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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Fruit production and exploited labor in northern Italy: Redefining urban responsibility toward the agrarian ground

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Abstract

Immigrants play a crucial role in the development of capital-intensive, industrialized agriculture and often find themselves living in derelict, stigmatized neighborhoods where they become not only objects of fear and exclusion but also objects of racketeering, exploitation, and profit-making dynamics. Global trends and migration flows trigger new concerns among policymakers who realize that food production is not only a rural issue. Discussing the Italian case of the Saluzzo Fruit District and the Prima Accoglienza Stagionali (PAS, First Reception of Seasonal Workers) project, this contribution focuses on the role that cities as institutional complexes can have in preventing illegal recruitment and exploitation of labor in agriculture as well as improving the living conditions of migrant field hands through the activation of urban–rural synergies for multifactor and multilevel cooperation. Results offer an overview of the potentiality of the abandonment of an emergency approach limited to the sole provision of shelters to migrant workers for adopting a more structured and holistic approach to territorial planning.

KEYWORDS
illegal labor intermediation, labor exploitation, migrant labor, urban–rural links

INTRODUCTION

Improving the urban–rural nexus is crucial for social justice, including improving farming labor conditions, ensuring food sovereignty, and avoiding food crises (Williams & Counihan, 2012). The necessity of renegotiating local relations between agricultural settings and urban public and private services is increasingly explicit. The recent COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the consequences of pressuring global food systems, including uncertainties that might affect both local food supply and rural labor conditions (Jansma & Wertheim-Heck, 2021). In January 2020, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Hilal Elver, denounced that in Italy, "hundreds of thousands of workers farm the land or take care of livestock without adequate legal and social protections, coping with insufficient salaries and living under the constant threat of losing their job, being forcibly repatriated, or becoming the object of physical and moral violence" (OHCHR, 2020). The most vulnerable groups in agricultural labor (e.g., migrants in irregular situations) are increasingly subject to various forms of labor exploitation.

One of these forms of exploitation is locally known as *caporalato* (gangmaster system). *Caporalato* is a gangmaster system of labor recruitment through which an intermediator, called a *caporale* (gangmaster), connects the demand for agricultural labor with a supply of vulnerable workers, whether migrants or locals, which renders such workers available at short notice and for cheap wages. The concept comes from the historic profile of gangmasters in Italian agriculture, known as *caporali*, who are tasked with intermediary functions in the recruitment, organization, and control of low-wage labor (Poppi &

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Travaglino, 2019). Such gangmasters often retain part of the workers' wage and monopolize negotiations with employers on compensation, duties, working hours, and conditions (Gansemans & D'Haese, 2020). As Perrotta and Raeymaekers (2022, 2) argue, "over the last 30 years, *caporalato* has represented a central infrastructure of labor mediation, which simultaneously complements neoliberal state policies while embedding the cost of labor reproduction into migrant networks."

Immigrants play an increasingly crucial role in the development of industrialized agriculture, and they shoulder the burden of keeping prices low. They often find themselves living in derelict, stigmatized neighborhoods where they are at a higher risk of being subjected to racketeering as well as labor and sexual exploitation (Campbell & Laheij, 2021). In Italy, the number of migrant agricultural workers has tripled in less than 15 years, rising from 5.6% of total agricultural employment numbers in 2008 to 17.8% in 2020 while the percentage of Italian workers decreased from 41.1% in 2008 to 36.5% in 2020 (Macrì, 2021). Immigrants are overrepresented in the undeclared economy, less specialized, and hold more precarious positions in the agricultural labor market. Moreover, the estimated number of irregular workers have increased from 180,000 in 2020 to 230,000 in 2022 (OPR, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated these dynamics that currently are characterizing the intensive agro-industrial production complexes on which urban populations increasingly depend (van der Ploeg, 2008). Global trends and migration flows trigger concerns among policymakers who increasingly realize that food production is not only a rural issue (Brunori & Di Iacovo, 2014; Morgan, 2009). Despite the importance of pioneering initiatives launched worldwide for more inclusive and sustainable food policies, much remains to be done. On the one hand, urban initiative and responsiveness still lag, in the face of a growing awareness of the impacts of urban demands on the rural sphere, in terms of natural resources, price containment, and precarious labor. On the other hand, centralization of institutional presence, public services, and labor control in urban areas facilitate the deterioration of agricultural labor conditions.

The urgency to limit such dynamics is extremely relevant for the urban contexts located within intensive agro-production territorial systems; in this case, in the literature there is still a lack of specific studies presenting broader assessments of their importance in terms of policymaking processes for building more just, fair, and inclusive territorial eco-social systems and rebalancing power relationships through the provision of services (e.g., labor union assistance) and/or widening their access. Analyzing a case study located in the Saluzzo Fruit District, in northern Italy, this article focuses on the role that cities as institutional complexes have in preventing agricultural labor exploitation. Saluzzo is a mid-sized city (population 17,423) located in the Cuneo province in the Piedmont region. At the heart of one of the larger and most specialized agro-industrial national districts, it is the third largest hub of fruit production in the country (Ippolito et al., 2020; Regione Piemonte and IRES-Piemonte, 2020). Increasing migration flows, seasonal worker demand, and housing scarcity in the surrounding rural areas are now causing seasonal concentrations of the migrant workers in informal settlements in the city center.

The article presents the case of Prima Accoglienza Stagionali (PAS, First Reception of Seasonal Workers), a project launched in 2018 by the municipality of Saluzzo, with the support of other local actors (social cooperatives, humanitarian associations, and labor unions) in partnership with the Piedmont Region. It aims to prevent migrant labor exploitation in agriculture as well as improve hosting conditions. To achieve such objectives, the municipality has enacted specific multilevel and multiactor strategies. This article presents and describes such strategies, drawing conclusions about the potential of municipalities to develop new problem-centered networks between urban and rural spaces, convening public, private, and third-sector actors to improve the quality of agricultural labor and develop more sustainable systems of food production.

CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Presenting the case study context

The valley in which Saluzzo is located is particularly suited to fruticulture and viticulture. The city is surrounded by a constellation of smaller municipalities called "Fruit Municipalities," which together give shape to the Saluzzo Fruit District (Figure 1). The focus on Saluzzo is relevant at the national level, since the Labor Ministry has identified local strategies for preventing and countering exploitation as best practices in the first national plan against labor exploitation in agriculture (MLPS, 2020). In Saluzzo, like in other agro-industrial areas of the country, there is a lack of local workers available for low-specialization jobs. Labor is often supplied by seasonal workers, usually asylum seekers or migrants in precarious situations, who tend to have lower wage expectations and fewer alternatives in the labor market. They also tend to lack access to basic services (e.g., shelter, health and social services, labor union assistance, placement support, etc.), as pointed out by the Regional Observatory on Immigration and the Right to Asylum (ROIRA) (Berton et al., 2020; Ippolito et al., 2020). These vulnerable groups in precarious situations constitute a social ground where gangmastery proliferates. Saluzzo has become a hub for migrant labor (mostly of sub-Saharan African origin) directed to the agro-fruit district: it functions as an access point toward the surrounding fields in terms of mobility, offers temporary housing solutions, and it has been in recent years the center of the institutional efforts to better organize, regulate, and protect recruitment processes for agricultural jobs.

The Saluzzo district—in line with the provincial data that show that only 12% of the farms have polyculture productions—is highly specialized in the cultivation of four main crops: apple (5258 hectares, equal to 84% of the total apple cultivation area in Piedmont), actinidia (3022 hectares, 71%), nectarine (2162 hectares, 98%), and peach (971 hectares, 57%).[1] In 2019/2020, the cultivation of small fruits and berries (e.g., raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, currants, and gooseberries) was covering 277 of the 285 total regional hectares occupied by this new production (Ippolito et al., 2020, 7). According to province data, only 12% of the farms have polyculture productions. Following a national trend, the concomitance between

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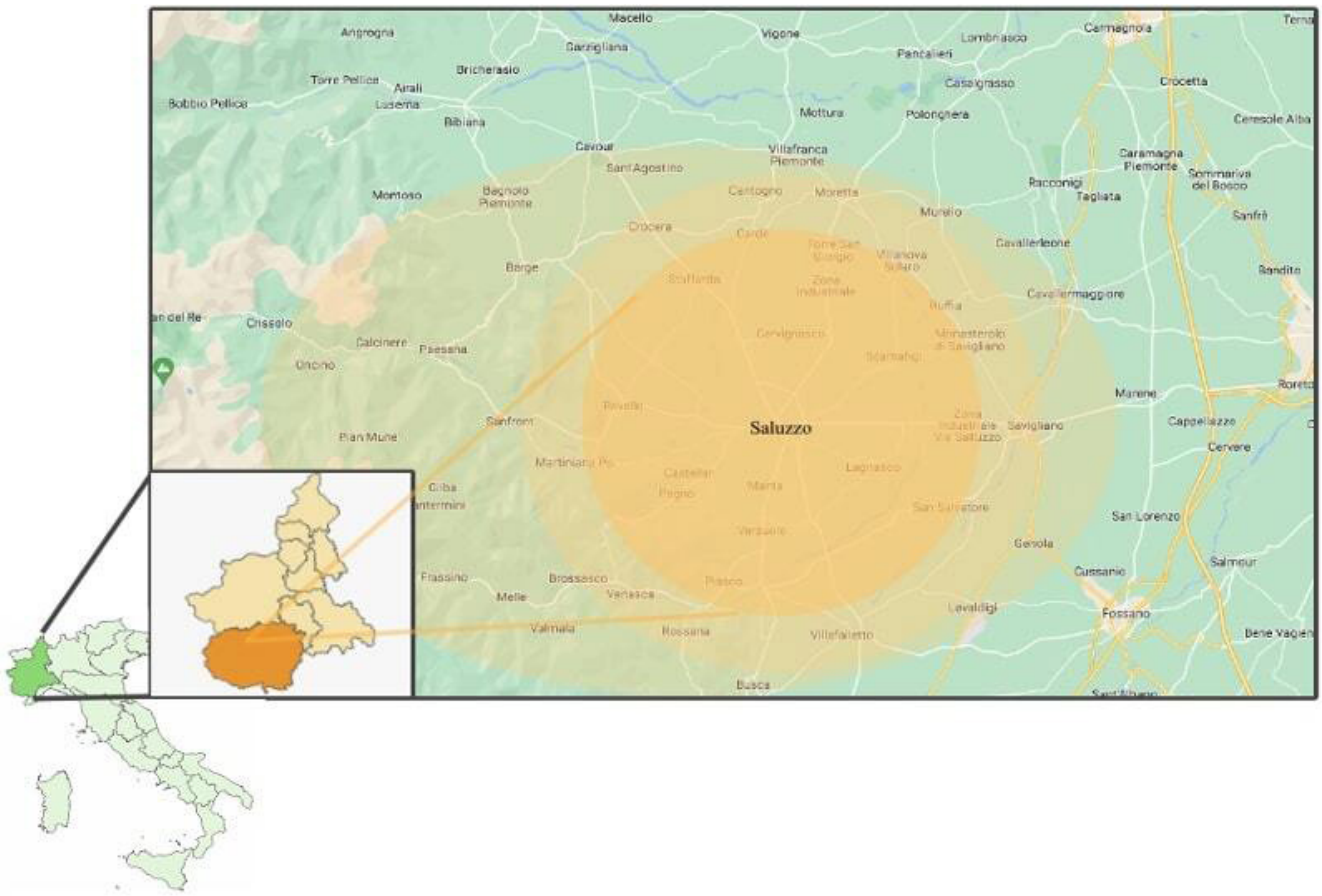

FIGURE 1 Saluzzo Fruit District, Piedmont region—Cuneo Province. *Source*: Own Elaboration.

increasing aging of local family-farm labor and progressive expansion of cultivation areas is making external labor an indispensable pillar of the local agro-food system that is increasingly larger year after year (Cavicchioli et al., 2019). If we consider the number of non-European workers employed (contractualized) in agriculture in the Saluzzo Fruit District, we can see that between September 2010 and September 2019 this number has almost doubled, shifting from 4515 people to 9568 people (Berton et al., 2020, 42).

