

# **MIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH OF ITALY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF NEW KNOWLEDGE**

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## **Abstract**

The arrival of migrants from North Africa has led to Italy's further tightening its control policies. Tunisian refugees have become "economic migrants", who can not obtain humanitarian protection, while asylum seekers are those for whom a form of reception has been created with the aim of defining situations of abandonment. On the other hand, some municipalities in Italy have spontaneously offered their assistance, so establishing a network of solidarity. Something which is particularly worthy of attention is the experience of refugees in terms of the welcome they have received from small Calabrian towns which were experiencing a declining population. The goal of this article is to show the network of relationships between institutional and social bodies which aims to define such aspects as: new forms of reception asylum within a context of profound social and economic degradation; practices which are set up by social operators with respect for ethical principles and the goal of going beyond the market logic that sees social work as a palliative for emergency situations; the logic of co-ordination between communal administrations and local social actors in realizing a project of hospitality which is consistent with sustainable development within the territory.

**Keywords:** refugees, sustainable development, migrations policies, social work.

## **Résumé**

Les incessantes arrivées de migrants d'Afrique du Nord sur l'île de Lampedusa ont entraîné un ultérieur durcissement des politiques de contrôle. Un système de contrôle des migrations qui voit les «exilés» tunisiens devenir les «migrants économiques», ceux qui ne peuvent s'élever à un statut de protection humanitaire. Les demandeurs d'asile sont ceux pour qui est construit un semblant d'accueil dans le but de contenir la présence migrante. Par contre, différentes communes en Italie ont offert spontanément leur propre disponibilité à l'accueil. L'article accorde une particulière attention à l'observation de certaines expériences d'hospitalité intégrée s'adressant aux réfugiés dans les villages dépeuplé de la Calabre. L'objectif du travail de recherche a été de relever les facteurs sociaux qui ont favorisé l'expérimentation de formes avancées d'inclusion des migrants dans une situation de dégradation économique profonde; les pratiques mises en acte par les intervenants dans le respect des références éthiques et déontologiques qui entendent dépasser la logique managériale de marché qui voit le travail social comme un palliatif aux situations d'urgence; les expériences de réseau entre sujets institutionnels et sociaux dans la

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réalisation des parcours alternatifs d'inclusion sociale à l'intérieur d'une logique de développement soutenable du territoire.

**Mots-clé :** réfugiés, développement soutenable, politiques migratoires, travail social.

### **Rezumat**

Neîncetatele sosiri ale migranților din Africa de Nord pe insula Lampedusa au dus la o înăsprire a politicilor de control. Sistemul de control al migrației vede acum ”exilații” tunisieni ce nu ajung la statutul protecției umanitare devenind ”migranți economici”. Pentru cei care cer azil este construită o primire care permite înregistrarea clară a prezenței migranților. Dimpotrivă, comunele din Italia au spontan disponibilitatea de a-i primi. Articolul acordă o atenție particulară observării diferitelor experiențe de primire integrată a migranților refugiați în satele depopulate ale Calabriei. Obiectivul cercetării ce a stat la baza articolului a fost acela de a releva : factorii sociali care au favorizat experimentarea formelor avansate de incluziune a migranților în condițiile degradării profunde a situației lor economice ; practicile intervenienților care respectă referințele etnice și deontologice înțelegând să depășească logica managerială ce vede asistența socială ca pe un paliativ în situații de urgență ; experiențele rețelelor formate de lucrătorii din instituții și asistenții sociali în vederea realizării parcursurilor alternative de incluziune socială în cadrul unei logici a dezvoltării durabile a teritoriului.

**Cuvinte cheie :** refugiați, dezvoltare durabilă, politici migratorii, asistență socială

### **Introduction**

This article will analyse the production of new knowledge and the procedures set up by social actors following the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers from North Africa in Calabria. In this southern Italian region which is sometimes seen as a “inbetween land” in the Mediterranean basin, the reception given to families and single mothers by little inland towns which have suffered depopulation has, over the last ten years, outlined alternative processes of social inclusion within the logic of territorial development. These experiences have inspired many local and extra-local social realities, but, especially when it comes to the managing of the “state of humanitarian emergency”<sup>1</sup> also highlight many points of great weakness as indicted by the high turnover of migrants and their limited operative autonomy.

