

LOST ENCOUNTERS?**The time-scale temporalities involved in countering gang-master and labour exploitation policies**

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Abstract

This paper offers a reflection on the ‘lost encounters’ between government policies’ temporalities and individual life trajectories’ of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy, focusing on how these time discrepancies may reveal the conditions to remain in, or fall into, exploitative working situations and/or social marginalisation/isolation. As Robertson (2019), Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi (2020) suggest, we apply the multiscale and relational category of temporalities to analyse state practices of migration governance, by considering state policies and regional projects to counter work exploitation in agriculture. Our analysis considers the following levels of multiscale interactions: subjective – migrant subjects’ biographical temporalities; micro-relational – migrant subjects and social operators; meso – actors involved in projects’ implementation temporalities and their interactions; and macro – state/political temporalities, which form the core of our analysis. To examine these multiple relations, we chose the angle of subjective and micro relational temporalities.

Keywords

timescale discrepancies; state temporalities; labour exploitation; gang-master prevention projects

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DOI: [10.13131/unipi/nzwq-xm40](https://doi.org/10.13131/unipi/nzwq-xm40)

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MULTIPLICATION OF ACTORS IN THE FIELD OF COUNTERING LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN ITALY

In the last decade, the issue of labour exploitation and illicit intermediation, the so-called *caporalato*, has found new centrality in the public and political debate and has become the object of normative interventions and policies, planned at national level. *Caporalato*, or gang-master, is an historical phenomenon in Italy that has become widespread in recent decades in multiple sectors of production (Medici Senza Frontiere, 2005; Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2012; Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014; Cristaldi, 2015)¹. At the normative level, the introduction of article 603 *bis* to the Italian Penal Code, in 2011, modified by law 199/2016², constituted a significant normative milestone in countering illicit intermediation and labour exploitation, although it is considered partial and certainly not sufficient to grasp the complexity and nuances of labour exploitation and illicit intermediation³. In terms of policy implementation, the initiatives that followed were oriented towards the definition of an operative national strategy to counter exploitation and, through the tender 1/2019, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies financed several regional projects, with a specific focus on labour exploitation of Third-Countries Nationals in agriculture.

The projects were focused on an employment sector where labour exploitation is particularly relevant:

from the north to the south, hundreds of thousands of workers farm the land or take care of livestock without adequate legal and social protections, coping

¹ Similar experiences are also documented in Spain, Romania, Germany, Greece, the UK, and the USA (see Omizzolo, 2016).

² The law recognizes the legal responsibility both of employers and of the intermediary, in cases of illicit intermediation and/ or labour exploitation and introduces new elements to favour the emergence and prevention of situations of exploitation: the definition of indexes of exploitation, with which to define the degree of exploitation of workers, and the strengthening of the *Rete del Lavoro Agricolo di Qualità* (Network of Qualified Agricultural Work), as a control and prevention tool of exploitation in the agro-food chains. One of the most important features are the so-called 'exploitation indexes'. For the first time there has been an attempt by Italian institutions to define economic exploitation by breaking it down into four sub-categories: pay levels; systematic violation of the law regarding working hours, weekly rest, leave and social insurance; safety, hygiene, and health protection at work; methods of control over workers, and degrading housing conditions (Salvia, 2019).

³ The strengthening of the penal approach has worked in part as a deterrent to the illegal employment of foreign workers, but the organisation of agricultural supply chains and territorial policies have seen limited changes (Palumbo 2016; Corrado, Caruso, 2022)

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 (Special Rapporteur, Elver, 2020).

In this regard, the sixth Report on Agri-food crimes and gang-master declares, referring to Istat data, that in 2021, there were around 230 workers in agriculture employed irregularly or without a working contract, the majority being migrants. At the national level it translated to 20% of the whole workforce in this sector, reaching peaks of 30-40% in different regions (Rapporto Placido Rizzotto, 2022). By expanding the range of action to the whole national territory, the projects intervened in both Southern and Central Italy, historically the subject of studies and interventions on the theme of informal/illegal intermediation in agriculture (Omizzolo, 2016, 2019; Sanò, 2018; Piro, 2021; Ippolito et al., 2021; 2021; Grimaldi 2022; Grimaldi et al., 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022), and in Northern Italy, where the agri-food chains are organised in a more structured way but are no less exposed to the risks of informal/illicit intermediation and exploitation (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2020).

Meanwhile, the integration and coordination of these projects into highly differentiated socio-economic contexts has been challenging, due not only to the different characteristics of the local economic sectors and related labour opportunities and exploitation trends, but also in terms of actors participating in each project and coordination between projects. In the period 2019-2022, in one region could be active three or four projects, supported by the same tender, acting in parallel with each other and with the anti-trafficking programmes – by mandate dedicated also to combating serious labour exploitation, even without a specific focus on agriculture – or those related to the asylum system⁴. The current phenomenon of exploitation and illegal hiring, as underlined by various empirical research, frequently involves asylum seekers, holders of other forms of protection or people who have left reception projects (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2014; Medu, 2015; Palumbo and Sciarba, 2015). In some cases, this is due to issues of geo-spatial proximity, but it is mostly because of the socio-legal or socio-economic precariousness in which many people fall, mainly during the long process of determination of their right of protection. Thus, these new anti-labour exploitation

⁴ In Italy, from 2011, a double-track reception system for asylum seekers and refugees was established: the ordinary (Sprar, then renamed in Siproimi and now Sai) and the extraordinary (Cas, 'Extraordinary Reception Centre'). See : https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/italy-how-has-reception-system-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-changed_en. (last access 21.02.2023).

projects have gone on to constitute a third axis of territorial policies. The methods of referral between counter labour exploitation projects and anti-trafficking programmes, and the collaboration with the asylum system, although foreseen by the announcement, by the regulations themselves and then redefined in the guidelines published in 2021, has in fact been experimental and constructed in the field.

