

THE ROSARNO PANDEMIC

Health emergency and endemic exploitation

The Seventh Report on the living and working conditions of migrant labourers in the Gioia Tauro Piana



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Summary

JULY 2020

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in partnership with

A Buon Diritto Association

contacts

posta@mediciperidirittiumani.org
info@mediciperidirittiumani.org
mediciperidirittiumani.org

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The authors

Ilaria Zambelli, Martina Marcellino, Federica Marini, Mariarita Peca, Alberto Barbieri

Medu field team

Ilaria Zambelli (coordinator), Federica Marini, Santi Sciacca, Rosaria Pappalardo, Gaia Spinella (doctors), Martina Marcellino (socio-legal operator), Karamo Barrow and Moussa Traoré (linguistic-cultural mediators), Luigi Leone (logistician), Isabella Bianco (volunteer socio-legal operator)

Medu team of Rome

Alberto Barbieri and Mariarita Peca (coordination), Francesca Fasciani (communication), Paolo Perri and Rosely Petry (administration)

Images

Photos by Benedetta Sanna (June 2020)
Ilaria Zambelli (February / May 2020)

Graphic layout

Laura Galli Studio redDotgrafica

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For further information on the Terragiusta project:

<http://www.mediciperidirittiumani.org/terragiusta/>

Information:

Medici per i Diritti Umani Onlus
posta@mediciperidirittiumani.org
info@mediciperidirittiumani.org
www.mediciperidirittiumani.org

Medici per i Diritti Umani (Medu) is an international non-profit humanitarian and solidarity organization, independent of political, union, religious and ethnic affiliations. Medu aims to bring health care to the most vulnerable populations in crisis situations, in Italy and abroad, and to develop democratic and participatory spaces within civil society for the promotion of the right to health and other human rights. Medu's action is based on the militancy of civil society, on the professional and voluntary commitment of doctors and other health professionals, as well as citizens and professionals from other disciplines.

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SUMMARY

For the seventh consecutive year, Doctors for Human Rights Italy (Medici per i Diritti Umani - Medu) operated in the Calabria region, in the Gioia Tauro Piana, during the citrus harvest season, providing primary health care and information on access to fundamental rights to migrant labourers who populate precarious settlements in the Municipalities of Rosarno, San Ferdinando, Drosi (part of the Municipality of Rizziconi) and Taurianova. Labour exploitation and widely spread illicit practices, to which must be added lack of controls and absence of effective measures to combat illegal work, have also this year prevented the access of labourers to dignified living conditions. In addition to this, the growing precariousness of legal conditions following the entry into force of *Decreti Sicurezza* ("Security Decrees" I and II entered into force respectively in October 2018 and June 2019 and introduced drastic restrictions on Italian reception system) and the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic had a worsening impact on the living, working, physical and mental health conditions of migrant workers.

From the end of November 2019 to May 2020, a multidisciplinary team, consisting of a coordinator, a doctor, a logistician, two cultural mediators and a socio-legal operator, used a mobile clinic to reach approximately 2,000 workers distributed in various official and unofficial settlements of the Piana. In addition to medical assistance and health care guidance, Medu has guaranteed systematic socio-legal support. The team also carried out widespread information, a prevention and active surveillance response to Covid-19, as precarious settlements were not achieved by any institutional system initiatives for the prevention and containment of the virus. Furthermore, in order to be able to face both individual and collective problems in an effective and coordinated way, Medu worked in a network with local associations and unions and attempted a constant dialogue with relevant local institutions, in particular the Prefecture, the Region and the Municipalities of the project's interested area,

reporting field data and analysis and proposing concrete solutions for overcoming individual issues.

This report analyses two phases: the first one before the appearance of Covid-19 (November 2019 - March 2020) and the following one started from the lockdown measures in March which highlights the effects of the pandemic on the existing critical conditions of exclusion, marginality and exploitation of labourers of the Piana.

The context

Labour exploitation, difficulties of having access to fundamental rights and territorial services, institutional inertia, precariousness of legal and living conditions, widespread illegality, political passivity, once again represent the distinctive features of the citrus harvest season in the Gioia Tauro Piana, that have made it even more critical because of the Covid-19 pandemic effects on the life of labourers.

