



Sheltered. Life and Work in Italy's Immigrant Ghettos

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Abstract

In Italy, about 10,000 immigrants live in informal settlements isolated from the native population. The largest and longest-lasting settlements are in agricultural areas. Started in the 1980s as temporary shelters of West African farmworkers, they have turned into permanent self-built settlements housing thousands of dwellers, most of whom find employment in the surrounding fields. Media and policy makers attribute the existence of such settlements to the coercive action of so-called gangmasters—illegal labor recruiters commonly associated with labor exploitation, violence, and the mafia. However, this overly simplistic and impressionistic view is undermined by key facts. This leaves open the question of how such settlements emerge.

In this study, I investigate the microfoundations of informal immigrant settlements while exploring three research questions. First, I explore the mechanisms and institutions that allow dwellers to survive in the absence of basic utilities and formal institutions. Second, I examine job-search strategies: why do some dwellers use brokers such as gangmasters for harvest job search, while others do so independently. Third, I examine residential choices: why do some dwellers remain in the ghettos the whole year, notwithstanding the harsh living conditions and the scarce job opportunities in the slack season, while others seek shelter in town as soon as the harvest ends. To address these questions, I have applied an integrative multi-method research design, including

the analysis of ethnographic and interview data gathered through immersive fieldwork in various settlements and the statistical analysis of original survey data encompassing eight settlements in five Italian provinces.

My results document the emergence of an embryonic society, sustained by mutually supportive exchanges, informal trade, and extralegal institutions, which allow immigrants to satisfy basic needs they cannot meet in Italian towns. Within such a society, most dwellers look for harvest work by relying on brokers' services, which, while costly, are indispensable to navigate a labor market plagued by structural deficiencies and unregistered work. Only a minority manage to look for jobs independently—namely, those who have access to independent transport and are better integrated into the district. Most dwellers stay for short periods and spend the rest of the year moving to other precarious arrangements in town while striving to fulfill aspirations of social and economic integration. But a smaller group finds long-term fallback shelter there. Impeded by previous poor investment in host-country human capital and lack of documents and supportive networks, they opt out of the uncertain hunt for opportunities in the outside world and craft narratives giving value to the choice of staying put.

Jury:

Diego Gambetta (Collegio Carlo Alberto / EUI) (Supervisor), Fabrizio Bernardi (EUI), Paolo Boccagni (University of Trento), Mitchell Duneier (Princeton University)

Bio

Simone is a postdoctoral researcher at Bocconi University. In his work, he investigates the determinants and consequences of social marginalization, economic hardship, cooperation, and informality. His research combines multiple types of empirical evidence, relying extensively on immersive fieldwork and statistics. Before pursuing a Ph.D. at the European University Institute, he has been studying social and political sciences and economics at the University of Pavia and Bocconi University.