The starting point of this article is the assumption that this complex panorama of actors made it possible to amplify opportunities for exchange and contamination of knowledge, languages and skills relating to the phenomenon of exploitation, migration and the dynamics of the agri-food chains. It also sheds light on the risks of discrepancies within one project among many, but also at a higher level among state practices and temporalities, being involved in both the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, as coordinator body and funder, and Ministry of Interior, being the authority that regulates migration. By focusing on the experiences of two counter-exploitation projects, implemented in two specific north-east regional contexts (Veneto and Emilia-Romagna), we focus on the 'lost encounters' within the geographies of actors, and between the aims of the projects and the needs and aspirations of individuals in terms of risk or in conditions of exploitation. We adopt a time-politics lens to highlight how different temporal dimensions (state chrono-politics, projects, operators and partners' temporalities and individual biographical times and needs) influence the interactions between projects and individual aims, and the relationship between social operators, partners, and migrants at risk or in conditions of labour exploitation.

This analysis and methodological approach derive from our specific methodological posture. Both having backgrounds as social researchers, each of us had the opportunity to work on two of these projects. During our activities we were in charge of conducting research, context analysis for the project's aims, as well outreach or activities related to work inclusion. Therefore, these double roles allowed each of us to be immersed in the field for more than a year and directly experience the frictions (Sheller, 2019) and the fractures as well as the possibilities articulated in the daily work temporalities. Thus, by considering our positionalities, and the unique opportunities to observe and reflect on ourselves as part of a bigger community that shares knowledge and experience (Freire, 1973), this contribution focuses on two specific histories with which we were personally involved as social operators.

This article is structured as follows: this first section offers a framework analysis in relation to policies recently promoted by the Italian national

government in the prevention of labour exploitation and indications on methodology. Section two discusses the theoretical framework through a dialogue with different disciplines that have contributed to the temporality turn in migration studies, borders studies and social support projects. Section three, first discusses the implementation framework of two specific projects and then the two case studies. Discussion and suggestions for future research and practitioners are found in section four.

2. THE SEVERAL DIMENSIONS OF TIME IN MIGRATION POLICIES AND MIGRANTS' LIVES

The effects of the temporality of state migration policies, comprehending as well specific reception and inclusion projects on migrants' lives, have been studied from different perspectives and in different socio-historical-geopolitical contexts, particularly in the case of forced migrants (Leutloff-Grandits, 2019; Merla and Smit, 2020; van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020). This literature underlines how a temporality lens taken alone may draw a partial understanding of migrants' experiences in relation to border regimes and migration policies. Being a subjective and interpersonal dimension (Jacobsen et al., 2020), the impact of time in the relation between people and state must be interpreted along with other dimensions – those of spatiality, mobility, and border regimes, individual emotions and aspirations, power relations and hierarchies – that cannot be under-evaluated or taken separately (de Genova, in Jacobsen et al. 2020; Tsagarousianou, 2022;). Several studies have argued how migrants' life trajectories are conditioned by legal and socio-economic precarity, as well as by the violation of the rights of free movement and citizenship regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Norum et al., 2016).

Indeed, material and symbolic borders that migrants encounter in their mobility trajectories, as well as the institutional temporalities of the decision processes on their right to stay and their paths of inclusion, have long-lasting effects on their own and their kin network's biographies (Malkki, 1995). In the case of forced migrants, state power is still more evident, since it also unfolds within the whole articulation of reception and inclusion projects in which they may be involved (Leutloff-Grandits, 2019; Tsagarousianou, 2022). As several authors argue, the neoliberal, linear and individual conception of time (Barber and Lem, 2018; Griffiths, 2021; Tsagarousianou, 2022) beneath the reception and inclusion projects pushes at reaching tangible results for one person within a predetermined time. Migrants' subjectivities, trajectories and

aspirations may not encounter – and thus challenge – this institutionally and hierarchically imposed conception of time.

Appadurai (2013) and other scholars have widely reflected on the interconnections between chrono-politics of state and the politics of hope of those «bare life» (Sylvester, 2006) which seem to be stuck in a limbo for an undetermined time (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). The positioning of these subjectivities, through their daily life practices and choices, and their capacity of aspiring and looking beyond this limbo, might be interpreted as a resistance strategy to state politics, which affects their biographical choices, in terms of timing and priorities to be followed.

Migrant subjects' temporalities may reveal their diversity in terms of non-corresponding or going beyond the hegemonic temporal structures. In other words, they produce a «repetition of differences» (Deleuze, 1995 in Norum et al. 2016), i.e., a different grammar of time experience than those of services, people and social actors, whose time conception is guided by the reaching of results required by funding agencies. The non-passive assimilation to a specific humanitarian project, in a determined space and time, can also be seen as a practice of self-determination (Appadurai, 2013). Projecting action in the future, is due also to the fact that «the future is perceived [...] as a space of security where one has arrived, often in a third country and/or with a safe house to live in with their family» (Norum et al., 2016: 75).

