

Socio-economic integration and migrants' agency in the Italian Alps

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ABSTRACT

Migrants interact with places of arrival in multiple ways. The configurations of local structures, places and people determine the extent and quality of interaction and can result in processes of inclusion or exclusion. Moreover, the relationship between individuals and the socio-spatial and structural contexts of action is also defined by migrants' agency, as highlighted by the analysis of qualitative data collected through an action-research conducted in the mountain area of Metropolitan City of Turin, Italy. In this context, a close interrelation emerges between socio-economic and labour integration of migrants and other dimensions that come into play in the process of their integration in a new reality. As shown in the case study, innovative policy tools seem necessary to be designed in order to stimulate virtuous processes and to strengthen migrants' real participation in the social life of local communities: these tools should deal with the crucial issues of public space and shared care of the territory between old and new inhabitants, enabling new forms of integration in rural and mountainous areas.

¹ Although the paper was conceived together, Fabio Lucchini is the author of paragraph 1, Monica Gilli is the author of paragraph 2 and Andrea Membretti is the author of paragraph 3.

1. Migrants' agency in the light of social structures and infrastructures

Migrants interact with places of arrival in multiple ways. The configurations of local structures, places and people determine the extent and quality of interaction and can result in processes of inclusion or exclusion in terms of access to housing, education, work, health, social security or political participation (Ager, Strang 2008). Migrants experience inclusion and exclusion simultaneously and use experiences gained over time to acquire knowledge about places and their accessibility. Positive representations and practices associated with places foster the development of place-based belonging (Radford 2017).

Moreover, previous migration experience and the settlement of migrants in particular places may facilitate or even predict the arrival of new migrants (Bakewell et al. 2012): social capital embedded within networks of relatives, friends, or even merely co-nationals in the place of destination are likely to reduce the costs and risks of migration, and thereby increase the likelihood of setting in motion migration dynamics independent of their initial conditions (Garip 2008). Research highlights the varied forms – either requested or received – of migration assistance, resulting in cumulative causation mechanisms (Bashi 2007).

Everywhere and also in rural and mountainous areas, successful integration depends on the ability/availability of migrants and local population to establish social bridge: in other words, enabling positive and enriching interactions with *local social structures and infrastructures* (Ager, Strang 2008; Schech, Rainbird 2013). The analysis of migrants' multiple interactions with *local social structures and infrastructures* is therefore a valuable starting point for assessing the impacts of settlement (Kordel, Weidinger 2019; Bagliani et al. 2021). An important reference here is, in fact, the Ager and Strang's mid-level theory (2008), as they discuss the structure of

integration and inclusion/exclusion, showing interdependencies between the spheres of employment, housing, education and health, as well as between social interactions and facilitators of spatial mobility, linguistic/cultural knowledge and security/protection: focusing on migrants' participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the host society, here it is possible to find an analysis from the perspective of both migrants and receiving society through several interdependent dimensions (citizenship and rights, education, employment, housing, and health, linguistic and cultural knowledge).

The relationship between individuals and the socio-spatial and structural contexts of action is well defined through the concept of *agency*, that, with reference to migrants, denotes an important spatial dimension; in particular, *agency* describes and clarifies the capacity or power to act in relation to the existing structures, considering action as embedded in a specific context (and its opportunities) (Halfacree, Rivera 2012). In this sense, development of migrants' agency can find valuable support from civil society actors, especially at local level, i.e. volunteers, churches, welfare organisations and associations in general. However, if members of the local population have not experienced the 'other' in the past or if they see migrants as a threat to their jobs, or their identity, building social bridges becomes complex (Connor 2007).

In this regard, the perplexity towards migrants of some local social groups - in both urban and rural contexts - is often particularly marked. Indeed, members of socio-economically disadvantaged groups, who occupy a weak position within society, tend to have little confidence in their own possibilities, perceive little control over their lives and consequently experience a range of negative feelings (anxiety, shame, frustration, anger). Migrants and ethnic minorities pose a threat to the disadvantaged in terms of employment, housing and services (Volpato 2019), and such a threat perception - particularly high in times of economic recession and growing inequality - constitutes the core of prejudice. The aversion to immigrants is explained in terms of objective conflict: in difficult times, the scar-

city of resources increases competition between groups and leads to perceive newcomers as competitors and rivals. The worsening of socio-economic conditions trigger social comparisons causing feelings of relative deprivation. Interestingly, the perception of having less than one's fair share and what other groups have act at all social levels, as indicated by studies according to which even individuals with high levels of education express negative attitudes towards immigrants when they are seen as an employment threat (Kuppens et al. 2018). In relation to these processes, the condition of foreign immigrants appears peculiar, due to the complexity of factors that influence actions in daily life and to the considerable variability of these factors over time and space.

