

Agricultural crisis, refugee crisis, or health crisis? Migrant seasonal workers in Italian agriculture during the COVID pandemic

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Abstract

The concept of crisis has been widely used to describe European social phenomena which have become acute and unmanageable in recent years. Exceptionality and emergency have become attributes of the political strategies developed to address the economic, social, and environmental unsustainability of industrial farming; the flow of forced migrants; and the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is based on ethnographic data collected over more than 2 years among immigrant workers and their employers in northern Italy, before and during the spread of the pandemic. By relating the experience of the people involved and analysis of the structural dimensions, I show how the “refugeeization of the agricultural workforce” and the “normalization of precarity” are two interconnected and interdependent processes. My study contributes to the recent scientific debate on the “polycrisis” by highlighting how the agricultural crisis generated a demand for vulnerable migrant labour and this situation was exacerbated by the health crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, a few months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, I met Alpha, a 23-year-old Ghanaian man. We were in a town in northern Italy, in the middle of one of the largest fruit and vegetable districts in the country. Alpha had time to talk to me that day because he had not yet been called by a local farmer to pick

peaches. In addition to looking for a job, Alpha was awaiting a convocation with the Territorial Commission¹ that would evaluate his request for political asylum. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 emergency, the reception facilities for seasonal workers in which Alpha had been hosted in previous years were closed and, to be closer to his workplace, Alpha spent the nights camped in the public garden.

Due to the COVID crisis I feel bad. It's not that things were much better for me before, but now I've reached the limit. Every day I wait. I am waiting for the phone call from the reception centre operators who tell me that the day of the interview with the Commission has arrived.... I am also waiting for the phone call from a farmer ... to be taken as a fruit picker. All this is wasted time, but we are used to it.... It's better not to think too much.

(Alpha, Ghanaian migrant, 23 y/o)

Alpha's words indicate the vulnerability of a person from multiple perspectives: an asylum seeker awaiting an interview at the Commission which can grant or deny him refugee status, a seasonal worker waiting for a call from an employer, and a potentially contagious person during the pandemic.

What Alpha describes as a subjective condition of deep malaise, attributable to the state of legal and working limbo in which he finds himself, must fit into a framework of structural crises that I analyse in this article.

Alpha's condition is defined by the intersection of three dimensions described in public debate as forms of "crisis": European migration policies towards the flows of people from Africa and Asia across the Mediterranean; the agricultural production chain in the context of the globalized economy; and the healthcare system in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Beck and Knecht, in their critical review of the category of "crisis" (Beck & Knecht, 2016), identified studies in the field of social anthropology. Some are interested in how people attempt to survive individually and collectively in conditions of hardship, precariousness, uncertainty, desperation. Others note the ways in which societies collectively respond politically to risk or disaster situations. Research that has investigated the dimensions of the crisis from the perspective of the people involved has shown that a perception of uncertainty prevails (Elliot, 2016; Vacchiano, 2014). People find themselves in a condition of temporal disorientation, in which past experience is no longer useful for moving through the present or predicting the future (Bryant & Knight, 2019).

If Alpha's words express this dimension of stalemate in which individuals are stuck, paradoxically on the structural side of policies the concept of "crisis" is connected to a constellation of meanings (exceptionality, emergency) that refer to the urgency of rapid and decisive interventions. At the media and political levels, the use of the category of "crisis" evokes a state of exceptionality and intense difficulty or danger, but also a moment when crucial decisions must be made to address the emergency. Salazar (2021) highlighted how continuous references to the category of crisis actually ended up reaffirming "long-standing (essential) principles that structure society, crisis itself becoming an advanced economic or political technology or strategy" (p. 2). Following Salazar's reading, we can therefore see that the political-economic strategy makes use of the exceptional nature of the so-called "crises" to justify the implementation of emergency measures. Even well before the pandemic, research on the management of immigration in small Italian municipalities highlighted how an overall "emergency approach" had been adopted (Bonizzoni et al., 2017) – a strategy based on extraordinary means and tools conceived as a response to unpredictable phenomena.