Nearly 2,000 people were living in a slum in the industrial area of the Municipality of San Ferdinando until the huge settlement was removed on 6th March 2019 because of an imposing clearing operation ordered by the previous Home Affairs Minister Matteo Salvini. The slum was replaced by another tent city (the first was built in 2013) providing a number of places not sufficient for the actual presence on the territory and reserved exclusively to regular migrants. During the 2019-2020 citrus harvest season, the new tent city hosted 440 people (less than a quarter of the labourers who lived in the slum). Therefore, the eviction forced hundreds of labourers to move to other territories or to disperse them in even more precarious settlements in the countryside of the neighboring municipalities.

The growing precariousness caused by Decreti Sicurezza (Security Decrees) and the effects of the pandemic have impacted in a pejorative way on health, on the living and working conditions of labourers of the Piana

Population profile

In the last three months of activities before the pandemic spread (end of November 2019 - February 2020), Medu team provided health, social and legal assistance to 231 people. This is a lower number if compared to the previous years from the time that ordinary first aid activities have been replaced, since the beginning of the pandemic in March, by systematic information activities on Covid-19, active surveillance and distribution of safety devices which reached about 400 people.

The migrants, all males, came from western Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular from Mali (49%), Senegal (12%), Ghana (9%) and Gambia (9%) and had an average age about 30 years, confirming the data of previous years. Most of the assisted people have been present in Italy for more than 4 years (4-9 years 63%), 25% for less than 3 years and a smaller but significant percentage (12%) have been in Italy for over ten years.

Related to the stay in the Piana, 81% of 131 people who answered the question were there for a season, while 19% said they were living permanently in Calabria. The settlements reached by the mobile clinic were the following: the San Ferdinando tent city, the abandoned farmhouses in the countryside of the Municipalities of Rizziconi and Taurianova and the container field of Rosarno, set-up after the so-called "Rivolta di Rosarno" in 2010.

Health conditions and access to care

In the three months before the pandemic spread (end of November 2019 - February 2020), the mobile clinic team provided health care to 201 people during 291 medical visits. In line with the data of the past seasons, the majority of patients were affected by respiratory system diseases (22% of patients), osteoarticular system diseases (19%), digestive system diseases (15%) and skin diseases (9%). Similarly to the previous year, a reduced - but certainly underestimated - percentage of patients also needed psychological and/or psychiatric support and reported living a period of strong emotional stress. Overall, the syndromic picture that emerged is a mirror of terrible hygienic-sanitary, working and housing conditions in which labourers of the Gioia Tauro Piana have been forced to live in: social exclusion, stigmatization, housing promiscuity, lack of both electricity and hygienic services, lack of both drinking water and heating in unofficial settlements, inhuman working conditions, incorrect or insufficient nutrition.

Labour exploitation, difficulties of having access to fundamental rights and territorial services, institutional inertia, precariousness of legal and life conditions, widespread illegality, political passivity are the distinctive features of the citrus harvest season in the Gioia Tauro Piana

Of the 125 people who answered the question, only 35% said they were registered with the National Health Service (NHS) and had a general practice doctor (GP) assigned in Calabria or in other regions. The most recurrent causes for the failure to acquire a NHS general doctor are misinformation and bureaucratic obstacles, especially, the impossibility of obtaining a residence card in unofficial settlements. Regarding to access care for people without a regular residence permit, such as in previous years, the STP clinic in Rosarno has been the general medicine reference point and also it has guaranteed first health care even to regularly people with residence in other regions. However, it has been necessary to address those people to some social private health facilities because of their impossibility of prescribing specialist visits and diagnostic investi-





gations on the NHS recipe book, in particular the Emergency clinic in Polistena and the “Centro di Medicina Solidale” of the ACE association of Pellaro. On the other hand, as in previous years, the STP clinic in Rosarno has suffered serious structural, instrumental and staff deficiencies, providing only one doctor who can guarantee three weekly openings.