In the specific territorial context, the aims of this research regard: 1) evaluation of the potentials and weaknesses of local institutions and associations considering the diasporic nature of the communities and the contribution they might make to territorial development processes; 2) analysis of the social and political dynamics

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<sup>1</sup> In February 2011, about 2 months before the arrival on the island of Lampedusa of immigrants from North Africa, the Italian government declared a state of humanitarian emergency with the aim of producing an “effective resistance” to the exceptional influx of Non-European citizens into Italian territory (Decree by the President of the *Consiglio dei Ministri*, 12th February 2011; Decree by the *Consiglio dei Ministri* 21st May 2012).

of participation so as to overcome both the logic of exclusion from national citizenship and that which sees social service as a “palliative” in situations of emergency; 3) Detection of experience of networking between institutions and social actors, and the possibility these have to overcome processes of civic stratification of rights.

The studied cases refer to centres found in the territory of Calabria where two receptive projects for asylum seekers and refugees were set up, one in Riace, a town on the region’s southern Ionian coast, and another in Acquafredda, a village in the interior. The field research foresaw observation of participants in the reception towns, semi-structured interviews with social actors and institutional representatives, and in-depth interviews with the refugees who benefitted from the reception programme.

### **Arrival of refugees in a land of emigration: planning new systems of “reception”**

Enclosing asylum seekers in reception camps has progressively become the preferred method of discouraging these migrants from moving around Italy (Sciurba 2009), so suspending their rights and rendering normal the idea that their presence is only provisional. The association often made between “illegal immigration” and “criminality” presents the arrival of refugees on the island of Lampedusa as “landings of illegal immigrants”<sup>2</sup> who are potentially deviant and whose rights would seem incompatible with the currently collapsing old social state (Delle Donne 2004, p.39).

In 2008, the Bossi-Fini law established the CARAs (Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo [Centres for Reception of Asylum Seekers]) which correspond to a “humanisation” logic of detention. The largest CARA is found in Crotona, Calabria and boasts places for 900 people. However, following the declaration of the “humanitarian emergency”, it has housed as many as 1500.

In the Crotona camp, just as in many others throughout Italy, the disciplining of bodies takes place through the approval of those actions limited to primary assistance. The areas reserved for the provision of help, legal guidance, socialisation and, therefore, autonomy are marginal (Medici Senza Frontiere 2010). The “potential” asylum seekers from Lybia, according to an initial identification based on racial criteria, are sent to various CARAs or identification centres set up in southern Italy (closed down hotels in Calabria; the “solidarity” towns of the ex NATO residential area in Sicily). The social operators’ work respects completely that of the operators in humanitarian camps described by

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<sup>2</sup>The regulations regarding the right to exile in Italy are part of the increasingly restrictive law on immigration. This is Law 94 of 2009 on the “crime of illegal entry into and residence in state territory” which leads to the immediate expulsion and detention within CEI (Centres of Identification and Expulsion) of migrants who reside illegally in Italy.

Bauman (2005): “saving” the conscience of the western populations by enclosing refugees in “out-of-sight” humanitarian camps which the sociologist defines as “dumps” and from which there is no real prospect of getting out.

Third sector action in accordance with local administration (municipal or provincial) makes up for the lack of any guarantee of social inclusion for the refugee and the suspension of their rights of citizenship. This project of “welfare from below” is based on the direct participation of local administrations and private social organisations. Since 2002, such programmes of social integration have been found in the SPRAR (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati [System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees])<sup>3</sup>. In small SPRAR territorial projects, defined as integrated reception projects, social operators help the families and small groups of refugees that live in the urban or rural centres in their daily relations with the indigenous population and institutional actors (SPRAR 2011). Some of these experiences have their origins in the 1990s in Calabria when the arrival of Kurdish refugees on the Ionian coast was met by spontaneous acts of welcome by the local populations. In Riace in 1998, the arrival of yet another boatload of refugees gave rise to “surprise” at the “landing”. The surreal image conjured up by the mayor was of: “...a sailing ship born of the sea... a multitude advancing across the beach...” (Domenico Lucano, mayor of Riace). The *multitude*, 300 Kurdish refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan, arrived in a municipality with a population at the time of about 1600 people, 600 of whom lived in the village itself. These Kurdish refugees were sheltered in the empty houses left by emigrants and stayed on in Calabria. This “choice” was made as an agreement between social operators and the refugees given that, after the arrival of Albanian refugees on the coasts of Apulia in the 1990s, the first forms of concentration and controls of refugee mobility had been put into practice (Dal Lago 1999).