The dimensions noted above, the subjective and the systemic, are two measures which allow us to relate the perspective of people to the analysis of structural processes, thus showing the stratification of the meanings of "crisis." This category, according to Capello (2021), cannot be overlooked when interpreting the present and future of the Mediterranean area, which has been defined in recent years by a continuous succession of crisis cycles. Going through catastrophic experiences such as the 2020 pandemic, the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, and the economic-financial crisis of 2008, the Mediterranean "has become one of the main sites in which the effects of

economic depression, politics of austerity, and the precarity of employment have been more clearly observed and critically analysed" (Capello et al., 2021: 9).

I consider the category of "crisis" as an analysis tool. As Cabot (2023) recalled, it has become possible to "take crisis as a method: a lens for unpacking how persons as reflective beings engage with human and planetary realities" (Cabot, 2023: 12).

Considering the heuristic value of "critical events" (Das, 1995) means paying attention to the structures and processes that name and define "crises," and to the dynamics of political and social change, and questioning the ethical positioning of the researchers themselves who operate in a "crisis."

This approach developed in a temporal context which, by qualifying the "crisis" under a single aspect – health – diverted attention from the interconnection of levels of vulnerability. Foremost are the structural vulnerabilities that characterize the Italian agricultural production system, which is based on the exploitation of migrant workers (Raeymaekers, 2024). In the pandemic, it became clear that there is a structural link between labour policies and migration policies that produces the precarious status and the production models of globalized supply-chain capitalism. The Italian agri-food system reproduced itself through the availability of a "reserve army of migrant labour in situations of irregularity and vulnerability" (Corrado & Palumbo, 2022: 154), and the pandemic only exacerbated the inequalities and frailties of this system. Tagliacozzo et al. (2021) use the concept of structural vulnerability to refer to underlying conditions and institutions that negatively influence the ability of a given system to cope with a crisis. They discuss interplay between the vulnerability of interconnected systems and, as a result, the capacity of latent vulnerability to propagate rapidly across systems during crises such as the pandemic.

In this article, I contribute to this theoretical debate by updating it with reference to three aspects. Although there are many studies on the presence of migrants in agriculture in Italy, there are few studies that document the process of replacement of long-term immigrant workers by refugee workers or asylum seekers (Dines & Rigo, 2015). Second, most of the contributions in the literature concern Southern Italy, while few focus on Northern Italy (Azzeruoli, 2017; Azzeruoli & Perrotta, 2015; Della Puppa & Piovesan, 2023). Finally, I enrich the reflections regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agri-food sector in Italy, from the direct perspective of workers (Gosetti, 2020; Guidi & Berti, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected in an international project that investigated long-lasting displacement situations at multiple sites in Europe and analysed options to improve displaced people's lives. My fieldwork took place between June 2019 and September 2021. I used different qualitative methods, such as expert interviews, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and biographic interviews. I also conducted participant observation, during the harvest periods (June–October) as well as other times of the year. This allowed me to meet the migrants who arrived in the study area exclusively for fruit picking, as well as migrants who have lived and worked in the area for longer periods.

For the expert interviews, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews with representatives of local administrations, social workers, volunteers from associations that assist migrants, trade unionists, and representatives of trade associations in the agri-food sector. These interviews were followed by focus groups attended by entrepreneurs with small, medium, and medium-large companies.

During the research, I carried out 30 in-depth interviews with migrant workers employed with seasonal contracts in the agricultural sector. The aim of these interviews was to understand "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006: 9).

I explored not only the present conditions of workers' lives but also past events relevant to them. I gave the research participants room to recount their life history in the form of a longer narrative, which they structured

themselves. The biographic interviews helped to investigate trajectories, important events, and transitions in the lives of respondents from their perspective.

Interviews and conversations were conducted in Italian, English, and, in a few cases, in Bambara and in Wolof, with the help of an interpreter. I transcribed the interviews and translated them into English. I did an initial open coding of the interviews by theme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and then applied the technique of narrative segment analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

THE AGRICULTURAL CRISIS: THE CHANGING FACE OF AGRICULTURE IN ITALY

The characteristics of agricultural work in Italy have profoundly changed in recent years. The traditional mixed peasant farming has been replaced by intensive monocultural farming (Corrado et al., 2016; Gertel & Sippel, 2016). In Italy, we observe a proliferation of enclaves characterized by industrial organization of agricultural production; ecological damage from the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and the uncontrolled use of water resources for irrigation; and a lack of attention to social measures, such as decent housing and community facilities for workers (King et al., 2021; Oxfam, 2018).