Legal and working conditions

A team’s socio-legal operator, supported by cultural mediators, has conducted 175 legal interviews with 87 people in total. Of 213 people (out of 231 with health and/or legal assistance), who provided information on their juridical condition, 90% were regularly resident, versus 10% of irregular ones. Among the regularly persons, two-thirds were asylum seekers (28%), holders of international protection (13% subsidiary protection, 1% refugee status) and other types of protection (14% humanitarian protection, 10% special cases, 2% special protection). It is also relevant the figure related to people undergoing renewal or conversion of humanitarian protection (25%) and only 7% of the assisted people had a residence permit for work reasons. Although the first *Decreto Sicurezza* abolished humanitarian protection,

Only a third of labourers have declared to be registered with the National Health Service and to have a general practice doctor assigned in the Calabria region or in other regions



Unofficial settlement in the Gioia Tauro Piana • April 2020 • (photo by Ilaria Zambelli, The Terragiusta project coordinator)

Direct and indirect consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic

which in the past years represented the most widespread residence permit among labourers (38% in 2017, 45% in 2018, 59% in 2019), the percentage of irregular migrants is not still growing. In fact, those who have submitted a request for renewal or conversion of humanitarian protection have in few cases obtained a residence permit for special protection or for work reasons and, in many cases, are still waiting the outcome of the request or have received the rejection of the application, falling back into the circuit to apply asylum, with a very limited chance of a positive outcome.

For what concerns their working conditions, 66% of 88 people who answered the question (58 people) said they were holding an employment contract - an increasing percentage over the years, they were 60% in 2019, 28% in 2018 and 17% between 2014 and 2015 - but only 10% received a regular paycheck. 34% of those said they were working without a contract. In both cases, the salary is between 25 and 35 euros per day, as in previous years. Furthermore, most of those who receive a paycheck have contributions for only 2-5 days per month, a number of days drastically lower than those actually carried out, which are on average 6 or 7 per week. This form of illegality does not allow migrant labourers to have access to agricultural unemployment neither to renew or convert their residence permit, exposing them to a high risk of irregularity and exploitation.

Last but not least, the *Caporalato* system ("gang-master system" meaning an illegal intermediation between labour demand and supply) continues to be widely spread throughout the Piana, despite the fact that the law against this system entered into force three years ago. Particularly in the morning, it is possible to see some groups near the roundabouts and road junctions waiting to be recruited as farm workers. As many assisted labourers reported, the trip costs 4 euros per person and vehicles can carry from 4 to 6 people.

The Calabria region has had one of the lowest contagion index cases from Covid-19 in Italy. In the province of Reggio Calabria, in particular, there have been only 277 positive patients since the beginning of the pandemic and among the migrants assisted by Medu team at informal settlements of the Piana only mild flu-like symptoms were found in some cases, then negative results to the swab. Despite this, Covid-19 emergency had a negative indirect impact on the health of labourers who live in the Gioia Tauro Piana. Enforced quarantine in small spaces, shared by many people, has in fact caused a general increase in psycho-physical discomfort among the population of precarious settlements.

After all, the ban on gatherings, an essential preventive measure to contain the contagion, has not been applied in the unofficial settlements and at the ministerial tent city where people were forced to live together in conditions of promiscuity, because of the absence of measures to encourage the relocation to more suitable places (such as closed hotels and buildings confiscated from

organized crime). In particular, stress from forced coexistence added up to a pre-existing uncomfortable condition characterized by poor hygiene conditions, lack of electricity, absence of drinking water. The most alarming conditions have been reported at some abandoned farmhouses due to the inability to access water. The perception of abandonment by institutions has been a very recurring theme.

In particular, the decision of some municipalities to exclude a portion of the labouring population - as not formally resident in the area - from the distribution of protective devices intended for the entire population

Two thirds of the labourers have declared to have an employment contract but only one in ten receives a regular paycheck and most of the labourers have contributions only for a lower number of days than those carried out

has exacerbated general discontent and mistrust towards local authorities. In the most critical phase of the epidemic, no local medical intervention by the regional health service was provided, which was in fact delegated to some humanitarian organizations in loco. Widespread misinformation then fueled prejudices and false beliefs about methods and effects of the contagion, screening, prevention measures and diagnostic procedures, pushing Medu team to do intense information activities, active syndromic surveillance and distribution of personal protective devices but, first of all, to create a new relationship based on trust. In total, between March and May, approximately 400 labourers, residing in the Gioia Tauro Piana, were reached by Covid-19 containment activities implemented by the mobile clinic team.