Currently, migrant seasonal workers are arriving mostly from Albania (21.7%),[2] Mali (16.8%), Ivory Coast (8.7%), Senegal (7.8%), China (7.7%), Morocco (6.5%), India (6.3%), Burkina Faso (5.1%), Gambia (3.7%), and Nigeria (3.6%), while the rest of the percentage is arriving from a plethora of countries such as Tunisia and other sub-Saharan countries (Berton et al., 2020, 44). Moreover, after the 2008 economic recession, many foreign workers—formerly employed in industries—flowed into agriculture, which increased the agricultural labor supply and was further intensified by the arrival of new migrants in the wake of the humanitarian crises of 2011–2012 (Arab Spring) and the exacerbation of the Libyan question and Syrian war (Caritas Italiana, 2014, 2015; Ippolito et al., 2020). As underlined by the ROIRA in the last years, the number of seasonal African laborers has significantly grown, increasing from 2100 in 2017 to 3404 in 2019 and—given the lack of decent housing solutions caused by the increase in the external labor flow—around 1000 migrants were counted as homeless in 2019 (Berton et al., 2020, 57). The ROIRA—on the basis of data of a local charity organization working with migrant farm workers (Caritas Italiana, 2014, 2015)—also points out that these are the most vulnerable workers and they are exposed to the risk of illegal hiring among other forms of abuse (Giammarinaro, 2022). According to Palumbo and Sciurba (2018), ghettoization in informal settlements and inadequate housing conditions of migrant workers, beyond situations of blackmail directly linked to the possibility to work on farms, may also foster sexual exploitation of migrant women. In Saluzzo, most of those who arrive in the city without a previous labor contact or with very short contracts, often of a few days, are men, 60% of which are under the age of 30 and with a poor educational level (Ippolito et al., 2020, 8). For this reason they are mostly needed—as unskilled labor—during the intensive harvesting months and not throughout the rest of the year when specialized knowledge is required (e.g., pruning) for plant or soil maintenance and regeneration (Berton et al., 2020; Caritas Italiana, 2015, 2019; Ippolito et al., 2020).

Methods of data collection and data analysis

By documenting the experience of the PAS project, we argue that mid-sized cities surrounded by productive agricultural territories,

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such as Saluzzo, are in the position to articulate dense urban–rural economic and social interdependencies (Tacoli, 1998), with the potential of becoming important organizational systems for improving the agricultural labor conditions. The case study has been developed using: (1) quantitative secondary data on the structure and evolution of the Saluzzo Fruit District and impact of the PAS initiative (period 2018–2019), processed by the Piedmont Institute for Socio-economic Research, the RORIA, and the humanitarian organization Caritas; and (2) qualitative data from seven semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in implementation and promotion of the PAS project and approach. Even though we have conducted only a small number of interviews, what here has relevance is the operative positionality of the actors: interviewees were selected from among the actors that implemented and articulated the municipal initiative on the ground. In PAS, partner organizations (e.g., labor unions, social cooperatives, and producer associations) work on the interface between the rural sphere (i.e., farms and farmworkers) and the urban sphere (i.e., institutions and related service providers). Specifically, job placement and labor union assistance are not something that we can limit within the sphere of the "urban" since they have no limitation on their action. However, the fact that organizations have no material branching into the countryside (e.g., branch offices, information service spots) often creates a wall between the two spheres and between service providers and seasonal migrant workers.

Interviews were conducted in early 2021, either in person or via video call. The decision to use mixed interview modes was due to the restrictions on internal movements during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews were focused on five main themes: a description of the project; the specific role of the actors involved in the PAS strategy/approach and the articulation and integration of their action(s); concerted cooperation: strengths and weaknesses; a focus on the relation of agriculture migration (e.g., migrant agricultural labor profiles); and evolution of the initiative and connections or synergies with other projects. In the following sections, albeit being anonymized, interview excerpts are specified according to the role each interviewee played within the PAS structure and its interconnection with other relevant local initiatives. The collected information has been analyzed in connection with the rich anthropological and sociological scholarship on both brokerage and labor exploitation within migration networks (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Boissevain, 1974; Farinella & Nori, 2020; Murphy, 1981; Perrotta, 2014; Wolf, 1956) and morphogenesis of informal settlements and territorial planning (Brovia & Piro, 2021; Dovey et al., 2020).

LABOR EXPLOITATION IN ITALIAN AGRICULTURE

A structural problem embedded in global trends

Since the 1980s, the agrarian terrain has been severely affected by the consolidation of modern globalized mass production systems (McMichael, 2010; van der Ploeg, 2008), such as the progressive promotion of liberalization measures, the growing cost–price squeeze,[3] and the decline in the agricultural prices—which have eroded the cost of labor power (Moore, 2010). As a consequence, the necessity to face international market pressure increased the necessity to use illegal bargaining and shadow economy practices aiming at cutting the costs of field hands. At the farm level, this reflects an urgency to easily and quickly reduce production costs since ongoing cost–price squeezes continue to churn surviving farmers into bankruptcy and foreclosure: "Through an increasingly unfair distribution of risks, costs, and profits along the chain, food industries and retailers use their oligopolistic market power of negotiation to impose price and conditions on farmers, who have faced a dramatic economic squeeze since the 1970s" (Corrado et al., 2018, 2). According to the *Fifth Report on Agro-mafia and Caporalato* (OPR, 2020, 188), it is estimated that in Italy in 2020, there were around 180,000 agricultural workers in irregular and vulnerable positions and exposed to exploitative conditions, often by illegal intermediators. Agriculture is the sector that has the highest estimations for undeclared labor and it also has wide-spread precarious contracts and conditions. It is also the sector most associated with poor labor in Italy: recent data show that among the five positions in the economy where poor workers are concentrated the most, four are agricultural professions (OPR, 2022, 21–29). The Italian National Statistical Institute shows that the agricultural irregularity rate is constantly growing: in 2013, out of 100 agricultural workers, 22.2 were irregular. In 2016 this number grew to 24.2, reaching a peak of 30.4% in southern regions where we find lower levels of productivity, added value, and human resources' employability (Coppola et al., 2018; RRN, 2020, 87).

