

FABIO MOSTACCIO*

THE PANDEMIC CONSEQUENCES ON IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN AGRI-FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

SUMMARY: 1. The condition of migrants in Italian agriculture: an overview. – 2. The pandemic impact on agriculture supply chain. – 3. The new Italian policies after pandemic crisis: the big chance. – 4. Closing remarks. – 5. Bibliography.

1. *The condition of migrants in Italian agriculture: an overview*

Although the literature on agri-food supply chains has greatly developed over the last few decades, agriculture studies, at least in the Italian case, remains relatively little explored, also due to the relevant transformations that have affected food production and distribution systems and the consequent territorial, political and environmental implications. Italy, in fact, with a total production value of approximately 55 billion euros and added value equal to 18 per cent of all EU value, is the leading agricultural producer in the European Union.¹ Compared to the labour market, in this sector there has been a steady decrease in employment: it has gone from about 1,4 million in the 1990s to less than 900,000.² At the same time, however, there was an exponential increase in immigrant manpower, largely irregular: although it is arduous to have reliable information about immigrant workers in agriculture, the recent official data confirm that in 2015 approximately 48 per cent of employees (about 405,000 out of a total of 843,000)—came from abroad. “Also, according to 2015 data, some 430,000 workers in this sector (i.e. more than 50 per cent) were employed without an official contract; 80 per cent of these workers, or 344,000, were foreign nationals and some 100,000 were identified as being at high risk of exploitation.”³

The precariousness of these workers promotes widespread illegal practices which, in addition to the absence of a contract, include reduced wages, longer

* Department of Cognitive Science, Education and Cultural Studies (COSPECS), University of Messina.

¹ Corrado, Alessandra, Lo Cascio, Martina, Perrotta, Domenico, “Introduzione. Per un’analisi critica delle filiere e dei sistemi agroalimentari in Italia”, “Meridiana”, n.93, 2018: pp. 9-26.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Corrado, Alessandra, Caruso, Francesco Saverio, Lo Cascio, Martina, Nori, Michele, Triandafyllidou, Anna (eds.), “Is Italian Agriculture a “Pull Factor” for irregular migration – and if so, why?”, European Policy Institute, 2018: p.3.

working days, the exercise of intimidation and violence; these kind of exploitation, widespread, especially in the South, produce dynamics of real slavery⁴ and represent the most effective method for reducing production costs, often favoured by the State absence or its retreatment.⁵ From this point of view, it is interesting what happens in Gioia Tauro plain, in Calabria region: “By analysing this phenomenon more closely it becomes clear that the process, from production to orange consumption, explicitly represents an exploitation supply chain. As a result of their lack of influence in terms of salary and working conditions, the migrant workers in Rosarno, already disadvantaged, are further exploited as a result of the economic difficulties linked to the big price competition of agricultural products (...). So, for a whole day of work in the orange groves, from dawn to dusk, the labourers’ salary ranges from 21 to 25 euros. The attribution of poor pay to immigrants, is a direct consequence of a misrepresented productive supply chain that defines the whole stagnant economic sector⁶”. Similar situations occur in all agricultural production, especially in the tomato supply chains.⁷

For a long time, the policies to fight the exploitation of immigrant workers have been limited to prosecuting criminal organizations, called “caporalato”, which illegally recruiting and managing groups of migrants to be included in the labour market, but these measures that have proved to be rather weak. Only with the law No 199/2016 has an important achievement been made: even entrepreneurs who practice the exploitation of labour can be arrested and their assets can be seized; furthermore, victims can access an assistance system and social inclusion programs; even in this case, however, the law has not always proved effective. “At the local level, the spotlight on exploitation has resulted mainly in the implementation of emergency humanitarian policies rather than in the development of structural policies concerning such issue as recruitment,

⁴ For further details cf. Mostaccio, Fabio, “La guerra delle arance”, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2012; Carchedi, Francesco, Galati, Marina, Saraceni Isabella (eds.), “Lavoro indecente. I braccianti stranieri nella piana lumentina, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2017; Avallone, Gennaro, “Sfruttamento e resistenze. Migrazioni e agricoltura in Europa, Italia, Piana del Sele”, Ombre Corte, Verona, 2017.

