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To cite this article: Ester Driel (2020) Refugee settlement and the revival of local communities: lessons from the Riace model, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 25:2, 149-173, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2020.1716538](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2020.1716538)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2020.1716538>



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Published online: 16 Apr 2020.



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Refugee settlement and the revival of local communities: lessons from the Riace model

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ABSTRACT

The high influx of migrants and refugees into Italy since the 1990s has resulted, firstly, in a complicated and emergency-based reception system where facilities often lack sanitary and socio-economic services, and secondly, in a negative public attitude toward refugees. An innovative approach to address these challenges, while at the same time combatting poverty and mafia in a depopulated area, was developed in Riace, a town in southern Italy. The purpose of this article is to examine to what extent Riace's reception programme: (1) supported the successful settlement of refugees; and (2) affected the local community and the attitude of the local population towards newcomers. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017, this article discusses 'the Riace model': an approach whereby original inhabitants and refugees are together responsible for community development. This promoted refugees' socio-economic inclusion and created a supportive attitude towards migrants among locals who are proud of their hospitality. The Riace model and the way in which it is embedded in a national reception system can serve as an example to other European countries. However, there are also future challenges that relate to insecurity around the continuation of government funding and competition over local opportunities.

RIASSUNTO

Il consistente flusso di migranti e rifugiati giunti in Italia dagli anni Novanta ha messo in prima istanza in moto un sistema d'accoglienza basato sull'emergenza e spesso carente nei servizi sanitari e socioeconomici e, in secondo luogo, ha provocato un atteggiamento negativo da parte della collettività nei confronti dei rifugiati. Un modo innovativo di affrontare queste sfide combattendo la povertà, la criminalità organizzata e lo spopolamento è stato sviluppato a Riace, nel sud Italia. Lo scopo di questo saggio è d'indagare fino a che punto il programma di accoglienza di Riace abbia favorito un adeguato stabilimento dei profughi e inciso sulla comunità locale e sulla sua disposizione verso i nuovi arrivati. Retto da una ricerca sul campo, il mio testo affronta il 'modello Riace', grazie al quale abitanti del luogo e rifugiati sono stati entrambi responsabili dello sviluppo della società del paese. Tale modello ha promosso l'inserimento socioeconomico dei migranti e instillato un'attitudine solidale nei riacesi. Il 'modello Riace' e il suo inquadramento nel sistema nazionale potrebbero servire da esempio per l'Europa. Ciononostante, permangono delle difficoltà riguardanti la precarietà del finanziamento pubblico e la sovrabbondanza di offerta di lavoro rispetto alle possibilità d'impiego nell'economia del territorio.

KEYWORDS asylum seekers; community development; Riace-model; southern Italy; local attitudes; refugee and asylum policies

PAROLE CHIAVE Richiedenti asilo; sviluppo della comunità; modello Riace; sud Italia; visione del mondo territoriale; politiche d'asilo

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s and especially since Europe's Refugee Crisis in 2015 hundreds of thousands of people have been crossing the Mediterranean to find safety and apply for asylum in Europe. In 2015, 1,256,210 refugees applied for asylum in the EU (UNHCR 2018). Although this number has dropped significantly after the implementation of a series of restrictive immigration policies and deals with the Turkish government and the UN-backed government in Libya, Europe still received 580,800 first-time asylum seekers in 2018 (UNHCR 2018; Eurostat 2019). The increasing number of asylum seekers has, among other things, led to more negative public attitudes towards refugees and their reception (Migration Data Portal 2018). National governments, local authorities and N.G.O.s have struggled to find ways of dealing with the challenge of accommodating these newcomers while taking public attitudes into account. Marginalization and (institutional) discrimination, exclusion from formal and informal social networks and high unemployment rates remain key challenges to the successful settlement of refugees in Europe (e.g. Abdelaaty and Steele 2018; Bakker, Dagevos and Engbertsen 2017; Puggioni 2016).