Nevertheless, state-dictated temporalities – for instance, in terms of legal *status* recognition and socio-economic integration projects – constrain people to negotiate personal conceptions of life projects and order. The experiences of acceleration, stagnation, suspension, and waiting affect, in particular, forced migrants' experiences, from their departure to their so-called 'reached autonomy'. In other words, the undetermined permanence in an undetermined time of those whose lives are confined to camps (as in Greece's camps or Cas and Cpr⁵ in Italy), of those who are waiting for a state decision about their rights for protection, or of those who are readmitted in specific social projects – such as reception projects, but also preventing-gang-master and work exploitation programmes – may activate different conceptions of the chronological order of their present and future. Scholars have shown this different and non-linear perception of time may go hand-in-hand with a process of having lived long experiences

⁵ Pre-removal detention centres (Cpr), where third-country nationals who have received an expulsion order are generally held.

See: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/detention-asylum-seekers/detention-conditions/place-detention/> (last access 21.02.2023).

of being trapped or out of time and living in an exceptional time and space. As Bello (2022) has argued, this state politics has historical roots and is a constant element in Italian government successions.

The analysis of public policies and official documents has shown how the normalisation of the exception has happened because of indefinite custody and further exceptional measures in the reception system through derogatory legal instruments, and namely Berlusconi's Security Package Decree of 2009; Renzi's Reception decree of 2015; and lastly, Salvini's Security Decrees of 2018 and 2019 (Ivi: 461)

Our work, by answering the call «to develop more theoretically robust approaches to waiting in migration as constituted in and through multiple and relational temporalities» (Jacobsen et al., 2020:3), aims to move beyond the binary and conflicting conception of time experienced by people with migratory backgrounds, by civil servants, and by social workers. By considering temporalities as subjective and relational, we consider how time discrepancies, alignments, and asymmetries emerge in the experiences of migrants and professionals involved in two specific projects, shedding light on the several levels of temporalities involved in this relation. State temporalities impact on social operators' work and relationship with 'beneficiaries. If on the one hand projects, programmes, and the social actors that implement them have to respect this state/founder dictated temporalities, on the other hand, social actors and social operators in particular, may find themselves in multiple conflicting timescale relationships: on one side the relation with the state and on the other with 'beneficiaries' biographical temporalities.

By referring to Robertson's (2019) multi-scalar approach to the analysis of the temporalities of migration, already adopted and operationalized by other scholars (Merla and Smit, 2020), we apply a temporality lens to analyse state practices of migration governance, by looking at regional projects' strategies to prevent and counter labour exploitation and in reference to the multiscale category of temporalities. We adapt Robertson's multiscale triumvirate (the macro-level of governmentality, the meso-level of the actors involved in projects implementation temporalities, and the micro level of biographical dimension) by adding an intermediate level: the micro, relational dimension between 'beneficiaries', i.e. migrants' temporalities, and social operators. Thus, we focus on how these temporalities impact on everyday encounters and interfere or interact with reaching project and individual goals.

3. TIME SCALES DISCREPANCIES

3.1. Project implementation frameworks

The two projects, both financed by the tender 1/2019 (see par.1), were implemented in Veneto and Emilia-Romagna regions. Prevention and support of regular labour inclusion were the main aims of these projects: these axes were considered strategic to the long-term strategies for combating labour exploitation. Hence the categories of both 'potential victim' and 'victim' of exploitation were introduced among the targets groups the projects addressed. This aim proved hard to achieve due to the conditions designed by the tender itself, since the projects were addressed exclusively to Third-Countries Citizens with a regular permit of stay. This constituted one of the first critical points since it excluded from the target some EU citizens present in agricultural exploitation networks, primarily the Third-Country nationals without a permit of stay who were exploited in the agricultural sector⁶. Social studies have often underlined that the condition of legal precarity may be one of the reasons why people fall into situations of marginalisation and exploitation (Reyneri, 1998) and, for this reason, the attention and efforts of the social operators have often been dedicated to supporting the regularisation process that people encounter in the daily projects' activities.

To reach these objectives, the projects were asked to implement several subsequent stages of interventions, that could imply the activation of a multiplicity of other actors, pertaining to the trade union sphere, research, and third sector agricultural employers' organisations, required as a compulsory partner of the tender itself. Empirically, in the relations between social operators and 'beneficiaries', these objectives were translated into a 'taking in charge' chain, constituted by temporarily consequent phases. This chain started from outreach activities – aimed at favouring the identification and emersion of people in or at risk of exploitative conditions – followed by training and support for regular socio-employment (re) integration⁷. This project's phased design was necessary to first answer the tender's requirements and protocols and also

⁶ Of the approximately 1.3 million agricultural workers, some 405,000 are migrants with either a regular or irregular migration *status* (Special Rapporteur, 2019, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/italy/visit-italy-report-special-rapporteur-contemporary-forms-slavery-including-its-causes>. Last access: 27/05/2023).

⁷ Generally, the design of the taking in charge chain seems to be not casual but rather framed by reference to the existing regional anti-trafficking programme methodology and phase structures, conceived on the basis of Art.18 D.Lgs 286/98 (Sempredon et al., 2019).

to coordinate partners' work, to provide a pathway and explain it externally (to other actors, both collaborators and 'beneficiaries'). On the other hand, although conceived to be flexible and non-linear by all the operators in the taking in charge chain (Zadra and Elsen, 2022), this structure (and the related time-scale encounters and actions) did not always harmonise with personal time biographies, rather the encounter between projects and individual's temporalities was often challenging, or even impossible in some cases.