This event was an unusual form of settlement in an area where emigration of the local populations and international migratory flows coexist (Pugliese 2006). Towns on the Ionian coast, like many others in the South of Italy, have a history of emigration towards America and, in the 1950s, the countries of northern Europe. In the 1960s and ‘70s, political and economic pressures brought about by the intensification of southern worker migration to the industrial North of Italy amplified the socio-economic disparity between the North and the South. The processes of unregulated urbanisation and construction along the coasts demonstrate the hegemony of organised crime’s territorial nomination, what Renate Siebert referred to as “territorial overlordship” (Siebert 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> The subjects involved in SPRAR are: the UN High Commission for Refugees (ACNUR); The National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI); the Ministry of the Interior, and the Department of Civil services for Immigration and Asylum.

At Riace, a town in the area of Locri, known for its association with 'ndrangheta<sup>4</sup> murders, the practice of welcoming refugees has had a countering effect on the phenomenon of social degradation which previously seemed irreversible. The local population gave initial assistance to the new arrivals by offering them houses which had been abandoned by emigrants. In 1999, about a year after the arrival of the first refugees in Riace, a social cooperative set up by some young people from the village started the restoration of those houses in the old town which emigrants had abandoned, using the finance provided by an ethical bank, with the intention of connecting the aspect of reception with that of solidarity tourism. In 2001, the municipal council of Riace accepted the National Asylum Plan (later became the SPRAR) and received ministerial and European finance to cover the expense of giving hospitality to refugees. In 1998, 6,000 migrants arrived in Riace and 250 have lived there permanently for several years. Numerous single mothers and families from Somalia, Serbia, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Palestine have also arrived and have often taken the places of those original refugees who came in the 1990s; 47 social operators, 15 of whom are refugees, presently work as part of the project run by the *Città Futura* association and Riace municipal council.

### **Refugee children at school in the reception villages: educating “diversity” and rediscovering one’s own “diversity”**

The hospitality shown to refugee families by the people of Riace and by the Arbëreshe municipality<sup>5</sup> of Acquafredda, has led to a slowing down in the depopulation phenomenon brought about by the constant flow of young people towards regional urban centres and the cities of central and northern Italy. Thanks to the presence of refugees’ children, the elementary schools in these villages have attained the requisite student intake to remain open as established by a recent school reform which was very restrictive regarding schools in mountain communities.

In the case of Acquafredda, which joined the SPRAR in 2009, the arrival of refugee families has allowed the village to reach a population of 1,200, maintain its administrative autonomy and perpetuate its consolidated bilingual culture. The 16 children of refugees make up 20% of the elementary school pupils in this Arbëreshe village today.

In Riace, on the other hand, a Somalian couple with 5 children and a single mother with 7 children arrived from Lampedusa on 5th August 2011. There are many young people of between 20 and 25 from Chad, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Somalia and Ethiopia. A new humanity has arrived leading to an intensification of

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<sup>4</sup> The 'Ndrangheta is a criminal organization in Italy, centered in Calabria.

<sup>5</sup> The Arbëreshe community settled in Calabria in the 15th century, following the escape of groups of Albanians from the Ottoman advance. These Albanians have maintained their distinct identity and continued to speak their language.

the school's didactic programme. Classrooms on the upper floors are open to the new arrivals with 2 classes for youths and adults and a new multi-level class in the elementary school. The processes which have been elaborated in this "extended" school domain have comfortably overcome the normative restrictions to intercultural education programmes, for example the limiting of immigrant children in elementary schools to 30%<sup>6</sup>. In one sense, the school has become a physical context for attempts at intercultural exchange with active involvement of the children, social operators, cultural mediators and adults who are guests in the structure during reading and writing classes. However, at the same time, the school has opened itself up to the village and the world, projecting the image of a laboratory of "intercultural citizenship"<sup>7</sup>.