Several studies also focus on how - during their migration trajectory - individuals abandon passivity, implementing specific agency practices and a resilient attitude (Innes 2016). With respect to this particular aspect of migration phenomena, the temporal dimension of agency appears particularly relevant. As emerges from a now-classic work on the ways in which agentic dimensions interpenetrate with forms of structure, the authors conceptualize agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its iterational or habitual aspect) but also oriented towards the future (as a projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a practical/evaluative capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) (Emirbayer, Mische 1998). In other words, migrants, as all other social actors, "are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present, and adjusting the various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstances) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways" (ibid.: 1012).

That considered, migrants develops agency in various areas of their daily lives - acting to improve their housing conditions, to participate in cultural and political life, to enhance their education and qualification. From this point of view, direct and interpersonal social relations - embedded in spatial contexts and/or framed by

them - can be crucial for the development of agency, as migrants learn to interact with the structures present on the territory. The feedback effects of migrant agency are associated to processes of socio-cultural negotiation, social construction of everyday places (Woods 2018) and horizontal transfer of knowledge to other migrants. A process that, in certain circumstances, can be institutionalised by migrants' own organisations. Therefore, also in the light of this theoretical framework, in the debate between proponents of agentivist or structuralist approaches, sounds appropriate, for analytical and explanatory purposes, to consider structures (*local social structures and infrastructures*, in particular) not as mere limits to action but as elements that make it possible instead.

2. The self-construction of a public space of recognition: an action-research in the Alps of Piedmont

MATILDE (Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Areas) is a 3-year EU Horizon 2020 project focusing on the role and impact of migration on the local development of rural and mountain regions. MATILDE used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and adopted an action-research approach, emphasising the agency of migrants and the site-specific features of the 10 regions involved (<https://matilde-migration.eu/about-matilde/>). In this project, Italian researchers (University of Turin) worked on two different case studies, one in South Tyrol (dealing with migrants' labour inclusion), while the other - discussed in this contribution - located in the Metropolitan City of Turin (Piedmont region) and focusing on the impact of migrants on housing patterns and socio-spatial transformation of mountain villages. Here it has been selected the small-size municipality of Bussoleno (5,806 inhabitants), at the end of

Susa Valley, about 30 km from the main town of Turin. In this village the opportunities to engage local actors and residents in action-research activities appeared good due to the local history of welcoming international migrants, dating back to the early 1990s (and even before, if considering internal labor migration from southern Italy).

Bussoleno has been therefore identified as an interesting case-study because of its relevant and long-lasting share of migrants; the presence of relevant public spaces that could be targeted by action-research activities; diversified interconnections (railway, commuting, etc.) between the small municipality and the regional capital of Turin; and, not least, local actors available to collaborate in the project, in particular active in the field of migrant inclusion (as Italian Red Cross, local Mayor, catholic church and several associations).

The aim of the action-research conducted in Bussoleno in 2021 was to investigate - using a participatory approach - the use of public spaces by migrants and locals, the different self-perceptions and ways of living with respect to the considered mountain territory, and the connections between such a mountain area and the metropolitan core (Gilli, Membretti 2022a).

The first step of the action-research was the field preparation that allowed to recruit participants for the activities in an atmosphere of trust and mutual cooperation. This preparation involved three types of stakeholders: territorial partner, local stakeholders and migrants. The territorial partner was identified in the Metropolitan City of Turin that, supporting the research with an intense institutional communication activity, decided to assign to the research institute FIERI the most operative part of its work (collaboration in preliminary investigation and in action-research itself). Then, a wide range of local stakeholders were involved: public institutions, third sector associations (operating in the reception of migrants and social/housing inclusion) and different actors operating in the field of education (e.g. school for adults, etc.). These local actors worked

also as socio-cultural mediators between the research team and migrants in Bussoleno.

Migrants directly involved in the action-research in Bussoleno were 30 (one third female) and were mainly Albanians and Moroccans, both first and second generation migrants. Of the 14 Albanians, half were first generation and half second generation migrants, all living in Bussoleno or maintaining close links with Bussoleno; other migrants (N = 12) were either first and second generation Moroccans, or people coming from other African countries (Guinea, Somalia) or Bangladesh, most of them resident in – or gravitating to – Bussoleno, as attending the CPIA adult school (Gilli, Membretti 2022b). Moreover, some “migrants in transit” – that is, people intending to cross the nearby border with France – were also engaged in the activities. These last subjects (4 males, from Central Africa) were hosted by the Red Cross in Bussoleno, some of them engaged in a professionalization process within project LISA (acronym for: work, inclusion, development, independence), which targets fragile people, homeless or asylum seekers.