There were several dimensions that did not facilitate this empirical time-phase improvement and the aimed for alignment among projects and subjects with a migratory background. A first element relates to the load of aims, aspirations, fears, hopes and personal resources that a person brings with him/her, which must be located within subjective transnational horizons and belongings, and/or along with networks of interdependence an individual might be linked to, such as the case of women and men being trafficked for sexual and work exploitation (Omizzolo, 2019; Caroselli, 2022). These elements may prevent or require a determined timeframe for migrants to decide whether to participate in a specific project, thus creating a relation of trust between social practitioners and 'beneficiaries', based on a shared conviction that the project can be a valid and strong alternative to the social and economic resources that may be found in networks connected to labour exploitation, and to exiting exploitative conditions or conditions of vulnerability. This trust creation process does not depend exclusively on the professionals' competencies in reading the multiple needs of the people they encounter, but also on the normative framework (in terms of repression of exploitative activities and compensation tools), as well as on the possible channels in each project for a fluid, quick referral, and access to other services. Additional factors impact these dimensions and, although it is not possible to discuss them all, it is worth mentioning the rhythm and fluidity of the taking in charge chain, and in particular the final phase or re-employment, that is conditioned by the structural socio-economic conditions of the agricultural sector which, in both the regions, is characterised by seasonal labour needs (Corrado et al., 2018). This seasonality did not always coincide with the needs and the times of the emersion, the training activities or the regularisation process.

Thus, although the empirical implementation and the challenges encountered were different in some aspects – mainly in the composition of partnerships involved and the local contexts of action – similarities were also present, mainly in terms of the complexities of the project 'beneficiaries' needs and encounters, the macro and structural

characteristics of the labour exploitation, and the precarious socio, economic and legal conditions of the 'beneficiaries' encountered by both projects. By focusing, in particular, on the timescale of two specific phases of intervention (outreach and labour inclusion), two specific cases, one for each project, are presented.

3.2. Project 1. Nur: "I'm trapped in here": the waiting in outreach activities.

The first case relates the story of Nur⁸ and the phase of emersion is located in a specific Veneto Area, although the project covered three different regions. The methodology applied during the outreach activities was a product of reflexive work conducted and guided in a participative way among more than 40 actors. Two main characteristics of this project – different from the second one – is the cooperation with the regional anti-trafficking project and the fact that one of the partners leading it at the regional level facilitated some of the interactions among different actors involved in its implementation. These elements, among others, made it possible to create spaces of reflexivity and collaboration among the two teams: anti-trafficking and prevention of gang-mastering and work exploitation; and, at a higher level, with teams working in two other regions on these specific but interconnected projects and social phenomena. This was a key point and not taken for granted. In other Italian regions, projects were led by different actors and anti-trafficking regional projects were not always among their partners.

Nur was not an agriculture worker, but he worked in an accessories shop run by a co-national in the last two years. Since the first meeting, after having heard the operators' explanations about the project's activities, he felt able to confide in us and spoke out about his working conditions. He did not speak good Italian, but English and Bengali, and he was probably in his 40s, having lived in Italy for the last six years – three of them in that specific territory. He said that he worked eight hours per day, while his contract just declared four. Moreover, violating the state's regulations, his employer paid him in cash only €460 while the payroll for the first year indicated €750 and the second year only €600. He was never allowed to take a day off, or holidays. During this brief meeting he said that his permit of stay was going to expire in December and that he had a permit of stay for humanitarian reasons, which was converted into a permit of stay for working reasons. He claimed not to

⁸ For security reasons, names are pseudonymous and geographic coordinates are generalised.

know what trade unions are or what they could do for him. His answer to whether he tried to talk to his employer about not having respected word agreements as he said was: «He is a bad man; he is a bad man. I tried to talk to him, but he told me to be brave. I do not know what to do, where are police, controls, why do they not come here and see the situation?»⁹ Nur denied having family or other relationships with his employer.

While on one hand he shared in this first encounter that he was in a coercive environment due to his employer's behaviour, at the same time he demonstrated being aware of his rights being violated by affirming and declaring his lack of trust in inspectors and the police. After this encounter, the operator immediately shared the case with the anti-trafficking unit, one of the partners of the project, which implements the same activities in the same territory. A series of actions were decided before approaching Nur again, with the aim of proposing to him a meeting in a protected place (anti-trafficking offices in the area close to his work) and providing him with all necessary information on his legal working conditions, as a first step, and then if required on other subjects. At the same time anti-trafficking colleagues, by working very closely with the national anti-trafficking green line team, verified whether any report resulted in this case. This collaboration and circularity, as well as the fluid and speedy collaboration of team members, is the first element we focus on.

During the second encounter, he immediately reported being tired since he is paid less than he should: «the boss does not pay well, he has a very bad heart, but I have to wait until I have my permit of stay in March»¹⁰. This time the operator was accompanied by a new figure: a cultural mediator (East European) specialised in contacting this specific target. Nur confirmed his working conditions were even worse; the employer not only threatened him verbally but also once pushed him and asked him to work extra hours. Nur at first seemed very interested in having a meeting with the team at the office and called immediately, saying that he wanted the appointment but with conditions: only the two people he already knew (operator and mediator) could be present – he would not accept a cultural mediator from his country – adding at the end, «I won't bring any document to show since I do not want to make a mess now»¹¹. It was agreed to have the meeting one week later at the office with the two people from the last encounter. Before the day of the appointment the two teams met again to agree on a strategy: to re-evaluate his conditions and what elements should be the ones to 'hook' him. The

⁹ Fieldwork notes, August 2021.