In the extra-curricula activity organised by the receptive municipalities in the Locri area, the children of the new and older inhabitants of the village of Riace follow a socialisation process outlined by the school framework: from afternoon support activity to the showing of films, going to the swimming pool and access to information technology. This new quotidian reality has been made possible by redistribution of the ministerial resources which were sent to the municipalities in order to organise extraordinary measures for the reception of North African immigrants. "Extraordinary" operations which, in a highly destructured social territorial context,<sup>8</sup> produce "normal" services that guide the youth within an intercultural education framework (Elia 2012, pp. 157-170). The children see their history and diversity rendered legitimate and recognised by others at various moments in the life of the receptive village and classes from other Italian regions have been invited to share the didactic experience through school tourism. At the end of the school year, activities are organised in which all of the village families take part and this is a part of the new quotidian reality which provides occasions for re-evaluation of any conflict with the new arrivals' diversity. Daily interaction

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<sup>6</sup>A law passed by the last Berlusconi government in 2010 included in the "Indications and recommendations for the integration of non-Italian national pupils". *La Repubblica, Gelmini: "Dall'anno prossimo tetto del 30% per gli stranieri"*, 8 gennaio 2010.

<sup>7</sup>The idea of intercultural citizenship takes us to an open form of citizenship which is not based upon the distinction between worthy and undesirable, but regards forms of solidarity and guarantees of equality which derive from a recognition of the differences (Colombo, E.; Domaneschi, L., Marchetti, A., (dir.), *Una nuova generazione di italiani. L'idea di cittadinanza tra i giovani figli di immigrati*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2009; Simeoni, M., *La cittadinanza interculturale. Consenso e confronto*, Roma, Armando, 2005, p. 176).

<sup>8</sup>It would seem opportune to highlight the processes of inequality within the access to rights of social citizenship which define a dual social state system, that is a social state which differs between the North and the South of Italy (Fantozzi, P., *Il welfare nel mezzogiorno*, in Ascoli, U., (dir.), *Il welfare in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011). The local welfare receives less help from the Government and cuts in municipal finance have been particularly hard felt. Citizens in the South are recipients of a third of the resources distributed in the North. The comparison between a public expenditure of 30 euros per capita in Calabria and 280 euros per capita in Trentino is clearly significant (ISTAT, *Rapporto annuale. La situazione del Paese nel 2010*, Roma, ISTAT, 2011).

with refugee families generates direct involvement amongst Riace's inhabitants deriving from the fact that they no longer feel like simple spectators to a humanitarian action, but subjects who are directly implicated in the redefinition of a living space for the new arrivals. This experience implies a return to socialisation, to the "rediscovery of cultural diversity with respect to a dominant model of globalisation" (Touraine 2009, p. 26). The recognition of other people's universal requirements as the subject (Touraine 2009) declares his needs: the locals' need to re-find the beauty of their place of birth, to protect their living space in order share it with the new arrivals and the search for solutions which can give a certain stability to both the children of the refugees and to their own children.

### **The arrival of migrants from North Africa: new reciprocal relations in an unwelcoming system**

According to the general guidelines provided by the ministerial programme, the integrated welcome project foresees a process of training, literacy and social involvement through a practice of territorial accompaniment. In order to be completely feasible, this project requires a stabilisation process to be defined which principally works in the areas of integration at work and the project beneficiary's autonomy within a year (SPRAR 2011). According to the aims of integrated welcome, the municipal administrations of southern Italy, and particularly such cases as Riace, are greatly penalised in the realisation of the ministerial objectives due to the weakness of the local work market. The reasons for this are to be found in the lack of attention from the Italian government to the integrated reception project model<sup>9</sup> and, in particular, the links this has to territorial development. In its management of the "state of humanitarian emergency", the Civil Protection has excluded any participation by the small Calabrian SPRAR projects. The asylum seekers are those for whom a semblance of welcome is created. The building of new CARAs with the aim of containing the migrant presence and the overdue involvement of a few of the refugee families who arrived on Lampedusa in the receptive projects associated with the SPRAR are aimed at the destructuring of local systems of migration governance. This non-intervention logic supports the idea of a temporary stay for migrants in their homo oeconomicus dimension (Boutang 1998) and, at the same time, questions the on-the-job-acquired professionalism and skills which inspired the proposals of local public politics. The young refugees who are beneficiaries of the SPRAR projects in Calabria ask themselves what possible future they have in a social reality which exhibits