Agricultural production is strictly conditioned by the organization of large-scale distribution. The market imposes low prices on producers along with quality and productivity standards, and it encourages demand for a flexible workforce (Preibisch, 2010; Rogaly, 2008). Few big retail corporations determine the production costs and standards, the distribution, and the consumption patterns of these agri-food supply chains. To respond to market pressures, the number of farms has decreased over the years, their average size has increased, and the exploitation of a flexible workforce has also increased (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2022). Farms mostly need seasonal workers available for short periods rather than permanent workers.

The area covered by my study has gone from 23,000 companies in 2010 to 19,000 in 2020, for a decrease of 17.5% (Mellano, 2017). There are 12,000 hectares of intensive cultivation of kiwis, peaches, apples, and blueberries, and it is one of the most important agricultural fruit districts in Italy.²

According to the secretary of a local farmers' association: "In 1975 there were 74,000 farms in Piedmont, today there are 19,000. Many farms no longer exist and large landowners buy or rent land from other small ones, a reality that we fought in the post-war period". (Giovanni, Italian farmer, 60 y/o).

Many of these farms practise conventional agriculture, using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and relatively few adhere to organic farming. Many farms have a low propensity for cooperation and this fact places them in a position of weakness regarding large-scale distribution, leading to a definition of sales prices that are disadvantageous for producers (Fondazione, 2018).

Power is concentrated in the hands of large retailers, and this aspect is reflected in the composition of the fruit price. According to a local farmer, the final price for a kilo of fruit in the supermarket is around 2.30 euros: 0.50 euros are for the farmer, 0.40 for packaging and conservation, 0.70 for the merchant, 0.20 for transport, 0.10 for distribution, and 0.40 for the supermarket. So 40% of the total cost is for production while 60% is for distribution and sales (Mangano, 2020: 65).

This significant difference between the prices farmers receive for their produce and the prices consumers pay has relevant consequences for workers. Firms at the top of the supply chain exert pressure on those at the bottom and various research shows how, in the Italian case, because of the price squeeze, workers suffer from lower income and poor working conditions, job insecurity, compromised safety standards, and inadequate facilities. When bottom firms are struggling to survive, they may resort to exploitative labour practices, including paying below minimum wage, violating labour laws, and disregarding workers' rights (Corrado et al., 2018; Uleri et al., 2023). These phenomena have been well documented not only in Mediterranean agriculture but also in other contexts, such as North America (Weil, 2014).

Many farmers described an irreversible crisis in the local agricultural system (Farinella & Moiso, 2021). In addition to rising costs of production, there is continuous damage to local agricultural production. In the period from 2018 to today, dozens of climatic events have occurred. A representative of the local farmers declared:

We are facing the consequences of climate change with the multiplication of extreme events with a higher frequency of violent events, short and intense rainfall, and rapid transition from the sun to bad weather. This has caused the loss of over 14 billion euros in a decade, drops in national agricultural production, and damage to structures and infrastructure in the countryside with flooding and landslides.

(Sandro, Italian farmer, 55 y/o)

These climatic changes alter the sowing, flowering, and ripening times of fruit and require extraordinary interventions, such as the placement of anti-hail nets, the use of new chemicals, or the introduction of more resistant hybrid varieties. Above all, the climate crisis significantly impacts the work experiences of seasonal agricultural workers. Climate changes force these workers to adapt their working rhythms and hours. The start of harvest has been consistently delayed in recent years, due to either drought or excessive rainfall. Moreover, harvesting activities are frequently disrupted by unexpected rains. In 2019 there were 19 days of interruption; in 2020 there were 23.

In various locations, exceptional climatic events, such as torrential rains, have inflicted damage on the reception centres where migrant workers live. This aspect emerged in several interviews:

Many workers, like me, were welcomed into a tent city, built in a large meadow. For two years in a row, due to heavy rain, all the tents were flooded. We were evacuated. Some, the luckiest, were hosted by friends, but all the others were left without a place to sleep

(Alpha, Ghanaian migrant, 23 y/o)

The feeling of precariousness is evident in Alpha's testimony: external climatic factors have caused the cyclical repetition of emergency situations in which only a few "lucky" people have managed to find solutions. Climate change also jeopardizes the health of workers, as the increased use of chemical products to protect crops from parasites has long-term effects on their well-being (de-Assis et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2016).