¹⁰ Fieldwork notes, September 2021

¹¹ Fieldwork notes, September 2021

day before the appointment, Nur called and said he could not come since he must work and that his lunch time was again reduced to only 30 minutes. Then he asked if operators could reach him in the workplace, as this could be easier for him.

This constitutes a second element that needs attention: the relational time dimension in elaborating the possibility to 'ask for help' and to interact with other actors different than those of the 'dependency chain'. These time dimensions seem to be influenced by emotions and their elaborations, in this case: fear of the employer; fear of co-nationals that work as cultural mediators and may reveal his identity; and at the same time, hope. Nur was already elaborating, as we will show below, his own strategy on how to exit this situation and a meeting at this time of his life with the project's operators was an exceptional element – it probably disturbed his own plans, or required some energy to re-calibrate resources that were new, unknown, and could have unpredictable results.

In the view of operators, social mediators and the anti-trafficking unit, it was clear that Nur was living in a condition of being trapped, hence proposing a meeting in the office (in a protected place, with a mother tongue cultural mediator) was conceived as a chance to provide him with all necessary information on his rights and social inclusion possibilities, to allow him to choose whether to trust, narrate, or act on exiting his exploitative working condition. Nur decided not to present himself. Social operators agreed that Nur probably made this choice due to fear of being controlled, or other unknown motivations. Almost a week later, the social operator and cultural mediator accepted his invitation and went to his workplace for a third meeting. He confirmed his situation and added a new piece to his biography: he had a family back in his home country, a wife and a 7-year-old son, whom he had not seen in the last three years. He said he was sending them money but since Covid-19 arrived he was paid less and was no longer able to sustain his family: he paid €250 for his house and what remained was not enough. Here again the operator and cultural mediator perceived the deep need of this man to talk and share with somebody different than the people he already knew but without translating this into a request for help: as he said several times, «for me is okay just talking like this, we can take a coffee and when you want come here and say *ciao*»¹². In relation to his working and legal conditions, he revealed his perception more clearly: «I'm blocked here»¹³, until he could have his permit of stay. He believed that since this

¹² Fieldwork notes, November 2021

¹³ Fieldwork notes, November 2021

employer converted his permit of stay, offering him an undetermined working contract, he had to stay there until the permit of stay was ready to be collected, moreover he had looked for other jobs but then Covid-19 arrived and cut off these possibilities.

During this encounter the two figures tried several strategies to ‘hook him’ into seeking legal assistance to reunite him with his family and assist him in finding a new job. He seemed to have no interest in these possibilities and in relation to the latter he said he already had a strategy for the future, when he will collect his permit of stay:

I do not want to link myself to a new job now, I will wait until March to collect my permit of stay and then I’ll go three months in Bangladesh so the boss won’t think anything bad, then when I’ll be back and will look for a new job.¹⁴

Social operators recognized Nur’s strategy to act in his own ‘power mobility’ by adapting his needs and strategies to fit the working and legal conditions he had at that specific time. Nur was aware that he was being exploited but at the same time chose not to take up the project’s help, although the social operators chose to leave an open door, by recognizing his agency and awareness in making this choice. During this last encounter he shared additional elements of his history, saying that it took him three years to arrive in Italy. During this time, he lived and worked in several countries, including Libya for two years. His words recall what several reports and studies have denounced about the level of violence and fundamental rights violations in Libya: «€400 here [in Italy] is not fair, I know, but is always better and more than in Libya. In Libya it was tremendous, really tremendous.»¹⁵

A last meeting took place three weeks before the project’s conclusion. The aim, built up among the two teams, was to create a link between him and the anti-trafficking unit, to provide him with new contact numbers and people, and leaving him the choice to call or not. This was also the longest meeting, lasting more than 30 minutes. Even if the projects’ immediate results may not seem to have been reached – Nur did not accept any immediate support – this experience, in the operators’ view, may have at least given him the opportunity to know about an alternative that he could pursue in the future, and despite the project’s rigid structure in terms of targets, results, actions, and sectors of production to be addressed, it allowed two project teams the possibility of testing rapid intervention. This case seems to show that even if projects’ temporalities

¹⁴ Fieldwork notes, November 2021

¹⁵ Fieldwork notes, December 2021

were fluid and rapid, well-coordinated and agreed, this is not sufficient for any immediate, tangible change in exiting exploitation if these do not encounter biographical needs and temporalities. A third actor plays a central role – the state, with its «legal fetishism», as defined by Navaro-Yashin (2003)¹⁶ and its temporalities, which are our focus here. The state's bureaucratic machine and its expression of power - that of recognizing or denying legal *status* - and its impact on related temporalities of both subjects and projects. Here, in social operators' and our view, it seems that this encounter is impeded from translating into action due to the role that legal *status* has in a migrant's life: being in exploitative working conditions seems an acceptable bargain compared to the benefits of having a permit of stay.