⁵ Caruso, Francesco Saverio, “Certificazioni e lavoro nelle filiere agroalimentari. Il caso GlobalGap in Italia”, “Meridiana”, n.93, 2018: pp. 231-250.

⁶ Mostaccio, Fabio, “Changing food supply chains: the role of citizens and civil society organisations in working towards a social economy” in Barbera, Filippo, Jones, Ian (eds.) “The Foundational Economy and Citizenship: Comparative perspectives on civil repair”, Policy Press, Bristol, 2020: p. 216.

⁷ D’Onofrio, Giuseppe, “Firms, labor, migrations and unions within tomato value chain in Southern Italy”, Ledizioni, Milano, 2020.

transportation and housing. For instance, in Rosarno (Calabria), since 2011 the question of housing for seasonal workers has been addressed primarily by creating tent cities far from the urban centres, without transport services, which are under constant police surveillance. These facilities are inadequate for the thousands of workers arriving for the orange-picking season.⁸

Paradoxically, beyond the desperation and the tragedies connected to it, the spread of the pandemic Covid-19 can also represent an important opportunity to produce those policies that the players of the agri-food sector have been waiting for a long time. In this context, the essay aims to analyse these dynamics in an attempt to answer the following question: can coronavirus represent the great opportunity to obtain adequate social and economic recognition for immigrant workers? Or, on the contrary, will this new condition eventually further increase social inequalities?

2. *The pandemic impact on agriculture supply chain*

On March 11th 2020 with these words announced: “WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction. We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic. Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death⁹”. As much as WHO tries to send a reassuring message, this speech inevitably produces a sense of bewilderment and disorientation¹⁰ in the world population. On the same day, a few hours later, after weeks of uncertainty and hesitation from the Italian Government, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte issues the Decree No 64/2020 (known as the “#IoRestoInCasa Decree”) with which it is decided the suspension of retail commercial activities, educational activities, catering services, the prohibition of gatherings in public places or places open to the consumers. A few weeks later, on March 22, 2020, a new, even more restrictive decree will follow, which provides for the closure of those production activities considered non-essential (it will be published a list of all sectors considered strategic for

⁸ Corrado, Alessandra, et al., op. cit., 2018: p.21.

⁹ WHO, 11 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19>.

¹⁰ Migliorati, Lorenzo, “Un sociologo nella zona rossa. Rischio, paura, morte e creatività ai tempi di Covid-19”, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2020.

the Italian economy) and all people are forbidden to move from their residence except for recognised work needs or for extreme urgency reasons: it officially begins in lockdown.

Actually, Italy is the first Western country to undergo with a response to the pandemic and to have to invent a strategy, using all the human and material resources at its disposal.

From an economic point of view, the consequences of the lockdown are huge, especially as regards exports in the food and agricultural products sector, which represents an important item of the state budget: according to Istat data, in 2019 it was recorded a value of 44,57 billion euros, a growth of 5,3% compared to 2018. It is still too early to calculate the damage suffered, but certainly these are enormous losses.¹¹

Surprisingly, Italians respond to this government imposition with great self-discipline and a sense of responsibility: within a few hours they will be able to reorganize their daily lives in light of the new rules.¹²

The instantaneous transformation of lifestyles immediately translated into a change in consumption: in contrast to the general collapse in consumption, food spending record growth of 19% in March, with a peak of 23% for supermarkets, where almost half of purchases took place. The increase in sales is mainly due to two features: the increase in stocks for fear of quarantine and the forced closure of bars, taverns and restaurants.¹³

Coldiretti, the major organization representing agricultural entrepreneurs at national and European level, also declares: "Under pressure is the work of over three million Italians who have been asked to continue operating in the food supply chain, from industrial campaigns to transport, shops and supermarkets, to ensure continuity in the supply of food and drinks to the population¹⁴".

The rapid spread of Covid-19 has brought out all the contradictions typical of advanced economy countries. Thus, some categories of workers considered marginal such as carers, shop assistants, home delivery workers, farm workers, suddenly discover that they are essential and find themselves considered key workers, in the same way as health personnel.

While the majority of Italian workers, quickly followed by European ones,

¹¹ Zollo, Anna, "Import/export, danni economici e possibilità dell'industria alimentare italiana", in Guigioni, Anna, Ferrari, Renato, "Pandemia 2020. La vita quotidiana in Italia con il Covid-19", M&J Publishing House, e-book, 2020.