The economic power of large retailers, subsequent contractual weakness, and climate change: these elements of crisis are also the causes that farmers invoke when they explain their increasing need for a flexible and cheap workforce.

MIGRANT WORKFORCE: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Changes in the characteristics of agricultural production (types of crops, harvesting periods) have also led to a change in the type of workforce required (Nori & Farinella, 2020).

A first change concerns the origin of workers and a progressive replacement of Italians by migrant workers. While in 2008, Italian agricultural workers with employment contracts were 41.1% of the workforce, and in 2020 36.5%, the percentage of foreign workers rose from 6% in 2008 to 18% in 2020 (Macri, 2021).

The seasonality of agricultural work and the use of fixed-term contracts have also increased. About 90% of agricultural workers in Italy are on fixed-term employment, which has increased over the past years. Conversely, the use of open-ended contracts has been declining for both Italian and foreign workers (Figure 1).

In the last decade, the number of workers employed for less than 50 days per year increased by about 10%, for a total of around 320,000 workers in 2017.

	Italian workers		Foreign workers	
	Open-ended contracts	Fixed-term contracts	Open-ended contracts	Fixed-term contracts
2009	11.7	88.3	9.0	91.0
2011	12.4	87.6	7.9	92.1
2013	12.3	87.7	7.6	92.4
2015	11.9	88.1	6.8	93.2
2017	11.4	88.6	6.4	93.6

Source: Macri (2019)

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Italian and foreign workers in agriculture by contract type, 2018. Source: Macri (2019)

In the last 10 years, irregular work in agriculture has also increased, reaching 24.4% in 2020. In the Italian economy as a whole, irregular work is estimated at 12% (Istat, 2020). In 2021, it was estimated that irregular workers in the Italian agricultural sector numbered 230,000 (Carchedi & Bilongo, 2022).

Seasonal agricultural employment contracts are primarily governed by the “Testo Unico sull’Occupazione” [“Consolidated Law on Employment”] (Legislative Decree 81/2015) and the National Collective Bargaining Agreement (CCNL) for the agricultural sector. Fixed-term contracts can be concluded for a maximum of 8 months per year and could be extended for up to five successive renewals. There must be a break of at least 60 days before a new seasonal contract can be established. Seasonal agricultural workers are entitled to a minimum wage set by the CCNL, and employers are required to pay social security and insurance contributions for their employees. Working conditions, including minimum wages, may vary based on specific provisions outlined in the CCNL. The agricultural sector is considered “poor” since employers always apply the minimum wage and do not declare all the hours actually worked by employees. Furthermore, the seasonal work sector in agriculture is one where the system of controls and sanctions is weak and ineffective, due to the limited duration of the contracts and because the workers are particularly vulnerable to blackmail and are not available to report to the authorities (Faleri, 2019).

In Italy, there is furthermore a complex regulation framework designed over the last two decades to manage the recruitment of seasonal workers. The entry system for foreign workers is based on an employer-driven mechanism whereby the employer has to invite the worker (Law No. 40/1998). Each year the government sets quotas of seasonal permits by decree, taking into account the regional needs for workforce and the unemployment figures. Employers have to present a list of foreign workers to receive the work permits or ask for an authorization to work for people registered in the lists provided through bilateral agreements. This administrative system is rigid and slow so employers tend to use workers who already live in Italy, doing “ex-post regularizations”.

Because it is so difficult for farmers to get foreign workers in time for harvest using the quotas decree, there is a growing share of asylum seekers and irregular migrants working seasonally. They are already in Italy and, in many cases, they accept work for little money and in precarious conditions. In this regard, Dines and Rigo (2015) have described a process of “refugeization” of the workforce in Italy. While waiting for their interview with the Commission,³ asylum seekers live in a condition of limbo, facing various temporal and spatial constraints that affect their daily lives (Cingolani et al., 2022). Asylum seekers in Italy are entitled to work 60 days after the formalization of their asylum application, with no specific restrictions compared to other foreigners (Legislative Decree 142/2015). They can work regularly until their residence permit as asylum seekers is renewed. This permit is valid for 6 months and can be renewed until the decision of the Territorial Commission regarding the request for recognition of international protection. Asylum seekers are entitled to the same social and employment rights as other regular migrants, but not to welfare rights (basic income and family contributions) (Rasnača & Bogoeski, 2023).