Different participatory tools were used in conducting action-research: focus groups (in the preliminary work and in the final evaluation), mobility mapping, social mapping and a 4-days participatory architecture workshop. Mobility mapping and social mapping resulted useful tools to re-construct the mobility trajectories of migrants living in Bussoleno and the map of public spaces in the village, used and frequented by migrants in their free time.

The field work brought out some needs expressed by participants with respect to the territory they live: one of the most relevant resulted in creating a new meeting place in the centre of the village, close to the public market area and accessible to different groups of people (youngsters, mothers with children, etc.). Therefore, with the aim of self-building a convivial wooden structure (the “MATILDE big bench”), a 4-days participatory architecture workshop was organized, involving migrants, local population and a group of students (also coming from other regions, and responding to a national call

organized with the support of Camposaz association, partner of the initiative).

The final output of the activities is represented by a new and concrete public space of encounter, offered to the different populations of the village as a common good to take care of in the future.

The action-research conducted in Bussoleno has led to different considerations and reflections, with respect in particular to the issue of integration and agency of migrants in rural and mountain areas. First of all, it has showed that the engagement and even the empowerment of migrants can take place not only through labour integration but also through a mindful co-creation and shared use of public spaces. Public spaces play an important role for social cohesion and recognition, especially in mountain and rural areas where there are fewer places for organised socialisation with respect to bigger cities. Public spaces play an even more important role for migrants living in mountain and rural areas because they have fewer economic resources and relational networks, and lack non-commodified spaces of encounter.

The action-research and participatory activities enforced at the same time the idea that engagement of migrants and locals can translate into rootedness and sense of belonging, also for different communities with respect to the same places, trough not only to the use and maintenance of an asset but also to its design and creation. In this way, the space-making process becomes a sense-making process (Weick 1969) with a construction of shared meanings through the creation of concrete spaces.

Let us look at these points analytically.

Engagement and even empowerment of migrants can take place through a conscious use and co-creation of public spaces. This means the habit of frequenting - in addition to one's private home - a set of spaces for collective social use, without access con-

straints, both indoors (such as a public library) and outdoors (such as a garden, or a street). In public spaces, individual carries out activities, establishes ties, exchanges information, while he/she is visible and recognised within the social fabric, thus exercising her/his rights of citizenship. What are the characteristics of a public space? First of all, it must be a semanticized space. It is not a question of simply having an empty space, such as a field or a courtyard, but a space to which the community gives specific meanings and values. Its characteristics are often site-specific and can vary, but common features include being an accessible, safe, visible place, facilitating relationships, adaptable to different uses over time (Gilli, Membretti 2022b).

Public spaces play an important role for social cohesion, especially in mountain and rural areas where there are fewer places for organised socialisation, both public, such as museums, and private, such as associations, places of cult, shopping centres. Among the indoor public spaces in Bussoleno there is a library, a museum-workshop for schools (a former mill, the Varesio Museum) and a railway museum currently closed. However, the research conducted in MAT-ILDE project was mainly aimed at focusing on outdoor public spaces because - as it emerged in a previous work (Ibid.: 201) - there is often a low level of awareness of migrants about mountain space and landscape: migrants often do not realise that they live in a mountain village and do not often frequent paths and outdoor spaces. The action-research, with the realisation of a public outdoor space offering also a view on the mountain panorama, aimed to facilitate this use and a wider awareness.

In Bussoleno, existing outdoor public spaces include some playgrounds, mainly dedicated to the youngest (kindergarten and primary school children) and a football field, while there is a lack of meeting grounds for adolescents; for this reason, adolescents and young people often move to other villages by train. Migrants in Bussoleno mainly use the benches they find scattered around the town, including those in front of the station, where, however, there is no space for a real square. The largest square of the village, the market