¹² Perna, Tonino, "Pandeconomia. Le alternative possibili", Castelvechi, Roma, 2020.

¹³ Coldiretti, 14 aprile, 2020, <https://www.coldiretti.it/economia/coronavirus-con-19-ci-bo-salvo-da-crack-consumi>.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

find themselves working from home, in smart working, agricultural labour, mostly immigrants, cannot stop production: even as a result of the increase in demand for agricultural goods, they continue to work in the same unhealthy conditions, forced to live in tent cities and to share putrid spaces lacking sanitation with each other, with the strong risk of transforming these places into coronavirus outbreaks.

In this scenario, the European political establishment, perhaps for the first time, is starting to seriously question the need to find new solutions to a problem that has never really been addressed. The temporary closure of borders, which prevents the mobility of foreign seasonal workers, especially from Eastern Europe, has raised the issue of labour shortages and the risk of loss of food production in many EU countries.¹⁵

In Italy, triggering strong reaction from populist right-wing parties, “Giorgio Gori, the mayor of Bergamo, one of the worst hit cities from coronavirus, has called on the Italian government to speed up the issuing of the yearly decree that regularises non-EU migrant workers, as Italy is in desperate need for agricultural workers before the harvest season begins¹⁶”. Then he has written on twitter: “This year, a lot of regular migrant workers will not come to Italian farms. We need at least 200,000 non-EU workers and we need that the decree is released immediately “.

While the EU is working on a reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) which provides for the recognition of the rights of agricultural workers, many European states have issued temporary measures with the aim of containing the problem. So, Italy, with a government measures, automatically extends for validity until the 15th of June 2020 all expiring residence permits for seasonal work as well.

3. *The new Italian policies after pandemic crisis: the big chance*

The pandemic crisis has led to need to review many of different states and the EU policies that have implemented over the last few decades, rethinking the relationship between state and market. This is immediately evident for some

¹⁵ Palumbo, Letizia, Corrado, Alessandra, “Keeping the Italian agri-food system alive: Migrant farmworkers wanted!”, 29 aprile 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/keeping-italian-agri-food-system-alive-migrant-farmworkers-wanted/>

¹⁶ Fortuna, Gerardo, “Italy looks to non-EU migrants to plug gap in agricultural workforce”, Euractiv.com, 1 April, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/italy-looks-to-non-eu-migrants-plug-gap-in-agricultural-workforce/>

sectors such as health and education, but also for long neglected sectors, especially in Italy, such as agriculture, which acquires a new centrality.

It is in this situation that many of the Italian government choices are implanted, once the lockdown is over, which also mark the gradual reopening of all production activities in the country.

On May 19, 2020, Decree No 34/2020 (known as “Relaunch Decree”) was issued, with which the government authorisations economic aids and policies that will be pursued in order to revive the Italian economy and relaunch the country in the European and international scene.

As regards the agricultural sector, 1,150 billion euros are assigned (destined to: support the agricultural supply chains in crisis; creation of a food emergency fund, to help the food distribution among poor people; facilitate access to credit for agricultural enterprises; compensate for the economic losses of wineries that have had to stop exports; resume the activities of the land reclamation authorities).

With the distribution and use of these funds, the government hopes to have a positive impact on the development of the agri-food system. Beside these measures, temporary forms of social safety nets and support measures for businesses are introduced to reduce the risk of contagion in the workplace.

As regards the protection of workers, the main measure envisaged concerns the regularization of employment relationships: from 1 June, employers will be able to submit a request to INPS (the Italian Social Security Service) to close an employment contract with citizens foreigners present on the national territory or to declare the existence of an irregular employment relationship, still in progress, with Italian or foreign citizens.

Moreover, foreign citizens with a residence permit expired from 31 October 2019, will be able to apply for a temporary residence permit, lasting 6 months. The law referring to activities in specific sectors: agriculture, grazing and zootechnics, fishing and related activities; assistance to the person like caregiver; domestic work to support family needs (art. 103).

The minister for agricultural policies, Teresa Bellanova, a previous farm worker, in presenting this provision, amid tears of emotion, will say: “If I think about my history, my life, this is an extraordinary result for me. (...) From today invisibles will be less invisibles. The state is stronger than caporalato.”.