In October 2020, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian government issued a new Decree Law No. 130/2020 on migration and international protection. The Decree did not modify the quota system for seasonal workers and, although it reintroduced humanitarian protection for asylum seekers, it has not really shortened the time for obtaining refugee status.

In the area under study, over the years, the composition of the agricultural workforce has also changed profoundly. Until the mid-1990s, almost all workers were Italians. Part of the workforce, especially the seasonal one, was made up of internal migrants from southern Italy or students. Since the mid-1990s the number of migrants from Eastern Europe has increased, in particular from Albania, Romania, and Poland. Since the early 2000s, African workers have appeared, especially sub-Saharan, who became the majority of workers from 2015 onwards.⁴ The problems faced by foreign seasonal workers are many and interconnected (Fondazione, 2020): they concern labour intermediation, contracts, housing, and the provision of various essential assistance services (health, social, and legal).

Access to work rarely occurs through formal channels, that is, through public employment offices or private temporary agencies. In most cases, people find work through informal networks. There are migrants who have worked for several years in companies and who, when there is a need for more workforce, call compatriots and work as brokers with the owners of the companies. For employers, using brokers makes the recruitment process much quicker.

For migrants in irregular conditions – who cannot access legal intermediation services – the use of mediators is often the only way to find employment. In the beginning, these mediators enjoy great social prestige among migrants and become “political power brokers” within their community networks in Italy. As documented by Uleri et al. “they navigate the space and the interlinkages between community-based local voices and the structural translocal-societal transformations” (Uleri et al., 2023: 219).

If workers were hired through an official channel, the employment contract would be registered at the labour office and verified, and both employers and workers would be subjected to greater checks. By using mediators, workers therefore lose many of the guarantees that a regular contract would entail.

For me, as soon as I arrived, the simplest thing was to refer to one of my compatriots. He immediately took me to an Italian man who needed workers to harvest apples. It was easier that way, but there is also a downside. Until you have your network, you are always dependent on your mediator and you never know how secure your job will be.

(Clarence, Malian migrant, 28 y/o)

This testimony highlights the ambivalence of the informal intermediation system. This system is indispensable but, at the same time, migrants are aware of the arbitrariness of the broker and this causes them uncertainty about the possibility of finding a safe and well-paid job.

When migrants find a job they almost always get a short-term contract. In this area, there is a lot of “grey” work, because the bosses do not recognize in the contract all of the workdays actually undertaken by their employees. In general, the hours declared in the contract are paid according to what is established in the collective agreements of the sector, while the hours not declared are paid less (Caritas Italiana, 2018).

Furthermore, workers often face problems finding accommodations. All asylum seekers in Italy, from the moment they apply until they receive a response from the Territorial Commission, have the right to sleep in reception facilities.

From the perspective of employers, hiring an asylum seeker is advantageous, because they do not need to offer guaranteed housing. Some asylum seekers stay in reception centres far from the harvest areas. They are often forced to leave these facilities to reach their workplaces and thus lose the right to return to the facilities when the harvest is over. The search for rental housing on the private market is also complicated because homeowners in the area are not willing to rent to foreign nationals, especially Africans (Ponzo et al., 2022).

To meet the challenge of housing accommodation for seasonal workers, local administrations have offered some temporary solutions: in 2014 the Catholic Organization Caritas set up an equipped camp for 250 people; in 2016, another 95 beds were added in public buildings or in containers; in 2018 the project PAS (Prima Accoglienza Stagionali – First Seasonal Reception) began. In this project, an old barracks was renovated, with 370 places made available for seasonal workers (Brovia & Piro, 2020). Nevertheless, these solutions have never been able to satisfy all the demand for beds by workers.

Another significant problem, related to that of housing, concerns the provision of essential assistance services (health, social, and legal). Migrants who were hosted in reception centres for seasonal workers did not receive a residence certificate, which is essential to access basic health services. Thus, only a few organizations of volunteer doctors offered free health care to seasonal workers, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of these aspects – recruitment, housing, welfare provision – were defined as policy priorities in the three-year plan adopted in 2019 by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (the national plan against exploitation and illegal gang mastering in the agricultural sector). Furthermore in 2020 started an AMIF – funded project “Good Land,” aimed at informing and accommodating migrant seasonal workers, orienting them to local services, supporting the match between labour demand and supply and fighting irregular employment.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis and all responses provided at the local level failed to solve these problems and instead exacerbated them.