The embedding of labor exploitation in Italian agriculture (and in many other contexts) goes way beyond individual gangmasters (*caporali*), reaching the structural level. The desperation that makes precarious labor conditions possible is the result of intersecting structural problems: the lack of public investment in disadvantaged territories (SVIMEZ, 2019), the flawed immigrant reception system (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021), and the lack of adequate labor policies and interventions aimed at helping seasonal migrant workers overcome barriers in accessing the labor market autonomously. These all contribute to generating a desperate labor pool (Melossi, 2021). However, the *caporalato* system is not found exclusively in Italy since the gangmastered labor system also is common in the agricultural landscapes of Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This corresponds, as underlined by Brass (2004), to a widespread restructuring of the rural labor process by cost-cutting agribusiness enterprises and commercial farmers. Gangmastering appears to be a form of what Schneider and Schneider (2013, 11) define as broker capitalism. This is a form of capitalism that differs from merchant, industrial, and financial capitalism in that broker capitalists may control only marginal assets of the production complex and flourish at the rural periphery where the core interests are unable or scarcely able to monopolize or administer local activities connected with the production, marketing, and export of products.[4] The most significant resources are the networks of personal contacts. According to Schneider and

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Schneider, broker capitalists "do not make decisions that affect millions of people" but "in the local arena they are a viable, full-fledged market force, with the capacity to promote or obstruct change within parameters set by the world-system" (Schneider & Schneider, 2013, 11).

The *caporalato* system

A recent national law (Law n.199/2016) has redefined labor exploitation in the penal code, expanding its conceptualization by improving the framework at the disposal of the justice system and law enforcement to address and contain it, while enhancing protections for exploited people. Italian law frames labor exploitation in all industries through the concept of *caporalato*, which includes both labor exploitation as well as the illegal intermediation of exploited labor. *Caporalato* in agriculture is built on globalized food systems that aim at producing cheap food for cheap labor, lowering costs through the exploitation of vulnerable groups (Poppi & Travaglino, 2019). This reduces labor agency, understood as workers' ability to act effectively to improve their labor conditions (Gansemans & D'Haese, 2020). The *caporale* is a social broker mediating illegally between labor supply and demand, traditionally but not exclusively in agriculture (Scaturro, 2021). Boissevain (1974, 148) describes brokers as actors who place "people in touch with each other either directly or indirectly for profit." The *caporale* strengthens its interests by retaining part of the worker's salary using physical duress or intimidation, or just being recognized by the worker as an unavoidable step to enter the agricultural labor market and by the farm owner as a supplier of an cheap and easily exploitable workforce (e.g., migrants in irregular situations). In doing so, the *caporale* receives a sort of social legitimation that elevates its role to a level of structural indispensability, often recognized by the worker. Following Bourdieu, 2002, such social acceptance derives from the *caporale* ability to distinguish themself through a consolidation of social and cultural capital, mobilizing a position of connectedness and prestige which, as underlined by Poppi and Travaglino (2019), lies in the indispensability of the service provided by the *caporale*.

Today with the presence of a migrant labor force that is quickly increasing at the national level, immigrants represent the perfect viable pathway for the action of *caporali*. Because they are more open to accepting lower wages (under the legal national level) and precarious working conditions, such workers usually do not have sufficient information regarding their labor rights. Additionally, in many cases, they do not know the steps to access the labor market and lack direct access to contact the farms. Furthermore, migrants in irregular situations[5]—who cannot access legal intermediation services—are more vulnerable to blackmail than legal migrant workers and are often forced to accept severely exploitative working conditions to survive. As underlined by Ambrosini (2012, 363) "an irregular immigrant costs less, is more flexible and makes fewer demands. Moreover, a person who has just arrived, who does not know the language and who has few or no social contacts is the most willing candidate to undertake hard work.... Therefore, the most marginal foreigners, the 'Others' *par excellence*, become the most useful."

At first, some migrant workers may perceive the action of the *caporale* as an advantage, but this ends up costing them their labor rights. The *caporale* as a gangmaster moves within these social peripheries y attracting the workforce that the legal labor market left totally or partly behind. It substitutes the direct action of farm owners and offers them cheap labor. For irregular migrants, this intermediation becomes unavoidable since, as previously highlighted, it would be impossible for them to enter the agricultural labor market independently or—in some cases—reach the workplace without the transport provided by the gangmaster (Howard & Forin, 2019). Farmers value the ability of the gangmaster to offer fast response to workforce requests by gathering the necessary quantity of workers and providing transportation to the field and bring them back at the end of the workday.

Within migrant communities, sometimes intermediators are illegal occupational brokers (of the same nationality) who organize flows of workforce from the country of origin. They have been in Italy for years, usually working in the agricultural sector, have learned the language, have developed relational networks, and have acquired a level of agency (Faleschini Lerner & Past, 2020). They are brokers who are able to manage, control, and channel contextualized knowledge flows (Murphy, 1981). The migrant *caporali* have a highly influential role that places them as "political power brokers" (Wolf, 1956) within their community networks in Italy. They navigate the space and the interlinkages between community-based local voices and the structural translocal-societal transformations (Bräuchler et al., 2021). There are situations in which the *caporale* still works in the fields guiding groups that recognize them as a "first among equals" (i.e., *caporalato* of the foreperson). They are an enterprising person who owns sufficient means of transport or is able to rent them, with expertise in the organizational process related to the different stages of the labor recruitment. They have trusted workers and control several teams, having established a clientele of farms which contact them recurrently every season (OPR, 2018).

Usually in Italy, the irregular migrant field hands receive between EUR 20 and 25 per day (less than half of the legal amount established by the national legislation). There are also extreme cases that show a more severe situation in which—working between 8 and 12 hours—they receive EUR 5–8 per day or EUR 250 per month, of which 200 are retained for food, transport, and hosting in a ghetto (Valent, 2010). This constitutes a system of oppression and control in which workers become completely dependent on the actions of the intermediary (Leogrande, 2016). It develops following different trajectories from bonded labor (e.g., piecework paid EUR 3–4 for a 375 kg fruit bin) to ghettoization and social isolation of (migrant) laborers from local communities. However, we have to underline that the *caporalato* system in Italy is not a new phenomenon. Its origin dates back to the nineteenth century and is one of the results of the shift from peasant family agriculture to large industrial cultivation. The emerging industrial production structure of the countryside started to require large groups of workers, temporarily aggregated,

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that the territories—where industrial agriculture took place—were unable to provide. For this reason, groups of seasonal wage-workers began to move toward those territories, often with the intermediation of a *caporale*. For example, in 1905, the Labor Office of the Italian MAIT (Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Transport) underlined that in Capitanata—a rural southern area that since the end of the nineteenth century had been characterized by the abandonment of transhumant pastoralism in favor of the expansion of intensive grain cultivation and viticulture—a large part of the workforce migrated seasonally, and it is estimated that three quarters of the rice weeders were recruited by a *caporale* (Perrotta, 2014; Russo, 2002). The cost of mediation amounted to 10% of the salary in the case of women, while in the case of men, the *caporale* granted cash advances to the laborers during the winter and then subtracted such amount with interest when they were paid at the end of the harvest season (Perrotta, 2014, 197).