Outcomes, however, are well below expectations: by the expected deadline date, only 207,542 applications have been received, out of the expected 600,000; of these, 85% (176,848) concern domestic work and caregivers and only 15% (30,694) refer to the emergence of irregular employment relationships in other sectors, including agriculture.

The reasons for this lack of success are due to several factors: first of all, it is a real amnesty with a complicated bureaucratic process that provides for a tax of 500 euros that the employer must pay for each worker to be regularized. From an economic point of view, however, for the employer is much more useful to have an irregular employee: it is much more easily exploited. There is no incentive for employer to proceed with the regularization. Furthermore, from an investigation by the magazine “L’Espresso”, it emerges that this law has become a business for caporalato organizations who have become intermediaries. And many migrants pay thousands of euros for a bogus piece of paper to unscrupulous torturers and entrepreneurs in order to obtain a residence permit¹⁷, triggering a new form of exploitation of immigrant labour.

This also explains why most of the questions concern care and domestic work: employers, in this case, are families who need assistance, but do not have to earn and have no interest in maintaining irregular employment relationships.¹⁸

On a more general level, the limit of this law is represented by the strongly economic connotation that does not consider the sphere of rights: it seems to be structured only with the aim of solving the shortage of agriculture manpower, without affecting the social consequences that the result: lack of adequate housing solutions, precarious hygienic and sanitary conditions, difficult access to health care. Portugal, for example, responded to the covid-19 crisis with a law that guarantees temporary residence permits to those who have already requested it, guaranteeing access to all public services such as the national health system and social services.¹⁹

4. *Closing remarks*

Until the spread of coronavirus, the exploitation of workers in agriculture issue was left to the self-organization capacity of civil society. This is the framework in which experiences such as that of SOS Rosarno are placed; it is an

¹⁷ Collettivo Lorem Ipsum, “Il mercato nero dei contratti e degli indirizzi falsi creato dalla sanatoria migranti”, L’Espresso, 22 Agosto 2020, <https://espresso.repubblica.it/plus/articoli/2020/08/21/news/sanatoria-bellanova-contratti-falsi-1.352255?preview=true>.

¹⁸ Siviero, Giulia, “La regolarizzazione dei migranti non sta funzionando”, il Post.com, 22 luglio 2020, <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/07/22/la-regolarizzazione-dei-migranti-non-sta-funzionando/>

¹⁹ Covella, Arturo, Raffaele, “Il decreto rilancio e la normativa sull’emersione del lavoro irregolare. Un primo commento”, Diritto.it, 18 maggio 2020, <https://www.diritto.it/il-decreto-rilancio-e-la-normativa-sullemersione-del-lavoro-irregolare-un-primo-commento/>

association which promotes responsible consumption, solidarity economy, and workers rights.²⁰

In Italy, today, there are several civil society organizations launched similar activities. Such as the “Funky Tomato”, a project to promote “a European campaign against agricultural workers’ exploitation, and support[ed] the creation of a participatory supply chain of production and transformation of high quality tomatoes, by constituting a social alliance among migrant workers, farmers, consumers, precarious workers and artists.”²¹ In 2011 born “No Cap” an international association against caporalato which creates an ethical supply chains as well.

The civil society looks like to know better than the political establishment that the exploitation of workers in the agri-food chain is a structural problem that is part of the global agri-food chains within the food regime of transnational corporations.²² From this structure depends the exploitation and degradation of production, labour, territories and the labour market segmentation on the basis of gender, nationality or strict immigration policies.

It is clear that the Italian government, alone, without the support of the EU, cannot achieve great results, however, the coronaviris could really have been the great opportunity to pave the way for important processes of social inclusion and the recognition of the rights of migrant workers and, at the same time, promote appropriate policies to be discussed and negotiated at European level. At present, what remains is a missed opportunity

4. *Bibliography*

- Avallone, Gennaro, “Sfruttamento e resistenze. Migrazioni e agricoltura in Europa, Italia, Piana del Sele”, Ombre Corte, Verona, 2017;
- Carchedi, Francesco, Galati, Marina, Saraceni Isabella (eds.), “Lavoro indecente. I braccianti stranieri nella piana lamentina, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2017;
- Caruso, Francesco Saverio, “Certificazioni e lavoro nelle filiere agroalimentari. Il caso GlobalGap in Italia”, “Meridiana”, n.93, 2018: pp. 231-250.
- Coldiretti, 14 aprile 2020, <https://www.coldiretti.it/economia/coronavirus-con-19-cibo-salvo-da-crack-consumi>.