THE COVID-19 CRISIS FOR SEASONAL WORKERS

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated an already difficult situation. Compared to previous years, in 2020, to cope with the lack of manpower, farmers were forced to recruit almost exclusively African asylum seekers. The Flow Decree was issued only in July and established that applications could be submitted starting in October. That was too late for the fruit harvest, which in this area began in June, and many workers had not even arrived from abroad. Romanian workers, as EU citizens, did not need a visa to enter Italy and they were considered “essential workers,” but compulsory quarantine was envisaged for them. In other European countries, there were specific agreements to facilitate the entry of this category of workers, but not in Italy. Some Romanians, who usually worked locally, preferred to go to Germany or Austria thanks to the so-called “green corridors” (Cingolani, 2021). These workers experienced severe forms of discrimination and stigmatization and some of them returned to Romania after a short time without even being paid (Stancu, 2020). This change in the migratory patterns is not new, but clearly the pandemic accelerated it. There are foreign workers who have been present in Italy for many years who, despite a good level of socio-labour integration, with the worsening of working conditions, decided to leave Italy forever, as in the case of some Macedonians employed in the wine sector in Piedmont who moved to Germany in search of employment in agriculture or in construction (Cingolani & Donatiello, 2022).

In March and April 2020 the government established a series of economic subsidies for all regular workers (Corrado & Palumbo, 2022). People who were not regularly contracted at the time, such as many agricultural seasonal workers, did not receive these subsidies. To deal with the COVID-19 emergency, the Italian government also approved the Relaunch Decree (Law No. 77 of 17 July 2020), containing a provision for the regularization of workers in two sectors: agricultural and domestic work. This provision had two application channels: the first for employers and the second for foreign migrant workers. The regularization was strongly invoked by employers in agriculture, but then most of the application were made in the domestic field, showing that employers were not intentioned in regularizing the workers and preferred to resort to undeclared/precarious work (Schiavone, 2020). At the end of the regularization process, 207,000 applications were submitted through the employer channel and only 13,000 workers applied through the second channel.⁵ The lump sum cost to employers of regularizing an employment relationship (€500) risked being offloaded onto the workers, and there were reports of an illegal market in fake contracts which cost up to €5000. Also, the conditions required to apply significantly limit its scope,

leaving numerous migrants in situations of irregularity and precariousness. In accordance with the second channel for the regularization, migrants could submit their applications independently, but they had to demonstrate that they had been working regularly before October 2019 by providing a certificate of residence. A very difficult condition to meet for the majority of migrants.

In the area of my study, few employers applied for regularization for their workers. The employer who submitted a request for regularization knew that he/she was exposing his/her company to greater fiscal controls. In many parts of Italy, migrants paid informal mediators to produce false certificates of residence and false receipts to prove payment of taxes in the past. Furthermore, the bureaucratic process was extremely slow, and, in the summer of 2021, many of the regularization requests had not yet received an answer. Many companies preferred to continue using non-regular workers, especially for seasonal work (Corrado & Palumbo, 2022).

The announcement of the regularization produced a mobility of irregular migrants from northern Italy to southern Italy. Many migrants believed that in Southern Italy it was easier to find informal mediators to obtain false residence certificates but this often did not happen (Grimaldi, 2022).

Many of us went to the South, because it was easier to find a solution there. Some left a job that already existed in the North, to go to Campania or Calabria. But many were cheated and were never regularized. In Italy there are no safe laws for immigrants.

(William, Malian migrant, 29 y/o)

The contradictory information on the mechanisms of regularization and the subsequent disappointment for lack of the same, and for the scams that occurred, have amplified the feeling of uncertainty and mistrust among migrants. Despite farmers' fears about the risk of not having harvesters, the pandemic did not stop the influx of asylum seekers and irregular migrants in search of work. The temporary PAS structure was not opened in 2020 to prevent contagion and many migrants settled in the public parks of the city. The police began to increase controls and to sanction workers who slept outdoors.

Following protests from workers, in June 2020 local institutions signed a protocol for the management of the COVID-19 emergency. Nine municipalities agreed to open containers but the number of places needed was much higher. For this reason, many workers created informal camps near the authorized containers. Strong tensions developed between the social workers who managed the reception facilities and the migrants.