CASE STUDY

The agrarian question in the city

Agricultural seasonal labor flows are hyper mobile. The permanent precariousness and short duration of agricultural low-skill contracts force workers to move where the work is, throughout the national territory and from abroad. Most of the low-waged labor in Saluzzo arrives from West Africa, chiefly French-speaking countries, often following, as emerged from our interviews, three different types of (labor) migration flows:

1. Internal extended migration from the fields in southern Italy to northern Italy. As one of the labor union representatives we interviewed, by reconstructing the local evolution of the agricultural labor profile, points out: "When I was young, I went to pick fruit, there was much less production. Production has now increased by at least one third since the 1980s. There has always been the tradition of people coming from outside to pick fruit here: first they came from the mountains, and then people from Southern Italy came. … Then Polish workers replaced the Italian workers from the South and then slowly the Albanians arrived, now they are mostly replaced by African workers. Most of them move between Northern and Southern Italy." (Int.5 Labor Union Representative)
2. Internal short migrations from the nearest big cities (in this case, Turin) to the Saluzzo countryside, which may also entail temporal shifts to other industries as specified by a social worker involved in first reception of migrant workers: "Many of those who live in Turin usually in summer come here in Saluzzo and in winter try to do something in Turin—many of them, for example, work in food delivery services." (Int.1, social worker)
3. International migration flows related to seasonal occupation occasions. These are registered mainly between the Italian and the Spanish fields: "Most of the cyclicity is north–south/south–north, and with Spain. When the harvesting season here ends, most of them go to Spain for the orange harvesting season." (Int.1, social worker)

Such intensive and differentiated flows give evidence of how—in the fruit district—urban and rural areas are neither well-bounded nor self-sufficient spaces. Rather, comprising areas of different land use, interconnected by different mobility patterns, they are closely intertwined and significantly dependent on each other (Banzhaf et al., 2022). The increase in migration flows—and the increase in production—have caused at the local level an emergency in the provision of temporal housing services. A social worker referring to the growing number of migrant workers arriving and temporally living Saluzzo underlines: "Some of them arrived because they have already been in Saluzzo in the past, we knew them, and we knew their faces but in the last years they are mostly new" (Int. 2). Likewise, the representative of a producer organization explained that until a decade ago, hosting facilities for seasonal workers were mostly provided by farm owners while today, housing is sought through the informal activation of migrants' personal networks: "[Before] bed and a decent roof were chiefly provided by the farmer, in an unrivaled number in other parts of Italy" (Int. 3). People in general tend to seek information related to job placement and housing that is "easily accessible, preferably from interpersonal sources such as friends, relatives or co-workers rather than from institutions or organizations" (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, 27). Migrant agricultural workers use formal sources rarely, relying instead on informal sources to avoid legal problems. As pointed out by Farinella and Nori (2020), recruitment is often by word of mouth through the reactivation of personal networks and definition of individual arrangements among migrant communities who often engage and contact friends and relatives. However, relying on informal networks for job placement and hosting can expose workers to exploitative conditions. A speaker for a regional research center explained the image of the "friendly gangmaster" or "friend *caporale*," "who maybe helps you in finding a bed-place, a job offer or provides you [illegally] with a document to work, in exchange for money" (Int. 6). They can be the "metaphorical 'friend-of-a-friend' to being local strongmen who alas assume important political functions … simultaneously bridge gaps, while also gaining a benefit from the boundaries between so-called 'weak' social ties" (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2022, 9). The "friend *caporale*" logic mirrors what we previously called "*caporalato* of the foreperson." Accordingly, a labor union representative explains how often informal support in labor intermediation may end up being labor exploitation in disguise:

> Farmers ask a person who has already worked for them, if he has some friends available for working in the fields, and he begins to bring people there …. When he understands that he is the essential point people have to refer to for entering the labor market, he tries to earn money using this mechanism …. When

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> we explain to migrant workers what labor should look like, it is difficult for them to understand, because they see the caporale [gangmaster] as providing a job opportunity. So, for them it is not a problem but an opportunity. For us, however, it is a systemic problem. (Int.5 Labor Union Representative)

The gangmasters are nodes between supraterritorial networks that are perceived as incommensurable (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2022). The cultural and linguistic closeness between *caporali* and workers creates trust, and hierarchies are reaffirmed by the ability of gangmasters to negotiate access to the labor market, which would be otherwise inaccessible for undocumented or recently arrived migrants. This mechanism is locally fostered by a system of flourishing and dense connections between compatriots and migration and labor policies that are often complicated, ever-changing, and heterogeneous between localities.

> They often arrive because they have other contacts or compatriots who are already here and even if they tell them the conditions in Saluzzo are difficult, they come anyway because their first thought is to send money to the family, to their country, regardless of the precariousness [of the living and working conditions]. (Int. 2, social worker)

It is highly disorienting for everyone, especially for migrants who experience greater barriers in accessing labor market and regularization procedures autonomously (Perrotta, 2019). In most cases, the migrant *caporale* have access to what Boissevain (1974, 147) defines as "primary resources"—resources that they know how to activate (e.g., farm contacts, knowledge of the local labor market and regularization procedures, etc.) but do not directly own, which distinguishes them from *patrons* (in this case the farm owners) who control and manage material assets (e.g., land).[6] Building on these, they create local room to maneuver in the Italian context, an arena of interests (Bierschenk et al., 2002), to make profit and a living for themselves (Murphy, 1981).