The unease of labourers has increased during the health emergency, because they were forced to spend the lockdown in settlements characterized by overcrowding, precarious and poor hygienic conditions having not any kind of institutional health care assistance

The Decrees (Prime Minister decrees) issued since the beginning of the pandemic - essential to contain the spread of the infection – have also had significant consequences on the living conditions of labourers. Firstly, the limit imposed by the Government on national and local mobility has prevented the movement of labourers to other regions to seek employment opportunities in seasonal farm jobs (strawberry harvest in Campania, tomatoes in Puglia, etc.). Even the movements outside the municipality of residence/domicile which are essential to allow labourers to reach workplaces have been banned, despite the fact that agriculture is considered one of the essential productive sectors by the Decrees. The cases of labourers who received administrative sanctions stopped while trying to reach the workplace have been not uncommon.



Unofficial settlement in the Gioia Tauro Piana • June 2020 • (photo by Benedetta Sanna for Medu)

In several cases, the police forces requested labourers to stop for a check to show their employment contract along with a self-certification. This illegitimate practice was only used with migrant workers who were forced to return to their places of residence when in absence of an employment contract or an improperly registered contract. Consequently, migrants in the Piana were unemployed and left without a salary. Furthermore, for most of them it was impossible to access the support measures introduced by the Government. In particular, due to widespread contribution and wage irregularities, they were not in possession of the main requirement to access the Covid-19 allowance, namely to have a minimum of 50 working days registered in 2019.

90% of the assisted persons were legally resident, of whom two thirds were asylum seekers, international protection holders and other types of protection, and 25% were in the process of renewal or conversion of humanitarian protection

The *Sanatoria*: expectations and limits

The *Sanatoria* (it is an extraordinary measure to regularize undocumented migrants employed in undeclared work) has some unclear aspects and the text has many inconsistencies (when the report has been published) and it is also hardly likely that in a context such as that of the Gioia Tauro Piana this measure will find a real application. On 15th June, the Home Affairs Minister declared that 32,000 applications were received, but those regarding domestic work and personal assistance represented 91% of the applications already completed (21,695) and 76% of those being processed. These data confirm a widespread concern regarding difficulties for migrant workers in the agricultural sector to access this procedure.

The *Sanatoria* could have a poor efficacy in the specific context of the Piana, due to the limitation of the possibility of regularization only to some specific sectors and to the central role of the employer in the procedure of emergence of undeclared work. Last but not least, farms are in many cases in a condition of legal and contributory irregularity. In addition, the small size of most of them - where the decree provides for a minimum annual income of 30,000 euros – prevents access to the procedure.

The underlying purpose of the provision of regularization seems to allow to find temporary labourers in certain sectors, rather than, as hoped, health protection and fight against undeclared work through the emergence of irregular employment relationships and the stipulation of new contracts. It should be noted once again that among migrant workers assisted in the Gioia Tauro Piana, nine out of ten are regularly resident and only one in ten is in possession of a regular paycheck. What is therefore becoming urgent is the need to regulate work, guarantee compliance with national and provincial sectoral collective agreements and the legality towards all workers, including migrant workers with regular residence permits, which represent the absolute majority.

Conclusions and recommendations

For the umpteenth season, Medu noticed the absence of political will and strategic planning to significantly affect the very serious phenomenon of exploitation of migrants employed as agricultural workers in the Gioia Tauro Piana. Measures taken - such as increased controls by the National Labour Inspectorate in the last years, provision of *Sanatoria*, installation of another tent city - do not have affected the exploitation and the *Caporalato* system, which continue to spread widely. Added to that the measures taken to contain and prevent the contagion of Covid-19 in precarious settlements proved to be completely partial and not very incisive, not foreseeing an active role of territorial health institutions within of a system approach to protect public health. The measures were indeed limited to financing (with European funds from the Asylum Migration and Integration Funds assigned by the Calabria Region through a call) the mobile clinic activities of humanitarian organizations present in the Gioia Tauro Piana and in the Sibaritide area, not predicting a direct action by local health institutions - that it would be appropriate. These funds also allowed Medu to operate in the Piana in May and June, ensuring, as far as possible, epidemiological screening and surveillance activities. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, a dramatic health and social event, could indeed have represented an occasion of strong discontinuity to face in a new and decisive way the dramatic situation of labourers of the Gioia Tauro Piana. In collaboration with other associations operating in the territory, Medu has developed concrete proposals for the management and containment of the contagion, as well as for the dismantling of the ghettos. In particular, the operational proposals advanced to the Region, also through a public letter, aim to promote synergistic and coordinated actions between territorial institutions for overcoming the ghettos and promoting individual and collective health through the adoption of urgent measures,