3.3. Project 2. Justice: accelerations, stasis, and transitions in the labour inclusion phase

The experience of Justice, a Nigerian citizen in his 40s, who has lived in Italy since 2016, lies at the intersection of different phases of the project, but with a particular focus on the one dedicated to training and labour inclusion. This case is based in Emilia-Romagna, which was one of the regions involved by the project, that had a unique national coordination team, with different local representatives co-coordinating and implementing the actions at regional levels. Different from the above, this specific regional project was challenged with building an integrated and effective chain of interventions. Despite the general guidelines given at the beginning of the project, and mainly because of the very different expertise of the partners, methodologies were empirically and gradually defined in the field, based on the evolution of the exploitation and gang-master dynamics encountered, and on the training and employment opportunities proposed by the enterprises. Focusing specifically on the experience of labour inclusion, this case shows how priorities, both from the project organisation and from economic sectors, only partially met the multiple needs of the 'beneficiaries' of the project.

The meeting with Justice took place at the end of a complex process of evaluation and redefinition of the outreach methodologies. At the very beginning, two main methodologies were put in place by the two partners

¹⁶ The implication is, to use the words of Michael Taussig (1992), that the state is a fetish, an abstraction imagined to be 'a thing' on the part of both public-political as well as scholarly discourses (Navaro-Yashin, 2002). The anthropologist suggests, emergent researchers to write ethnographies which would deconstruct the notion of 'the state', focusing instead on the everyday social relations which constitute it. (Navaro -Yashin 2003: 71).

in charge. On the one hand, the team of specialised cultural mediators regularly carried out information and observation activities in contexts of informal aggregation of foreign citizens, in various urban contexts. On the other side, union trade operators aimed to contact potential workers in conditions of exploitation, during their normal counter-activities, i.e. in a formal space-time designed to welcome workers from the agricultural sector, mainly to complete administrative and social security procedures. The intersection of these two contact methodologies initially led to dubious results, at least in terms of activation of the following phases of taking-over chain envisaged by the project, for several reasons. Firstly, as some trade union operators have underlined, while this setting could give the possibility of reaching a very high number of people, the time and competences to investigate the individual situations and needs of workers of foreign origin, in conditions of economic fragility, was unavailable.¹⁷ Secondly, the training and support activities for exiting labour exploitation, provided by some of the partners, were not concrete enough and attractive for people who were encountered in the outreach activities.

An attempt to unblock the stasis of the project took place when a concrete possibility of training and job placement emerged in a farm in an area characterised by fruit production. Some representatives of the local economic agricultural sectors became curious about the project; it appeared to be an opportunity to respond to two different needs of the local agriculture sectors: the chronic difficulties in finding seasonal workers and, at the same time, the need to avoid running into situations of illicit intermediation, for example by relying on landless cooperatives to find workers (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2020). This concrete possibility drove the project operators to convince as many persons as possible to take part in training that the project wanted to organise with the farms interested in hiring new workers. Cultural mediators were asked to use a new outreach methodology, defined as 'targeted outreach', i.e., information activities with the specific aim of persuading people to participate in the training.

The meeting with Justice took place during one of these activities in an urban context near the farm interested in hiring agricultural workers. Cultural mediators often observed him sitting in a park, in conditions of emotional discomfort and loneliness and, sometimes, under the influence of alcohol. The mediators believed he could fall within the project's

¹⁷ One of the objectives of the project – the activation of Pas (counters/spaces dedicated to information on the project) – became effectively operational only in the last months of the project, along with the creation of street union activities, on the model of experiences that took place mostly in regions of Southern Italy.

target, because he was recognized as having the characteristics corresponding to the category of 'potential victim of exploitation'. The risk of falling into conditions of labour exploitation was never expressed by Justice, rather he always claimed to have the competencies to work in agriculture, thanks to previous experience – as emerged in a review of his social security contributions made by the trade union operators – and to be in strong need of a regular job – both for himself and his family sustenance and for the maintenance of his regular legal *status*. Thus, he took part in the proposed training activities, which was quite demanding in terms of time and personal involvement, since a large part of it was based on learning-by-doing methodologies, organised directly on the farm, and devoted to very specific pruning techniques. In the training process, Justice gradually acquired self-confidence, making more effort to use the Italian language and better interacted with classmates and trainers. As cultural mediators and the company owner hypothesised, these positive steps went along with his growing hope to ameliorate his socio-economic condition.

However, signs of fragility were still present, even if the mediators, who continued to have daily contact with him during and after the training, solicited the rest of the project team not to medicalize his discomfort, suggesting they concentrate on trying to resolve his material needs first. Despite the initial urgency of the company, the transition to job placement was not immediate. On the one hand, the company owner stalled for a long time before communicating his willingness to hire some of the trainers' participants since, as he said to some operators, he did not expect to observe so many fragilities – linguistic and psychosocial – among participants. On the other hand, once the hiring possibility materialised, the project operators evaluated the possibility of verifying the availability of other people before that of Justice, precisely because they were now convinced of his vulnerabilities, and they considered the seasonal and fixed-term contract the company could offer to be inadequate for improving his socio-economic condition. In the meantime, operators also evaluated the possibility for Justice to enter a Sai project for asylum seekers. Justice claimed international protection as soon as he arrived in Italy in 2016 and lived for several months in a Cara¹⁸ reception centre in Southern Italy. Cultural mediators were perplexed about this solution since, as they explicitly reported, from their point of view, this

¹⁸ Cara are first assistance and reception centres for asylum seekers, see: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/reception-conditions/short-overview-italian-reception-system/> (Last access 14/05/2023).

choice could appear to Justice as a form of regression of his autonomy. Although the rest of the team agreed with their opinion, they also believed that this was the only way for Justice to access a form of – even differential (Degli Uberti, 2019) – welfare, able to simultaneously respond to his several material (housing and food) and social (language, orientation and training) needs.