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<sup>9</sup> I progetti territoriali SPRAR sono sottoposti ogni tre anni ad una valutazione e ad un eventuale rifinanziamento. Il sistema SPRAR, nel 2011, ha coinvolto più di 120 comuni e ha avviato 153 progetti su tutto il territorio nazionale, mettendo in totale a disposizione circa 4.000 posti di accoglienza, un numero decisamente insufficiente rispetto al numero di rifugiati in Italia (50.000 nel 2011).

contradiction and ambiguity; from an excellent situation such as integrated welcome to work on the agricultural plains of Calabria where numerous asylum seekers, excluded from the reception projects, try to survive while becoming victims of organised crime's exploitation of foreign labour (Medici Senza Frontiere 2007, pp.1-29).

“When I left the CARA, I went to the Caritas to eat and I slept in the station (...). I lived like this for five months (...). I left Italy... I went to Germany twice, but the second time they put me in prison to make me understand that I mustn't go back (...), but prison in Germany is better than the life I had here (...). Then some Italians told me about these villages in Calabria and I came straight here. Here I have got a house (...), there is a lot of solidarity, but what can I do when it finishes? There are no jobs here and even the young people leave” (Abdul, 27 anni, Somalia).

The practices adopted go beyond any institutionalised reception obligation which give asylum seekers access to projects for a limited period of time. Among these, the making houses available to those excluded from the ministerial reception programme (those who have completed their one year period) should not be forgotten. Another element to be underlined is those occasions of social mobilisation which aim to suggest alternative methods to government policies of control of migrant flows: the “request” by migrants from Tunisia, expressed by mayors from the Locri area, when faced with the arbitrary policies of migrant delocalisation<sup>10</sup>; the hospitality to the *Dubliners*; the migrants who arrive in the reception village demanding their rights after various border crossing experiences (Beck 2011); the search for other municipalities and voluntary groups to help in the welcome process with the aim of giving continuity to the receptive actions and practices as opposed to the ministerial intention of “substitution” with regard refugee presence on the projects. A number of local experiences have been inspired by the Riace reception project<sup>11</sup>. In Cosenza, a city of 70,000 inhabitants, the Asylum SPRAR project was set up in 2005 thanks to an experience of association

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<sup>10</sup> Since the arrival of North African migrants at the beginning of 2011, the Italian government has entrusted the role of transferring over 50,000 refugees to the various Italian regions (except for Abruzzo) to the Civil Protection. This decision was not made in concordance with local administrations (“L'inverno dell'accoglienza: emergenza, asilo e migrazioni nel 2011”, 28 novembre 2011, <http://www.meltingpot.org/articolo17172.html>). The arrival in the Calabrian SPRAR of migrants from North Africa dates back to the middle of August 2011, after around 8 months during which the national media talked about disagreements resulting from overcrowding at the Reception and Primary Assistance Centre on the island of Lampedusa.

<sup>11</sup> In 2009, Riace was chosen by the Ministry of the Interior as the place to experiment with one of two resettlement projects set up in Italy and involving 120 Palestinian refugees. Many of the houses that were used for tourists in the summer were given over to the migrants. In 2011, the Calabrian Council for Social Policy presented the “Riace model” at the «SaviAV – Social inclusion and vocational integration of Asylum seekers and Victims of human trafficking», organised by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (lead partner Equal Project), as a practice for the recovery of rural areas due to the refugee presence in the territory.



of migrants and Italians who fight against discrimination in the work place and regarding accommodation. The SPRAR project in Lamezia Terme, a city in the centre of the region, at present offers hospitality to a group of young asylum seekers in buildings confiscated from organised crime. These experiences which social operators and local administrations define acts of ideological de-legitimisation of institutional racism (Wieworka 1998) with the aim of overturning the dominant image of refugees as a problem from which it is necessary for us to defend ourselves. World Refugee Day and local village patron saints' festivals become occasions for "humanising" meetings that bring together cultural elements of life, country of origin and refugee experience (Mance 2010) with the intention of helping local residents live alongside the new families.