The measures adopted by the Government since the beginning of the pandemic, first of all, the limitation of local and interregional mobility, prevented labourers to reach the workplaces, increasing the precariousness of their living conditions

such as medium and long term measures. Neither the municipalities directly affected by the presence of farm workers' settlements nor the Prefecture or the Calabria region have not yet given feedback on these proposals.

In the light of the above, Medu calls for the adoption of urgent measures to contrast the exploitation of workers, the overcoming of ghettos and the promotion of legality. These proposals for an articulated and systemic model can contribute to improve the living and working conditions of labourers and revitalize the agricultural sector.

Specifically, Medu asks:

To the Government, to the Calabria Region and to the Municipalities of the Gioia Tauro Piana:

- The gradual dismantling of ghettos and the establishment of good practices that empower housing insertion in urban areas of the Gioia Tauro Piana, following the "Drosi model" based on housing intermediation for a widespread reception in vacant properties in small inhabited areas in the process of depopulation.

To the Government and the Region:

- System policies and investments to relaunch the agri-food sector in Southern Italy, especially in the Calabria region, through incentives to companies that guarantee quality standards and ethical production in respect of labour rights environmental protection;
- Actions aimed to promote the creation of cooperatives enterprises that join small farmers, able to help them to increase bargaining power and protection.

To the Government:

- The introduction of new rules for large-scale retail trade, promoting social sustainability in supply chains and preventing unfair trading practices against small farmers and workers;

- More transparent product labels in order to provide the consumer with information not only on the nutritional values, the expiry date, the origin of the products, but also on the price paid to the farmer and the compliance with labour laws and environmental impact of production;
- Automatic suspension of the denial order of international protection during the emergency;
- Extend the possibility of submitting the application for regularization to all irregular immigrants, free of charge, and with the only criterion of presence in Italy on 8 March 2020. In addition: allowing the issuance of a residence work permit to those workers who can prove the existence of a regular contract work in progress; allowing the issuance of a temporary residence permit for pending employment convertible into a work permit in presence of a work contract to those who do not have an occupation or are illegal employed.

To the Calabria Region:

- The implementation of information activities aimed at promoting the right to health and NHS registration procedures;
- The renovation and upgrading of the STP clinic of Rosarno and its conversion into a primary care center for all people employed seasonally in the Piana and unable to access a NHS general doctor;
- The activation of one or more dental centers for the most deprived within the territorial public health structures;
- The strengthening of local public services - especially Mental Health Centers and hospital clinics - in order to take care of mentally ill patients;
- Structured actions that help the meeting between labour demand and supply, in particular, strengthening Employment Centers and creating booking lists;
- Intensify labour inspections of the National Labour Inspectorate to combat labour exploitation and tax evasion.

To the Municipalities of the Piana:

- Allow registration with the Civil Registry of asylum seekers and, in general, of migrants with a regular residence permit who live in unofficial settlements, in order to allow their registration with the Regional Health Service and the renewal / conversion of residence documents.

To the Unions:

- Guarantee a more constant and incisive presence on workplaces and in the settlements where agricultural workers live, enhancing information activities on labour rights and workers' organizations.

In the context of the Gioia Tauro Piana, where 9 out of 10 workers have already the residence permit, but many irregularities in connection with work are the order of the day, the Sanatoria could find a very limited application





Unofficial settlement in the Gioia Tauro Piana • April 2020 • (photo by Ilaria Zambelli, Terragiusta Project Coordinator)



contacts

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info@mediciperidiritiumani.org

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