The request of entry for the asylum seekers reception centre was, however, refused, due to an incompatibility with his legal *status* that operators had not noticed before.¹⁹ In the meantime, the urgency of finding seasonal workers for the farm increased, as did the desire of one of the projects to achieve this result, and, in accordance with the farmer, it was decided to offer Justice the possibility of employment. After several steps and time taken to verify his legal and employability *status*, Justice signed a one-month contract, with the possibility of renewal for up to three months and to access unemployment allowance until the following harvest season. After his and his employer's initial enthusiasm, Justice gradually 'failed' in the job, in terms of respect for timetables, duties and relationships with colleagues. After the second month, he practically failed to show up for work and the employer decided not to renew the contract. The cultural mediators were surprised, since, in their conversations with Justice, they had not noticed such a quick deterioration. On the contrary, they noticed a surprising acceleration and strengthening of his personal hopes and projections into the future. Soon after beginning the job, Justice told them he was planning to buy land in his country of origin and wanted to start the process for reuniting with his daughter. During a project meeting, some operators interpreted these dreams as contrasting with the precarity of the contract provided by the project itself, thus it was a risky leap forward and a possible sign of a poor sense of reality. Faced with that remark, a mediator responded by quoting Sankara, «a man without dreams is a dead man»²⁰, vindicating Justice's right to lofty aspirations. Once the company decision was made, the owner called the operators, communicating that she had the suspicion that Justice had lost his house, a condition subsequently confirmed by the mediators, who later verified it.

¹⁹ Despite having a permit for special cases, awaiting renewal by the competent CT, he had made a request for renewal for a self-employment job. The lawyer to whom he had turned independently to resolve his case was then contacted by project operators, and documentation was gradually sent in support of the evaluation of his integration process by the CT (for a request for renewal of special protection, then granted in December 2022). For more information on residence permits in Italy see: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/content-international-protection/status-and-residence/residence-permit/>. (Last access: 25/05/2023).

²⁰ Fieldwork notes, August 2021

The operators continued following Justice's situation, even if the result of the project could be considered to have been reached: the project just sought to have a contract signed (regardless of its duration) to formally consider the goal of job placement achieved. The main efforts led in two directions: the organisation of a meeting between Justice and the social workers of the municipality; and the conclusion of his regularisation process. The social worker who met him observed, and then certified, a form of psychological vulnerability; in the meantime, the renewal of the permit of stay arrived unexpectedly, for special protection (for two years). At this point, thanks to the socio-legal labels acquired, and the certificates produced by social services, the process of «refugeeization» (Dines, Rigo, 2015) became concrete, that is the transition, or return, to the asylum seekers' and refugees' reception system, specifically, a Sai project for vulnerable persons.

4. 'LOST ENCOUNTERS?' IN THE FIELD: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME TIME FRICTIONS

In this section, in referring to the multiscale and relational geographies of time, we propose a reflection on both cases, focusing on the macro, meso and micro levels of timescale. Reflecting on the navigation of project temporalities by operators, stakeholders and actors differently involved in the field of countering labour exploitation, we then focus on the biographical dimensions of time, as perceived and influenced by the relationship between projects and 'beneficiaries', and the state-dictated temporalities. All these levels are interconnected in the daily work practices of project operators, converging in their relations, and imposing a rhythm to 'beneficiaries'' lives and migration trajectories. We believe that the 'lost encounters' between project aims and 'beneficiary' needs, or more widely at the relational level among 'beneficiaries' and 'social operators', are not to be read as a project's failure, but as 'frictions' (Sheller, 2019) that also bring opportunities.

One important point emerging from the two cases – and affecting the results and the timelines of the projects – is related to the interactions and referral practices (Degani, 2011) between counter-labour exploitation, anti-trafficking programmes, and Sai projects. The relationship between them was necessary in the taking in charge chains, and in filling the gap between project tools/times and individual needs. In both cases, these interactions became possible through the adoption of specific socio-legal categories (Zetter, 2007), that is the presence of indicators of labour exploitation in the first case, and the socio-medical certification of

vulnerabilities in the second (Fassin and d'Halluin, 2005). Concerning the times of the activation, in project 1 first and foremost the case management coordination among the prevention of gang-mastering and anti-trafficking projects was very fast and timely and made the process of recognising the indicators of labour exploitation fluid. Project 2 was different in that. Not only did they have to reach challenging goals through a partnership of actors working together for the first time and with a weak network at local level, but they also had to struggle to find the strategy to support a 'potential victim of trafficking', a label that does not have clear legal definition. However, in both cases the effort of the operators involved was to enlarge networks and/or experiment with multi-agency actions to overcome the temporal limits of the counter-labour projects.