square, is used for market purpose one day a week and becomes a car park the other days. There are no other usable squares for socialising. The central street of the village is narrow and has to guarantee access to the cars of the residents, and therefore cannot be pedestrianised. Private leisure spaces are also somewhat limited and mostly indoor, while access is related to consumption: the nearby shopping centre (not easy to be reached by walking), some shops, bars and restaurants/pizzerias. There are plans to use the old cinema, closed a long time ago, to build an indoor climbing gym, a very important project that would give space to young people and would connect indoor to outdoor. In Bussoleno there are some cultural, sport (CAI, Italian Alpine Club) and voluntary associations, but they are thought more for adults than for young people. There are no migrants' formal associations. For Moroccans, the most important place of indoor encounter remains the mosque, that is a small Islamic prayer room, which only welcomes men. Finally, there is the parish with its spaces. In this context, Turin, the regional capital, plays an important role. Many migrants go to Turin on Saturdays for the Porta Palazzo market, which is large, cheap and multi-ethnic, well connected by train, offering a way to 'counterbalance' the daily mountain experience with occasional urban incursions. Despite the fact that there are not many outdoor spaces for meeting, many activities are implemented to foster civic participation and engagement, mainly through the synergies developed by the Municipality and local authorities on one hand, and associations, cooperatives and the local parish (which also coordinates Caritas activities) on the other (Gilli, Membretti 2022b).

Public spaces play an even more important role for mountain and rural migrants that have fewer economic resources and relational networks. When focusing on public spaces, some considerations on the issues of housing have to be recalled²: those who do not have

2 Mountain villages generally have a high percentage of old and cheap houses, often old-fashioned but poor in technical and material terms; for the owners (Italians and non-Italians) the houses are now renovated and thermally insulated, but for the tenants, often immigrants, this represents a situation of housing hardship.

a sufficiently large and comfortable house need public spaces more than others. It must also be said that migrants - when they have money enough to be spent - do not always have a leisure culture similar to that of Western Europeans: membership of gyms, clubs and associations is not always frequent, and if someone join those facilities, are usually children, but not adults, and certainly not women, often relegated to the domestic space. Therefore, public spaces become crucial for getting out of the private and domestic dimension, exercising one's right to visibility and socialisation, and avoiding socio-spatial ghettoisation. Among migrants (but the same applies to Italians) the most disadvantaged individuals seem singles or couples without children. The loneliness of the big city is in reality only partial: at metropolitan level there are cultural associations, sports clubs, organisations of all kinds promoting socialisation among singles. In mountain villages, on the contrary, this social infrastructure does not exist and a single-person risks to be just a lonely man/woman with no landing fields; even more in the case of a migrant (Ibid.).

Finally, engagement of migrants translates into their rootedness and sense of belonging to the place. For developing rootedness, mere frequentation of public spaces is not enough: what is needed are engagement activities as the design and transformation of places, which can be stimulated by an inclusive public debate, participatory planning and choral implementation. Migrants visibility in a public place designed and shared with locals can foster mutual recognition and thus lay the foundations for negotiated pathways of citizenship.

In this way, the public space is not given - as a top-down intervention - but is self-produced by the community within a bottom-up approach: each migrant participating in this process will be able to say to her/his children with pride, "we made this and you will have to take care of it in the future", thus laying the foundations for a common intergenerational heritage (Ibid.).

3. From action-research to policy design: conclusive remarks

The analysis of the qualitative data collected through the action-research conducted in the mountain area of Metropolitan City of Turin seems to highlight the close interrelation between socio-economic and labour integration of migrants and other dimensions that come into play in the process of their integration in a new reality, with particular reference newcomers' agency.

Taking up the conceptualisation of Ager and Strang (2008), as referred in the introduction of this paper, a key component of integration is represented by citizenship and rights, i.e. the legal-political basic conditions nature for inclusion process. On the one hand, in the areas examined, guaranteed rights as freedom of religion and political expression and equality before the law can be asserted by individual and groups; on the other hand, certain obligations can be imposed on migrants, such as, for example, to participate in language and culture courses. Moreover, residential placement of migrants in rural and mountainous areas in many cases has been imposed by central institutions: this is the situation of the resettlement of many asylum seekers, relocated by national dispersal policies in even remote areas of Italy. Therefore, policies supporting migrants' agency should consider and guarantee the right to choose one's own place of settlement as part of migrants right to self-determination.

Another relevant aspect of the inclusion of migrants refers to the relations between them and local structures and institutions, and relates to the capacity of public administration to meet the special needs of the former and to facilitate their access to services on an equal and non-discriminatory basis. Local administrations in rural and mountainous areas often lack adequate knowledge of the needs of migrant groups and the rights that should be guaranteed to them, a circumstance aggravated by the fact that civil servants often do not

have intercultural experience and language skills to deal with ethnic diversity. Policies supporting migrants' agency need to be based on specific competencies and qualifications held by local institutions.

