected (Anci 2017). The lack of places has become even more critical due to the lengthening of the period of stay in the reception structures and the consequent slower turnover of migrants accommodated, caused by at least two factors. On the one hand, the waiting time for the hearing with the territorial Commissions for the recognition of international protection. On the other hand, the running times of the jurisdictional appeals in case of rejection of international protection (Medici sense Frontiere 2016). In some cases, the standards of the services provided are very inadequate to support refugees in the processes of social inclusion, translating into mere welfare and then forcing them, once they have left the centres, to resort to public assistance (UNHCR 2017).

The exclusion from the assistance circuits and accommodation, which puts migrants at risk of serious marginalization, forcing them to look for makeshift housing solutions often in unacceptable living

conditions, started more than decade ago. In fact, in the attempts of migrants to leave Italy in order to reach other European countries, a growing number of applicants for and beneficiaries of international protection are forced to live for years in precarious and spontaneous settlements (Mendola, Busetta 2018). In most informal and makeshift settlements, there are foreign nationals with different juridical status, a common feature is that most of the people living in these places are people who escaped from wars or famines, travelled for better access to basic human rights, and have often been tortured and abused (Mendola, Busetta 2018). Any type of structured intervention by the institutional subjects is absent and the primary assistance activities are delegated to humanitarian and voluntary organizations. This feeds the inhabitants an attitude of distrust towards institutions that, in a vicious circle, accentuates the tendency to self-ghettoization. To these are added many migrants returning to Italy after trying to reach Northern European countries. The majority of those who tried to reach illegally another European state were brought back to Italy under Dublin (EC 1990), and now they are in a situation of extreme marginalization because Italy does not have a plan of reintegration into the circuits of reception and of assistance for these cases (Brekke, Brochmann 2014).

At least 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees in Italy live outside the reception system, in conditions of precariousness and marginality, without any institutional assistance and with scarce access to medical care, in dozens of informal sites that spontaneously sprang up along the peninsula. This is reported by the MSF report "Out of the field. Asylum seekers and refugees in Italy: informal settlements and social marginality (2018). Rome, like all capitals, is one of the main point of arrival or transit for migrants landing in the south of Italy, making it reach a number of presence among the highest in the country. Except for hotspots, the capital is crossed naturally by all the different types of reception centres with over 9,000 people in first and secondary reception centres as of August 2019. As reported by the "Report sulla povertà a Roma" (Caritas 2019), housing is one of the most critical points for all the vulnerable groups living in the capital city, so much so that the phenomenon of abusive occupations of buildings or apartments is extremely widespread, constituting a very particular case on the national territory. As reported by the prefecture of Rome, in the capital there are 82 occupied buildings both Italian and migrant's Informal settlement are present throughout the city and consist of temporary camps (i.e. tents, substations), occupied buildings and apartments (Prefettura di Roma 2019). The latest estimates count about 11.000 people living in this situation (Caritas 2018).

Reading all the above mentioned, Rome seemed the right city where I could continue my personal journey inside Italy. Quoting Mark Twain, I catch the trade winds in my sails to explore, dream and discover (Mark Twain). Médecins du Monde after an interview with human resources identified me as the right person to manage the new project in the Italian capital called "Improving access to healthcare services for migrants and refugees in Rome" with a particular attention on those living in informal settlements. The focus of the intervention, which will last 26 months, is addressing mainly the key barriers hindering migrant's access to health services, mental health and psychosocial issues while improving the access to prevention knowledge with health education groups on SRH and addictions such as substances abuse and gambling through a rights- and community-based approach. At the same time, the focus is also on strengthening local actors', such as civil society, community leaders, and public health services, capacities and accountability to respond better to migrants needs enhancing and reinforcing their skills and knowledge to deal more efficiently with them.