Another dimension that emerges from both cases is how temporality plays a role in sharing aims and methods within the same team. Indeed, even if in project 1 methodologies and networks were built up in a relatively easy and fluid process, operators and stakeholders did not have the necessary time to assess, reflect and follow up. In project 2 it required time for the team to see 'with the same eyes' in terms of reading, analysing, and designing a pathway. Mediators in both cases tried to maintain a 'person-centred approach'. In the case of Justice, they resisted the pathologizing of social needs (Beneduce, 2015) and the infantilization process (Altin and Sandò, 2017) that they often observed – and criticised – in Italian social services and projects; in the case of Nur, they avoided putting pressure on him to denounce or get involved in legal proceedings. The sharing and reflection of the different perspectives, and thus the construction of a common approach, was not facilitated by the anxiety and pressures perceived by partners and operators to reach the projects' goals. The urgency to reach their goals was in part due to the fact that both projects were implemented during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to delays of certain actions, partly by structural element. In the case of Justice, for instance, the corporate world of agricultural involved in the project, which saw the harvest season approaching, needed an urgent response to the chronic lack of manpower.

How do these temporalities intersect with biographical temporalities of the 'beneficiaries'? Far from being atemporal subjects (Fabian 1983), Nur and Justice life trajectories are marked by specific temporal and subjective elements. In Nur's case, the feeling of being blocked/trapped and, thus, the intention to push and position actions, hope, and changes in the future (at least after collecting his permit of stay). The material needs

and also the migratory projects here seem to be shaped by waiting for the permit of stay, hence by feeling in a limbo (Sanò and Zanolli, 2022), with emotions such as fear deriving from precarious legal *status* and the lack of possibility to find a new job. In contrast to this 'time suspension', in Justice's case, we see the 'need to accelerate' a change. There is an urgency in Justice's attitude, in terms of the need to find a job, to become autonomous, to rebuild the role of 'breadwinner' and thus to feel and act as an 'adult man', in particular in relation with his left-behind daughter and following a very long regularisation process. There were thus specific biographical elements that impacted on these suspension and accelerations. In Nur's case they were determined by state temporalities related to legal *status*, but also by his 'normalisation' of exploitative working conditions after a traumatic experience in Libya that, in Nur's words, was an experience that shaped his present and future in the arriving country. These traumatic experiences, in terms of exploitation in origin and transit countries, are a common element in the biographical trajectories of these two men. A second element relates to Nur's migratory pathway and his emotional needs: feeling pressure from his family to maintain them economically seems to push him to resist that exploitative situation, keeping him in a vulnerable economic position, and to find an alternative, better paid job, that could allow him to be a resource for his family. Here again biographical needs and temporalities seem to be shaped by permit of stay precarity and temporalities related to the process of renewal, conversion and by individual exit strategies elaborated before the encounter with the two projects.

There is also an interpersonal dimension that is crucial in both cases: although the project's temporalities in case 1 tried to be immediate, well-coordinated, reflexive, and fluid, they did not correspond to Nur's project temporalities at that specific time. For this reason, Nur's decision not to act may shed light on a form of non-temporal alignment to the project's request and timeline, as he understood it. The 'lost encounter' here is determined by the same authority – the state – through a different agency, that is the Police Headquarters' temporalities and procedures in issuing a permit of stay. In the case of Justice, the 'lost' encounter – even if it had positive results, in terms of having a permit of stay and entering a reception centre – was initially due to the Justice's and operators' 'acceleration' desire to see a change, and on the project operators' need for other steps to be fulfilled first and through a slow process, thus the time rhythms were different. In both cases, it must also be said that the projects' networks functioned as a parachute tool and a monitoring network in a phase of particular fragility for both 'beneficiaries', making

it possible to maintain a connection over time, containing a possible drift in terms of slipping in conditions of exploitation or serious marginalisation.

These lost encounters were an important moment for the partners involved in the projects, since they allowed new questions to arise and for them to reflect on the temporal, methodological and structural limits they faced. The two cases shed light on how state temporalities play a central role in structuring meso- and micro-level relational temporalities and hence impede the encounters of times and needs. Operators were aware that their interventions and positionalities were strongly impacted by time acceleration and stagnation connected both to legal *status* and the socio-economic conditions of migrants. State temporalities, besides determining the projects' duration, procedures, and requirements regarding target 'beneficiaries', also dictates time through the procedures to obtain a permit of stay as well as the facility to lose it, above all in cases of unemployment or lack of denouncements of exploitation.

The stagnation and acceleration due to these state temporalities (timing of the projects, the legal procedures and socio-economic needs) show, on the one hand, the relevance of building strategies to overcome a project's timeline. This can be done by building and cultivating strong relationships with all the actors in the field, including state agencies, in order to strengthen the building of communities of practice, so that the taking in charge can continue through bridging activities, even after the project ends²¹. Moreover, given the interconnection between exploitative conditions, legal *status* and employment possibilities, it is necessary to have a leading partner, at local level, that could find strategies between state agencies and local project stakeholders. In case of future interventions against labour exploitation, for instance, this could be necessary to 'facilitate encounters' within the same state bureaucratic machine. These suggestions might be hard to achieve but, in our view, they are necessary working methodologies to interrupt the internal discrepancies that the state itself reproduces by limiting mobility and emersion, through legal *status* procedures, non-fluid communication among its different agencies and other social agencies, while investing huge economic resources to counter exploitation of workers.

²¹ As some new countering labour exploitation projects, in the regional contexts analysed here, are attempting to do.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is the result of a common reflection of the two authors. However, Serena Scarabello wrote section 1 and 3.3, Eriselda Shkopi wrote section 2 and 3.2. Section 3.1 and section 4 were written by both the authors. Eriselda Shkopi for this publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement 101066659.

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