Another important area for socio-economic and labour integration is access to education and training, and the interaction with educational facilities and infrastructures that can offer migrants the opportunity to acquire additional skills useful for social interaction and future job search. In the case-study of Bussoleno, these facilities are sometimes only accessible with non-negligible individual investments of time and money, especially when public transportation is underdeveloped and/or too expensive for people with poor income. Related to this problem there is in fact the issue of spatial mobility, which is particularly felt in rural and mountainous areas. Assuming that local spaces can be both experienced as places of conviviality and conflict (Radford 2017), mobility here refers to the ability to move from one's residential space in order to access employment, education and health, as well as to create and maintain social contacts and networks. Policy supporting migrants' agency have to consider their concrete right of internal mobility and the access to territorial resources, at different scale and considering budget's constraints.

Undoubtedly, again following Ager and Strang's approach, a relevant aspect of integration refers to the conditions of access to housing and spatial infrastructures, in particular public spaces. The literature here emphasises the interdependencies between housing and physical and emotional well-being, pointing out how perceived satisfaction with one's living arrangements is influenced by size and quality of housing, cost and contractual situation (Stewart, Shaffer 2015), but also by environmental and contextual factors, such as accessibility to health, education and work facilities. In addition to the structural conditions of the housing market (e.g. vacancy rate, level of renting), other access mechanisms determine whether and to what extent migrants are able to rent flats or houses in rural areas - mechanisms also partly similar to those operating in urban areas (Membretti, Quassoli 2015): specifically, differential treatment,

when not overt discrimination associated with landlords' reluctance to rent to migrants are among the most important obstacles, whereas support from the local population and social proximity facilitate access to housing (Weidinger, Kordel 2020). As we have seen in the case study, public space is relevant, assuming the role of a fundamental socio-spatial infrastructure for the development of citizenship through public visibility of migrants and their recognition by local community. Policy supporting migrants' agency need to be designed as place-based and place-sensitive, taking into account the role of spatial dimension for the quality of life and empowerment of people.

Access to health and health facilities/infrastructures clearly have positive impacts on the well-being of migrants and, consequently, also on their opportunities for socio-economic and labour integration. However, accessibility to health infrastructures in general and to medical specialists in particular can be problematic, in particular in the rural and mountainous areas under consideration, also due to linguistic-cultural barriers, besides the issue of costs and mobility. A related issue is that of security, especially for those migrants (in particular, refugees and asylum seekers) coming from war zones or who have experienced violence during their migration trajectory. In rural and mountainous areas, and specifically in those here considered, ambivalence is given by the fact that, while some migrants experience racism even in these remote territories (Garland, Chakraborti 2006), the majority consider rural Italian locations much safer than their countries of origin. Especially migrants' families emphasise the opportunity to raise their children in a protected environment, away from urban risks (Stenbacka 2012). Policy supporting migrants' agency should foster the overall well-being of newcomers, enhancing the role of health and perceived security at different territorial levels, in relationship to their active and concrete citizenship.

In conclusion, the data gathered in the above-mentioned case study, as in the other different territorial cases considered in MATILDE project at European level, show how rural and mountainous areas present ambivalent conditions with respect to the development of migrants'

agency in the integration process and in relation to a public policy ecosystem that is constructed on a local scale, but is based on norms and institutions that are also extra-local. Moreover, it is important to recognise that the dimensions described here - related to socio-economic and labour integration and to spatial inclusion - are subject to change as a result of migrants' impact on local social structures.

In this sense, the “ecosystem of public policies” (e.g., their interplay at different scale) can provide the structural basis for the development of migrants' agency, which - reinforced through participatory processes and the building of connections, bridges and social bonds - in turn interacts with local social structures. Clearly, social connections play an important role in conveying the process of socio-economic and labour integration at local level. Following Putnam's reflections on social capital (1993), relationships with family members, ethnic, national or religious communities (social connections) allow migrants and refugees to share cultural and social practices and maintain family patterns of relationships. In addition, these networks can also be made fruitful for building relationships, creating contacts and receiving assistance in navigating a new environment (Schech, Rainbird, 2013).

In the light of these reflections, innovative policy tools seem necessary to be designed and tested, in order to stimulate virtuous processes and to strengthen migrants' real participation in the social life of local communities, overcoming obsolete institutional models and developing different channels of involvement. As shown in the case of Bussoleno, these tools should deal with the crucial issues of public space and shared care of the territory between old and new inhabitants, enabling new forms of integration in rural and mountainous areas.

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