We found controls to enter the reception centres, and also controls by companies. Everyone was afraid and it seemed as if only we Africans had COVID.

(Malik, Malian migrant, 29 y/o)

When a positive case was discovered in one facility, all African workers in the area were seen as a public danger and were accused of spreading the virus.

With the pandemic, inequalities in treatment among workers increased, even within companies. The presence in the workplace of people with different legal statuses and different contracts, and therefore with different negotiating power, produced differential treatment by employers and divisions among these same workers.

STUCK IN MOBILITY. TRAJECTORIES DURING AND AFTER THE COVID CRISIS

The public debate emphasized that the COVID-19 emergency forced many workers to remain idle, and blocked several fundamental economic activities.

A different reality emerged from the data collected during the field research. Of the 30 migrants interviewed, 15 arrived in the area for the first time in 2020, in the first year of the pandemic; 10 arrived for the second time, having already been present in 2019; and five arrived there for the third time, having been in the zone in 2018 or earlier. So this agricultural district continued to represent a highly attractive focal point for seasonal workers, not only for those already loyal but also for others who arrived there for the first time in 2020 during the pandemic.

Seasonal work in this area is rife with migrants with fragmented geographic mobility trajectories. After the end of the harvest, of the 30 interviewed, 10 moved to other Italian regions, such as Campania, Calabria, and Sicily, and then returned again in 2021. These migrants went to Southern Italy both to try to obtain regularization there and to find a new job. Another five, at the end of the season, moved to other cities in Piedmont where they managed to return to the reception facilities as asylum seekers. Finally, five interviewees remained in the area, looking for other jobs.

These data, although they refer to a sample of migrants that is unrepresentative from a statistical viewpoint, confirm the results that have also emerged in other studies. Asylum seekers are often highly mobile at a translocal level, even if their legal status stabilization and upward socio-economic movement do not correspond to this mobility (Cingolani et al., 2022). It is precisely their particular conditions of legal uncertainty that make them a highly sought-after agricultural workforce, because they are flexible and blackmailable.

The COVID-19 emergency therefore did not block, but rather has kept the territorial mobility of particular categories of workers constant. Furthermore, due to a marked racialization of migrant workers, African asylum seekers have been publicly represented and are perceived as the most willing to accept precarious job and housing offers.

The health alarm for the pandemic has produced two complementary phenomena: first, there has been a growing ghettoization of African migrants, associated by public opinion with the threat of contagion. Thus, the rare opportunities for meeting and socializing among workers and natives, organized in the past by associations and groups of supportive citizens, have been reduced to a minimum or prohibited.

Nevertheless, the safety regulations defined for the COVID-19 emergency have produced a militarization of public spaces and a tightening of controls by the police in workplaces and institutional reception areas. The perception of strong institutional discrimination against migrants has thus consolidated among many of them.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I started from a definition of the concept of crisis, discussing its use in the public and political debate, with reference to the recent COVID-19 situation, and the impact that the crisis has had on agricultural production in Italy.

Public attention has focused entirely on the state of exceptionality and danger dictated by COVID, and this has prompted the production of a series of emergency measures at the national and local levels to improve workers' conditions. However, these measures paid no attention to the interconnection of vulnerability levels, to the structural vulnerabilities that characterize the Italian agricultural production system, and those connected to the production models of globalized supply-chain capitalism.

Through ethnographic research, my article offers an original contribution to the recent and growing scientific debate around the concept of "polycrisis."

As highlighted by Henig and Knight (2023), we live in an era characterized by the proliferation of "knotted eventedness" which requires researchers to adopt a type of "whole systems approach" in their studies. This means developing a "scalar work on polycrisis that puts planetary precarity under the microscope in grassroots contexts", analysing "the speed and scope of the multiple problems at our door" (Henig & Knight, 2023: 4). This approach allows us to avoid the trap of generalizing the category of polycrisis as an undifferentiated set of phenomena, but rather to look for causes, dynamics, and outcomes of individual phenomena. Although the COVID-19 crisis,

the crisis of migration and asylum policies, and the agricultural crisis can be read in their interdependencies, the central crisis concerns the agricultural production system which is increasingly based on the demand for seasonal workers. This demand is met by groups of migrant workers and above all, recently, by asylum seekers in highly vulnerable conditions.