Increasing migration flows and seasonal worker demand, on the one hand, and lack of accommodation solutions at the farm level, on the other hand, cause a concentration of field hands in informal settlements in the city center, letting the interconnection between city and rural areas be more evident. Rural infrastructure scarcity becomes a visible urban problem. An anti-trafficking outreach social worker explains that

> in the Saluzzo territory [unlike in southern Italy] there are not so big extensions [of land] which are abandoned, hence there are no ghettos or so-called bidonvilles outside the city in the countryside, but they [migrant-workers] stay here [in the city] and go to the fields by bike also because not all the routes [from the city to the field] are served by public transport. (Int. 2)

In the countryside around Saluzzo, there are no big extensions of abandoned land; this lack prevents migrant workers from flowing into the countryside, building ghettos and precarious camps. Hence, there is no "spatial dispersion of this contemporary agrarian question"[7] that, on the contrary, with the arrival of numerous migrant workers at the beginning of the harvesting season, is centralized in the city, in the main central public spaces: "You could see them sleeping in the park, in the center of the city" (Int. 2, social worker). Informal settlement may develop on both public and private land (Payne, 2004). According to Garrapa (2016), Castracani (2019), and Brovia and Piro (2021), usually informal settlements and camps do not represent just a side- effect of labor market distortions but rather are a fundamental, constitutive element of a labor regime based on the reproduction of flexible and cheap labor. In the literature focused on the exploitation of agricultural migrant labor, these encampments are always described as exclusively rural:

> The main features of these settlements, namely their proximity to the areas of production as well as their role in limiting workers' mobility, are functional to the just-in-time agricultural labor market … rural ghettos as spaces of migrant "seclusion," meaning a particular type of labor force placement characterized by the overlap between the production and the reproduction of everyday life. Differently from other types of camp, workers living in ghettos are not deprived formally of freedom of movement, but they are de facto captives, since they seldom move from rural areas.
>
> (Brovia & Piro, 2021, 55)

On the contrary, in Saluzzo, although sleeping in city parks is not that different in terms of quality of life for the migrants themselves, there is a high mobility of migrant labor via the daily commute from city center to the fields. Moreover, usually informal urban settlements are described as practices of adaptation to the forces of real urban conditions (e.g., available land, transit networks, employment markets, climate change, etc.) (Dovey et al., 2020); however here they are a strategy of adaptation to a broader urban–rural structure.

Urban–rural synergies: The PAS action in the Saluzzo Fruit District

In light of the above, the representative of the Regional Office for Policies on Equal Opportunities, Rights and Inclusion defines an emblematic image of the scenario by asserting that in recent years: "Saluzzo has faced the problem of the encampments in the city center …. We can say that … the Saluzzo question arises when the last ones [in a figurative sense] arrived in the richest area of Piedmont!" (Int.7). The agrarian question becomes the face of a structural problem palpable at the heart of city life. Structural problems need structural actions which, at the national level, were completely missing until recently. The high visibility of the informal settlement (and related

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social drifts) from and within the formal city helped determine the whole image of the city, but consequently it has also stimulated local public discussion about finding a solution in diffused urban planning in Saluzzo and in the surrounding municipalities of the fruit districts. To limit this social local peripheralization and exposure to exploitation, the municipality of Saluzzo launched in 2018—after the implementation of two other preparatory projects[8]—the PAS project. With this project, the municipality—with the financial support of the regional government and some territorial banking foundations—created an urban dormitory, the Foro Boario hub (Figure 2), with 368 beds, toilets, and common areas for food preparation, to accommodate the laborers who arrived in Saluzzo, especially the most precarious ones who had very short contracts.

The system of widespread reception[9] created new housing opportunities in the surrounding territories: 40 more beds in Saluzzo and 73 in smaller municipalities (24 in Verzuolo, 30 in Lagnasco, 19 in Costiglione Saluzzo). In this respect, a social worker explained:

> the municipality of Saluzzo, as institution, entered the field autonomously by renovating an old military building and creating a hub [Foro Boario] not only to accommodate people in Saluzzo but also to use this as the main center [for workers relocation]; if the workers had the contract in nearby municipalities, they were moved in these other minor centers in the "widespread reception" ("accoglienza diffusa"). (Int.1, social worker)

FIGURE 2 Map of the city of Saluzzo with some points of interest for migrant farmworkers. *Source*: Saluzzo Migrante, 2023. http://saluzzomigrante.it.

Public governance structures and institutional processes are often perceived as rigid and unable to intervene in rapidly evolving situations and changing societal needs. According to Simon (2021, 2) "this is particularly true nowadays, with a growing number of important and often intractable or 'wicked' transboundary challenges [e.g., mobility of people] … because they are so difficult to tackle effectively." In Saluzzo, the municipality showed elements of institutional initiative and social engagement, in contrast to the image of public authorities as distant ivory towers, engaging in general policies and broad funding priorities while keeping their distance from transformative efforts in favor of excluded groups:

> The concept of "widespread reception" has been quite revolutionary since [public-municipal] social services entered for the first time this issue, integrating together municipality, NGOs and labor unions which were responsible for the cultural mediation [and related information services for contractualization and workers' rights]. (Int.1, social worker)

Labor unions confirm that they did not expect the public authorities to actively engage in efforts to provide temporary housing to highly mobile seasonal workers. They were pleasantly surprised and decided to cooperate:

> We started by raising the problem through our initiatives and I must say that we have been supported a lot by the municipality of Saluzzo … because it was clear that there was the need of an institutional place [publicly funded] where migrant worker can stay, as fruit picking has not a well-defined period, that's mean that someone can work a week and then stop and do not find another job immediately, there was a need to have a general reception point. At the beginning, we were even thinking about opening a reception place for 200–300 people, but then together with the municipality of Saluzzo we have found this solution. (Int.4, Labor Union Representative)

In this narrative, Saluzzo appears as an urban center in which public and private actors connect around the attempt to play a set of rural development roles that are not limited to logistic functions. For instance, not only the provisioning of consumer convenience centers for purchasing non-durable and durable goods, linkages to (inter)national markets for selling agro-products, agro- and resource-processing centers, or non-agricultural employment for rural labor but also the provisioning of basic services (e.g., health and housing services) and services related to information and knowledge about labor rights (de Jong, 1988; Douglass, 1998; Rondinelli, 1979). A representative of the Regional Office for Policies on Equal Opportunities, Rights and Inclusion underlines:

> The first few years, the workers were camped in a disused station, in dilapidated encampments … now