For the project purpose, two informal settlements have been chosen in Rome. The first is in “Maslax” Square, the name has been chosen in memory of Maslax Mohammed, a young Somali that in 2017 committed suicide due to the myopia and the cynicism of European migration policies (Camilli 2017). This is an informal settlement in the form of tents and shacks run by a group of volunteers from an association called “Baobab Experience”. The camp is situated at the back of Tiburtina train station, which has been chosen as train stations are places where people come and go, but above all next to it there is the bus station, which is the easiest way for irregular migrants to travel around Italy<sup>2</sup>. When we first arrived at the camp there were around 300 people including transiting people, homeless, Dublin cases and migrants who lost their accommodation in reception centres. Most of them are from North Africa, West Africa and the Horn of Africa. Even though the number of people decreased in the last nine months due to the clearing out of the camp (Camilli 2018), there is still a high suffering within the population of exiled living in the street and the extreme social and administrative uncertainty, the long waiting in Italy and the new migration laws, simply aggravate their mental health. The second one is “Selam”, a word that means peace in Tigrinya, Arabic and Amharic. It is the biggest squat in Rome occupied mostly by holders of international protection from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. As of today, the 7-floor building hosts around 600 men, women, and children. Originally, the building was part of the University of Tor Vergata in the deprived periphery of Romanina: clearly the structure of the building is not made to host so many people. In 2006 300 asylum seekers and refugees occupied it, and occupying collectively a place as a group without the aid of any activist movements/collective for the house (Movimenti per la casa) is an extremely powerful act of resistance that reflects their need to regain their agency and their rights.

The people living in these settlements encounter a series of post-migration living difficulties, which have a negative impact on their mental health and social integration. Clear examples are delays in processing refugees’ applications, obstacles to employment, poverty, racial discrimination and isolation (Aragona, Pucci, Mazzetti, and Geraci 2012). Most importantly, several reports have highlighted that refugees have been often left to look for solutions on their own. Indeed, after obtaining legal protection, many migrants have been left without a place to go, resulting in a number of individuals being stranded on the road or occupying buildings in urban centres (Belloni 2016). That is why these forms of housing make sense for some migrants, who too often choose it willingly, seeing it as the only way to navigate the new environment (Mendola, Busetta 2018). In fact, they may prefer to live close to their co-nationals even in a marginalized context, creating an interesting mixture of solidarity and inter-ethnic collaboration in the case of Baobab Experience, but also a phenomenon that we could call ethnic self-segregation as in the case of Selam Palace (Belloni 2016).

## Difficulties in improving healthcare and well-being for migrants in squats: look, listen and link

When I entered Selam Palace the first time, my breath stopped for a second; as a Tigrinya speaker, I could communicate directly with a lot of them, yet they struggled in trusting Médecins du Monde and

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<sup>2</sup> To have more information on the association please check their website: <https://baobabexperience.org/presidi/>

consequently me. The same thing happened the first time I set foot in the informal settlement of Baobab Experience.

I kept asking myself why human beings, so similar to me, had to live in such an undignified way, why children should grow up in an unhealthy environment, why after all the troubles they went through passing Libya and crossing the Mediterranean Sea they had to live in a squat. Most importantly, I kept asking myself why there were no other options for them when they first disembarked in Italy.

To elaborate on the difficulties in improving the well-being of migrants in this situation and mental health issues related to migration and their social marginalization, I will first describe our mental health strategy. Then continue explaining how in practice we put it in place, and to conclude, I will describe how the response from public health facilities was inefficient, unfriendly and inadequate.

Since the beginning of this project, my team and I asked ourselves constantly what really the beneficiaries of Médecins du Monde project needed, what we could do to give them what they really need and when. It was only this that allowed us to keep questioning and challenging regularly our ideas while being always reminded of project targets and indicators that needed to be reached. In light of the complexity of the context, we decided to decline the specific objective of the project according to two crucial phases. During the first phase, called pre-contemplation, the context does not present a coherent and clear awareness of the problem, and people may not even see it as such. Establish a good and trustworthy relationship with CSOs members and community members, encourage the skills of volunteers and beneficiaries, promote clear and efficient communication, organize structured information and activities in order to build a safe environment and promote a critical thinking was the main objective of this phase.