²⁰ Mostaccio, Fabio “L’economia solidale come autodifesa della società. L’esperienza di Rosarno”, *Sociologia del lavoro*, n. 142, 2016.

²¹ Mostaccio, Fabio, op. cit, 2020.

²² McMichael, Philip, “A food regime genealogy”, “The Journal of Peasant Studies”, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2009: pp.139–169.

- Collettivo Lorem Ipsum, "Il mercato nero dei contratti e degli indirizzi falsi creato dalla sanatoria migranti", *L'Espresso*, 22 Agosto 2020, <https://espresso.repubblica.it/plus/articoli/2020/08/21/news/sanatoria-bellanova-contratti-falsi-1.352255?preview=true>
- Corrado, Alessandra, Caruso, Francesco Saverio, Lo Cascio, Martina, Nori, Michele, Triandafyllidou, Anna (eds.), "Is Italian Agriculture a "Pull Factor" for irregular migration – and if so, why?", European Policy Institute, 2018: p.3.
- Corrado, Alessandra, Lo Cascio, Martina, Perrotta, Domenico, "Introduzione. Per un'analisi critica delle filiere e dei sistemi agroalimentari in Italia", *"Meridiana"*, n.93, 2018: pp. 9-26.
- Covella, Arturo Raffaele, "Il decreto rilancio e la normativa sull'emersione del lavoro irregolare. Un primo commento", *Diritto.it*, 18 maggio 2020, <https://www.diritto.it/il-decreto-rilancio-e-la-normativa-sullemersione-del-lavoro-irregolare-un-primo-commento/>
- D'Onofrio, Giuseppe, "Firms, labor, migrations and unions within tomato value chain in Southern Italy", *Ledizioni*, Milano, 2020.
- Fortuna, Gerardo, "Italy looks to non-EU migrants to plug gap in agricultural workforce", *Euractiv.com*, 1 April, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/italy-looks-to-non-eu-migrants-plug-gap-in-agricultural-workforce/>
- McMichael, Philip, "A food regime genealogy", *"The Journal of Peasant Studies"*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2009: pp.139–169.
- Migliorati, Lorenzo, "Un sociologo nella zona rossa. Rischio, paura, morte e creatività ai tempi di Covid-19", *Franco Angeli*, Milano, 2020.
- Mostaccio, Fabio, "Changing food supply chains: the role of citizens and civil society organisations in working towards a social economy" in Barbera, Filippo, Jones, Ian (eds.) "The Foundational Economy and Citizenship: Comparative perspectives on civil repair", *Policy Press*, Bristol, 2020: p. 216.
- Mostaccio, Fabio "L'economia solidale come autodifesa della società. L'esperienza di Rosarno", *Sociologia del lavoro*, n. 142, 2016.
- Mostaccio, Fabio, "La guerra delle arance", *Rubbettino*, Soveria Mannelli, 2012.
- Palumbo, Letizia, Corrado, Alessandra, "Keeping the Italian agri-food system alive: Migrant farmworkers wanted!", 29 aprile 2020, <https://www.open-democracy.net/en/pandemic-border/keeping-italian-agri-food-system-alive-migrant-farmworkers-wanted/>
- Palumbo, Letizia, Sciarba, Alessandra, "The vulnerability to exploitation of women migrant workers in agriculture in the EU: the need for a Human Rights and Gender based approach", *Policy Department for Citizens'*

- Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union, 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604966/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604966_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604966/IPOL_STU(2018)604966_EN.pdf).
- Perna, Tonino, "Pandeconomia. Le alternative possibili", Castelvechi, Roma, 2020.
- Siviero, Giulia, "La regolarizzazione dei migranti non sta funzionando", *il Post*. com, 22 luglio 2020, <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/07/22/la-regolarizzazione-dei-migranti-non-sta-funzionando/>
- WHO, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.
- Zollo, Anna, "Import/export, danni economici e possibilità dell'industria alimentare italiana", in Guigioni, Anna, Ferrari, Renato, "Pandemia 2020. La vita quotidiana in Italia con il Covid-19", M&J Publishing House, e-book, 2020.