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> the situation is better managed …. Since the opening of that space [Foro Boario hub], things have started to change …. [Beyond basic services] there is an offer of language trainings, workplace safety trainings, or trainings regarding rights and duties of the workers, or also professional workshops that can bring seasonal workers closer to a profession, for example courses to learn how to prune. (Int.7)

Data (see PASsi Avanti, 2020, 3) show that in the 2018 harvesting season (June 3 through November 29) 516 workers used the PAS dormitory services while 418 used the other services provided by the hub (i.e., showers, toilet, kitchen, and electricity) (for a total of 934 workers). During the 2019 harvesting season (June 19 through November 22), these numbers slightly grew, with 629 workers for the first group and 502 for the second one (for a total of 1131 workers). In 2019, the nationality of such workers was mostly of African countries (54% from Mali; 18% from Senegal; 12% from the Ivory Coast; 16% from other countries), 57% of them were aged between 20 and 30 years old, and almost half of them were in Italy with a humanitarian residence permit. We have to highlight that, given the high number of migrant workers arriving in Saluzzo every year and the lack of a national calendarization of the crops' labor needs, the provided facilities were not always sufficient to accommodate all the migrants. However, the public effort represented a territorial unicum in the consolidation of territorial networks to enact preventive strategies against labor exploitation and to improve living conditions:

> The main objective has been removing people from the street, because it often happens that you are in Saluzzo and you have to go to pick apples 15 kilometers away, and the only vehicle you have is a bicycle, in this sense, the widespread reception helped a lot …. Obviously there was a huge demand for bed-places so sometimes we still had the need to organize external tents also because there was no national calendarization of the crops' labor needs. (Int.1, social worker)

Finally, a relevant figure is the one concerning the number of contracts regularly registered with the help given in the Foro Boario and in the centers of the widespread reception by the union representatives: they registered 1772 contracts in 2018 and 2771 in 2019.

> The creation of the PAS led an increase in the number of registered contracts but also an extension of the duration of the contract and a multiplication in the number of working days officially declared in the paycheck. (Int. 2, social worker).

> When workers came to us [at the PAS center], they showed us the work contracts and pointed out that—for example—20 working days were marked from June to September in the paycheck but actually they worked for more days, so we explained to them that the pay for this work was different …. We have intervened many times … to find a solution. We became a contact point for the workers. (Int.5, Labor Union Representative).

With regard to situations of informality and undeclared economy, in 2018, a local section of a national labor union filed 362 reports about irregularities in the contract of the workers who stayed at the Foro Boario hub (and widespread reception), 90 of which started a legal dispute for the regularization of their situation (Ippolito et al., 2020, 10). Municipal efforts guided the initial co-construction of a viable solution with a local urban–rural network of stakeholders, thus overcoming the disconnection between public and private entities and nongovernmental organizations, as well as fragmentation within sectors themselves. This connection effort intervened in situations of exploitation by enhancing urban–rural outreach efforts to exploited migrant field hands, and it promoted their social and material inclusion by connecting them effectively with services (e.g., technical training, language courses, cultural mediation, migration management, and labor intermediation services) and welfare measures. The connection of different public and private actors (e.g., social workers, labor union representatives, and institutional municipal and regional actors) operating at different levels and the facilitation of this connection through periodic coordination meetings and training courses have enabled them to circulate information between urban and rural spheres and acquire new perspectives on the effects of their choices on the wider structures in place. The predispositions toward certain administrative styles, roles, and languages fostered by professional trainings, and other aspects of organizational culture, "can profoundly affect the willingness of individuals and their organizations to trust and cooperate with others involved in multiorganizational and intergovernmental programs and, thus, determine the effectiveness of joint efforts" (Waugh Jr. & Waugh, 2003, 422).

According to Pascariu and Czischke (2015, 15), "the urban-rural structure of the existing mosaic of municipalities (of both urban and rural types) represents a challenge and an opportunity to develop urban-rural partnerships in the field of municipal functions". The role of regional and national level institutions in facilitating urban–rural cooperation across municipal boundaries is crucial. The cross-sectorial nature and fragmentation of urban–rural interactions require a better cooperation between sectors and institutions to design policy interventions that can address these challenges. In this specific case study, the project-driven activation of new urban–rural linkages against rural labor exploitation highlighted the role of Saluzzo as an essential node of a broader national effort for preventing exploitation of farmworkers by facilitating the provision of (and access to) services and other facilities through a multiactor and multisector collaboration. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that beyond the provisioning of basic services such as housing, electricity, and water, the PAS centers became spots where—through linguistic and cultural mediation—migrant workers could have contact with the labor unions, thus having access to legal protection. Moreover, labor unions and

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intermediation agents acquired from some farms more detailed information on labor demand and from anti-trafficking outreach and social workers knowledge on barriers that limit migrants' access to fair work conditions. Finally, farms have also received some benefits since, through the action of the producer association, specialized training for the farmworkers was offered, mostly related to pruning techniques.[10] Pruning requires specialization and investment in training activities, and this can profoundly determine the production yield: "On the one hand, we seek to protect workers, and improve their living and working conditions, and on the other hand, [by training workers] farms—as the counterpart—can [legally] find skilled labor" (Int.7, Representative of the Regional Office for Policies on Equal Opportunities, Rights and Inclusion). This allows farmers to partly face a situation in which commodity prices are falling while costs of production are increasingly rising. Structured and organized cooperation practices can be considered a form of innovation as a process of learning through interaction (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994), deeply rooted in social territorial networks.

DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

The Saluzzo case bears significance for the national policy level but also for the analytical level since it is one of the few projects in recent years (see also FARm, 2021; Zadra et al., 2022) that showcases the potential of municipal institutions to offer basic services to migrant seasonal farmworkers and strengthen urban–rural connections. Small towns and mid-sized cities are increasingly seen as nodal points within regional and national economies. They are nodes or hubs in which the strengthening of urban–rural linkages drive not only economic change but also social and cultural changes as complex societal transformations that are territorially rooted. By activating reciprocal learning and collaborative preventive interventions between actors with different interests and priorities, as well as facilitating knowledge transfer between different sectors and levels of governance, the PAS approach has begun expanding the range of connected services between urban and rural areas.