The actions carried out consolidate practices based upon the social responsibility of each and everyone (Giaccardi and Magatti 2003). For instance, these involve local responses to a shortage of resources and a globalised crisis, so as to compensate for the long wait for ministerial funding. Examples of this are the solidarity money made possible by the commitment of small local activities and the humanitarian work camps which stimulate acts of solidarity with a wide network of institutional and social subjects.

These actions represent a contrasting vision in that they present a social project the intention of which is to foresee the long term materialisation of a new form of social cohesion. The solutions adopted in the reception villages define revolutionary networks whose fundamental points (social movements, institutions and people) are identifiable in common objectives of solidarity and collaboration (Mance 2003). In this specific case, participation by social actors, small local economies, community buying groups and municipalities support the actions of economic solidarity. The aim is to support a social economy which acts as a basis for the lives of old and new residents alike.

"Here I feel as if all of the people of Riace are close to me... they don't see me as a refugee... I feel that there's no difference... I feel free like in my own country... I've been here for four years and working as an interpreter for fourteen months... it was difficult at first, but then I learnt ... Other Palestinian refugees have arrived who speak Arabic... I do a bit of everything... they call me for everything, to make an appointment with the dentist or because there's a broken pipe in the shower and I have to call the plumber... They think that Italy is like Europe, but Riace isn't Europe... Here there are many people who spend lots of money to study and who don't find work because it's also difficult for an Italian ..." (Mona, Palestinian, culturale cultural mediator, Città Futura Project, Riace).

"I am 34 and this is the first time in my life that I have worked... I mean that I have a regular work contract, otherwise I would have emigrated... I've got this work grant for a year, I get 500 euro and work half a day. The arrival of the immigrants has brought work to the village and saved the school, the children go to school, it's we that have to integrate with them, and not them with us... I don't see the difference... I'll give you an

example: there's a girl called Shugry, a young Somali girl who has got a baby of 2 and a half, but for me she's like a sister. She works on the project too and I call her Little Sister... a girl with a baby... how can you not want to protect her?" (Gianfranco, Italiano, sociale social operator, Città Futura, Riace).

## Conclusion

Despite the problem of defining meaningful processes of local development, the refugees' experience of lasting settlement in a southern Italian region which is traditionally seen as peripheral has proven to be an innovation because of their ways of thinking about territorial administration, permitting a meeting of individuals from "underdeveloped parts of the North and South of the world" which would otherwise have remained distant (Castel 2002). This involves practices which reinterpret the refugees' subordinate position as a consequence of the temporary nature of their presence and which, in the cases presented in this work, bring about a definition of new forms of democracy and new spaces of citizenship for the older and newer residents. Among the actions described in this work, it is worth underlining the restoration of an architectural and environmental patrimony thanks to the help of public resources aimed at reception; the long term reception project in which the refugees themselves become an active part of the project, sharing spaces and work places with the locals and the definition of forms of work ethics in a context where unemployment is rife.

The conscious voluntary effort by both the social actors and political institutions, with regard the definition of forms of social cohesion around the reception of the migrants, offers extraordinary occasions to put energy back into the socio-political sphere, initiating a process of profound change which passes through a considered, self-critical action aimed at defining forms of social regulation, that is to create and redistribute opportunities for everyone (Tönnies 2011).

In the spaces of discussion between local institutions (regional administration, the municipalities where the refugee centres are found, university and unions) and the social operators from the region's SPRAR projects, the debate on reception places the migrant at the heart of a wider reflection within which we ask ourselves about work-related problems during an economic crisis; about determining human and social resources to define processes of self-sustainable development, about the future of small communities and the social subjects that bear the weight of the crisis (Manovra Finanziaria, Decreto Legge [Budget, Decree of Law] 138/2011) and the cuts to municipal budgets; about the construction of an alternative system of relations between migrants and indigenous people which will bring about the recognition of a common situation of social inequality (Beck 2011).

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