The analysis of a specific case highlighted what the living and working conditions of migrants were before and during the COVID-19 crisis, and further highlighted the fact that there was no improvement, not even with a series of measures at both the national and local levels.

The recruitment of workers, as done before the COVID crisis, continued to take place mainly through informal channels, and brokers maintained their central position within the system. The contracts, when they are stipulated, are temporary and for a short duration of three, maximum four, months, and no employers changed the contracts from fixed-term to open-ended. The temporary public accommodations for seasonal workers have proved insufficient and have often resulted in workers' further ghettoization as employers have not increased their offers of housing for their workers. The regularization was a failure, promoting territorial mobility without positive results among many workers. Legal limbo pushed asylum seekers to settle into mobility and many migrants found themselves trapped within these mobility trajectories because they moved in order to survive, however with no opportunity to settle permanently and regularly (Fontanari, 2017). Most of the political interventions did not address the interrelations between vulnerabilities. In the period taken into consideration, there was no reform of labour policies or even of the policies that regulate the functioning of the agri-food supply chains.

However, it is not my intention to represent migrants as totally passive and devoid of agency. As Michael O'Regan (2023) noted, the polycrisis has prompted exploration of "counter-environments" and 'counter-narratives' that simulate possible outcomes and provide a road map for those seeking to counter the impacts of embodied uncertainties" (O'Regan, 2023: 5). The attempt to escape uncertainty is the desire to get moving again, to advance towards desirable futures, despite the difficulties of the present. This perspective recalls the formulation of the concept of "social navigation" proposed by Henrik Vigh (2010): "the praxis of navigating a road through shifting or opaque socio-political circumstances and the process of plotting it". (Vigh, 2010: 151). From this perspective, people can understand the (poly)crisis not only as "an aberrant moment of chaos", but also as a "terrain of action and meaning" (Vigh, 2008: 5).

Through the COVID-19 crisis, some alliances have emerged and strengthened and they could, in the future, lead to an improvement in workers' conditions: trade unions have acquired a new strength among migrant workers and they have publicly taken critical positions towards the policies adopted by the Italian government. At the local level, more than once they have clashed with the decisions taken by public administrations, the Prefecture, and employers' organizations. The number of disputes has increased and the activity of the unions' cultural mediators was crucial during the months of the pandemic (Buttino & Schiavone, 2022). There were some collective moments of protest staged in 2020 by African farm workers in the area, like the manifestation that pushed local institutions to sign the protocol for management of the COVID-19 emergency. These moments demonstrate that, after so many years of inequalities suffered, migrants wanted to show a collective political identity.

To conclude, I quote the post published on social media by one of my interviewees, in June 2020:

We are seasonal agricultural workers in the countryside, we are part of a solidarity movement. We fight to end racism, exploitation, police violence. This year, due to the anti-coronavirus measures, the seasonal reception project is also not guaranteed and the army has arrived. We call for an immediate and radical change in the unjust conditions we live in every day, as refugees and asylum seekers, and as human beings.

This statement clearly shows that the causes of the three crises are interdependent and that solutions cannot be found by adopting emergency tools; the solutions cannot come from the outside but must be formulated by the workers themselves. Adopting the category of "polycrisis" means being aware that we must move in the direction

of “polysolutions” that take into account the perspectives, interpretations, and aspirations of the individuals involved in the crises. The conditions of workers and the quality of agricultural production in Italy will improve only if policymakers take these indications into account in developing future policy responses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13273>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Territorial Commission is the authority in charge of examining every asylum request and deciding whether to grant international protection or not. Currently, there are 20 Commissions, located in the main Italian cities.

²In the past, the harvest was concentrated entirely between July and October. The harvest now begins as early as May with blueberries and extends until November for new varieties of apples.

³The Territorial Commission should interview the applicant within 30 days of having received his/her application but the time limit for the decision could be extended up to a maximum of 18 months. Many asylum seekers had their application refused and ended up in irregularity.

⁴According to data provided by the local Employment Office, in 2009 out of 7521 workers 2536 were Italian, 2875 were from Eastern Europe, and 1092 were from Africa; in 2020 out of 10,734 workers, 3232 were Italians, 1972 Eastern Europeans, and 4046 Africans (Buttino & Schiavone, 2022).

⁵Of these applications, just over 30,000 concerned agricultural work, 15% of the total, and the other 178,000 concerned domestic work.

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