Even though the provided facilities and services were (and still are) insufficient to accommodate all the people flowing into the region during the picking season or mitigate all the conflictual dynamics that may originate from this situation (e.g., strikes and protests to demand regular job contracts, housing, and documents), the adoption of a multifactor and multilevel approach represents a relevant step for both consolidating territorial networks to enact preventive strategies against labor exploitation and improving migrant workers' living conditions, including access to drinking water and services, a transition from an open-air camp to a dormitory, and access to health and legal assistance (Brovia & Piro, 2021). Moreover, it represents a first action to move away from an emergency approach limited to the shelter provision and toward a more structured and holistic approach to territorial planning. Currently this effort is linked to—and strengthened by—other projects such as La Buona Terra (The Good Land), co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and coordinated by the Piedmont region with the direct involvement of the Regional Office for Policies on Equal Opportunities, Rights and Inclusion.

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow the municipality to immediately rearrange the provisioning of services in the Foro Boario consistently with the measures and norms to contain the virus. However, in the light of the PAS approach, there has been an intervention of the Prefecture of Cuneo which for the first time directly asked the surrounding municipalities to strengthen the widespread reception. This resulted in the active involvement of numerous municipalities, including Lagnasco, Verzuolo, Costigliole Saluzzo, Savigliano, Busca, Tarantasca, Cuneo, Manta, Scarnafigi, and Saluzzo. In this territorial experience of preventing illegal intermediation and exploitation in agriculture, Saluzzo, as a main urban center of the agro-fruit district in which most of migrants arrive (especially those who are newcomers who does not know the area), does not play an isolated role in meeting rural workers' needs. In fact, the planning action of the municipality has been able to go beyond the limits of its urban area and its countryside, establishing a synergic collaboration between other local and regional institutions and entities to collectively analyze the problem, collectively study and implement solutions under a common territorial vision, and collectively find external additional funding (e.g., AMIF) for fostering them. Municipalities often adopt an isolated emergency approach considering the migrant presence as an extraordinary and unpredictable phenomenon to be faced through extraordinary interventions without interconnections at the territorial level (Brovia & Piro, 2021). These interventions are limited and offer financial support for emergency accommodation without a connection to other services. These are not only insufficient and inadequate measures that do not solve seasonal migrant workers' needs; they may even expose migrants to forms of labor exploitation (Semprebon et al., 2017). Yet, with the PAS approach, the multiactor and multilevel synergy allowed organizers to identify situations of undeclared work and initiate legal action to request regularization. It is an attempt to limit the *caporalato* system by creating effective legal alternatives.

Undeniably, we must underline that the peculiar spatialization of the agrarian question in the territory of the Saluzzo Fruit District has an important relevance since without dispersion and spatial isolation of migrants, the intervention of the local municipalities is facilitated. Last but not least, in Saluzzo, the fruit picking season starts usually in June with berries and small fruits and ends in October or November with actinidia, so, unlike in southern regions where there is a more temperate climate, here there is no seasonal cyclicity within the harvesting year. Therefore, at the local level, this requires an effort which is more limited in time. For example, the rural ghettos of the southern regions have gradually lost their character of seasonal settlements and have become permanent living solutions of camps and shantytowns occupied mainly by sub-Saharan African migrants (Semprebon et al., 2017). In Saluzzo, in November most of the migrants move to other producing areas. This can limit a generalization of all the claims we have made here; in this respect we need also to emphasize that our study offers a narrative developed by the actors directly involved

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in the implementation of the PAS action (and connected project initiatives). Future studies could combine this with migrant narratives to qualitatively assess the long-term impact and stability of this approach and cooperation model. However, this was not our intention; we focused instead on shedding light on the new promoted mechanisms and alliances for preventing labor exploitation, as a completely new public-private step in strengthening the urban–rural continuum. To address a new analytical focus, future research could analyze how this first group of public and private actors will be able to create a broader network, a network of networks, "so as to gather additional resources … and opportunities for promoting regime-level change" (Duncan & Pascucci, 2017, 332).

Beyond these limitations, our results reveal the complexity of the agrarian question of the rural laboring classes. This question is not bounded within the spatial limits of the rural or within the regulation of the agricultural system. As we have shown, it calls into play an inter-municipal partnership of actors that generally operate at the urban level or outside the agro-food system, such as social, transport, and housing services. In Italy, the business of irregular work and illegal labor intermediation in agriculture generates around EUR 4.8 billion, while the state's missed income by undeclared work amounts to EUR 1.8 billion (OPR, 2018, 1). For this reason, beyond emergency approaches and a rigid division between rural planning and urban planning, the concerted action of local institutions—whether national, regional, or municipal—must be deployed not by serving specific sectoral needs or private interests but as urban–rural strategies for social change and sustainable economic and territorial development.

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ENDNOTES

1 The percentages refer to the local portion of cultivated land with each specific crop by taking into account the regional extension total values.

2 Percentage of the total non-EU seasonal workers with contacts registered from 2014 to 2020.

3 The cost–price squeeze refers to the situation when input costs increase at a higher rate than prices received for outputs.

4 Broker capitalism (as well as *caporalato*) is not restricted to the agricultural sector; it is also present, for example, in the construction industry and food delivery services.

5 A person entering a country in an irregular manner or staying with an irregular status. In the EU context, a third-country national present in the territory of a Schengen State who does not fulfill, or no longer fulfills, the conditions of entry as set out in the Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code) or other conditions for entry, stay, or residence in that EU member state.

6 In some contexts in southern Italy, where distances between settlements and the fields are larger, they can also have control over material assets such as transportation.

7 In the literature, the term *agrarian question* mainly refers to the transformation of pre-capitalist agrarian social formations (e.g., peasant production units) into capitalist ones and, more broadly, to the processes through which capital comes into existence in the agro-production sector (e.g., primitive accumulation by land enclosure). Nonetheless we operate at the level of what Henry Bernstein (2006, PAGE) calls "rural laboring classes." Namely, we go beyond the classical framework of the "agrarian question of capital" (449) and adopt the lens of the "agrarian question of labor" (450) and the question of field hands (known in Italian as *la questione bracciantile*) and their structural exploitation and mechanisms of illegal labor recruitment.

8 These are Campo Solidale (2014) and Coltiviamo Solidarietà (2016).

9 Distribution of migrant workers in small groups across different municipalities and small facilities and apartments widespread throughout the territory.

10 In connection with other local projects such as *La Buona Terra* (The Good Land).

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