This was followed by a second phase, called the contemplation phase, characterized by a taking of awareness both of the problems and of the different unexpressed and dissatisfied needs but which do not determine a concrete capacity for action. It is a very important phase as it is in this stage that individuals are willing to consider the possibility that they have a problem and the possibility offers hope for change. Therefore, indicate specific ways for access to health services, promote learning of skills, encourage integrated approaches and processes of autonomy, rehabilitation and recovery of migratory project, health education sessions in order to stimulate health needs was at the core. Every week we organized health education session and information/orientation sessions on several topics such as dependency, mental health, communicable and non-communicable diseases with groups of migrants in both Selam Palace and Maslax Square. At the same time, we also organized capacity development trainings for Baobab Experience volunteers and constant trainings on the job especially during accompaniment to services such as NHS information point and offices (ASL/CUP), mental health clinics, hospitals and services for people with dependencies (SerD). The main expected results were mostly related to an increase of awareness of needs and communication skills. Result reached when unexpectedly one of the people participating in our health education session told us *"We do not want the fish, we want to learn how to fish"*. In fact, because of the vicious circle of distress and instability the people's capacity of resilience is frequently reduced and their agency is always at risk, but our activities were exactly based on giving back competencies in order to allow them to act directly. Notwithstanding the commitment, too often NGOs and civil society organization endanger the independence and strength of people be they migrants or not.

Despite, our endurance and willingness to improve mental health and wellbeing, we encountered a lot of barriers and obstacles within the Italian system that unfortunately did not allow us to do our job the way we wanted. Indeed, the lack of services focused on the needs of the people no matter their origins or where they lived, the lack of cultural competence approaches and cross-cultural skills of professionals jeopardize the access to the public health services with enormous consequences on migrants' health. The fact that until today public health services treat foreign cases that might have been in Italy for a decade as emergencies is quite alarming. The biggest challenges are related to health policies. In order to understand migrant patients and how they deal with pain and healing processes, transcultural competences are crucial. However, it seems like migration policies as well as health policies are still treating the so-called migration issue as a crisis that will end instead of dealing with it in a more progressive and holistic way and embrace it as part of our history (Tarsitani e Biondi, 2016). One of my colleague once said, "You reach a status of mental health when you realize you have a problem and you are no longer afraid to seek help". I would add that the system has to be ready to be welcoming too. There is still a long road to go in both the informal settlements where Médecins du Monde works and health services in Italy, but there is definitely some hope.

## Concluding remarks: lessons learned

Home is the result of the union of natural and supernatural forces, and represents the continuity of the existence between the public and the private. It is inside one's house that the individual experiences being part of the world, collects memories of the world, and puts them in relation to his own individuality. The house fortifies the identification of ourselves and gives certainty. It reveals itself as matter and colours, as space and light. It actually offers refuge from the external environment. A refuge where the individual collects memories of the world, and puts them in relation to the thing(s) he knows, to the image of the environment that corresponds to the spatial organization familiar to him/her. When you get inside, you are finally home (Essenziale 2016).

In the era of massive migrations, exoduses and exile, people need a place to call home where they do not have to justify their presence or who they are. A place where they belong. For that reason, urban squats and informal settlements, despite divergent interpretation, are a way of meeting a housing need and a way of satisfying the need of community and belonging.

During the three years I spent between Reggio Calabria and Rome, many things have changed in Italy and in Europe. Starting from the governments that from 2016 until today changed three times. From the government run by Prime Minister Gentiloni with Ministry of the Interior Minniti, then Prime Minister Conte with Ministry of the Interior Salvini, and more recently the new government Conte II. No matter the alliances, the first two governments had controversial approaches towards migration stipulating bilateral agreements with countries of transit such as Sudan, Libya and Niger in order to externalize the control of the frontiers as well as hinder irregular migration. Most importantly, the law regulating protection procedures for asylum seekers drastically changed, making it even more difficult for migrants to be granted access to protection and access to health services. These are all further stressors that help transform people full of hope to into invisible people suffering due to the precariousness of the system surrounding them.

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