An innovative approach to address these challenges was developed in Riace, southern Italy, by the local community in collaboration with several N.G.O.'s.¹ The reception of refugees in Riace started in 1998 when 300 Kurdish refugees landed at the Ionian coast and spontaneously received support by local inhabitants. Ever since, refugees have been hosted in houses that were abandoned by local emigrants looking for work abroad or elsewhere in Italy, leaving behind an impoverished 'ghost town', mainly inhabited by elderly people. Over time a comprehensive settlement programme for refugees has been developed in Riace, starting immediately upon arrival. Refugees, in turn, bring new life into the once-dying town. The success of this settlement programme is illustrated by the fact that various (inter)national authorities, including EU politicians, and the mass media have visited the town to learn from 'the Riace model' ('Pittella loda il "modello Riace"' 2015). Furthermore, other Calabrian villages have adopted parts of Riace's approach and some of them actively cooperate with the municipality of Riace in spite of resistance from the local mafia. This raises the question of whether, and in which ways, the Riace model can serve as an example for the settlement of asylum seekers in other European regions. The purpose of this article is to examine to what extent Riace's reception programme: (1) supports the successful settlement of

refugees; and (2) affects the local community and the attitudes of the local population towards newcomers. Empirically, this article draws upon our extensive ethnographic field work in Riace conducted in 2015 to 2017.

The author consciously chooses to use the term 'refugee settlement' over 'refugee integration' for various reasons. Firstly, Riace's settlement programme aims to create a social and economic win-win situation for both locals and refugees (Sasso 2012). The possible revival of the sparsely populated town and its consequences for the inhabitants can rather be seen as an attempt to create a new community, than as a process of integration of refugees into an existing society. Secondly, the term 'settlement' appears more neutral compared to 'integration', the latter term having recently been a key policy objective and a matter of significant public and political discussion across Europe. Moreover, although research has attempted to create coherent tools and frameworks linking different aspects of what (successful) integration could comprise (see e.g. Ager and Strang 2008) the concept of integration is used with widely differing meanings whereas settlement is a less contested concept. The refugee council of Australia (2015, New South Wales Government) described settlement as a 'two way process between the local community and newcomers, whereby both make adaptations to facilitate successful settlement', rooted in 'a spirit of hospitality'. This definition comes close to the meanings attached to settlement by Riace's inhabitants that will be presented in this article.

Section 2 of this article critically discusses the Italian reception system for refugees. Section 3 reviews the key challenges to the successful settlement of refugees in Europe and Italy. Section 4 presents the methods and research location. Section 5 (findings) discusses to what extent the Riace model supports the successful settlement of refugees and how it impacts the local community and the attitudes of locals towards refugees. It also discusses the problems and challenges that Riace faces. Section 6 (discussion) elaborates on the lessons from Riace for refugee settlement and asylum policies in Europe and discusses the implications of the Riace model for the European Asylum System, followed by a conclusion in section 7 that answers the main research questions.

2. Precarious asylum: refugees in the Italian reception system

Fostered by the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, Italy changed in the 1970s from being a country characterized by emigration to being a country of immigration as well (Grillo and Pratt, 2002). The first migrants came to look for work in informal jobs, though from the late 1990s the types of migration changed. The South of Italy, especially the island of Lampedusa, became a primary entry port for political and economic refugees mainly coming from African countries, the Middle East and Asia (Grillo and Pratt 2002).

Soon after Lampedusa also became a symbol of the 'illegal' arrival of migrants and led Italy to further tighten its border policies. Since those migrants are often associated with criminal activity and are seen as a threat to the welfare state (Delle Donne 2004), Italy created Centres of Identification and Expulsion (C.I.E.s) for those who reside in Italy illegally (based on law 94/2009). Besides the C.I.E.'s, Italy has a complicated reception system for asylum seekers that offers several types of accommodation, divided into first and second reception centres. Reception upon arrival (first reception) is offered in Centres for First Assistance (C.D.A.s), created in 1995, and since 2008 also in Centres for Accommodation of Asylum Seekers (C.A.R.A.s). According to law 142/2015, these centres have the general purpose of identifying and accommodating refugees. First Aid and Reception Centres (C.P.S.A.s), created in 2006, and Extraordinary Reception Centres (C.A.S.s), introduced in October 2013 (upon the launch of the Mare Nostrum Operation), offer first aid to asylum seekers before they are transferred to other reception structures. The C.A.S.s, born out of a lack of available places in other reception structures, aim to host asylum seekers only for a limited period of time. However, due to the continuing arrivals of refugees and migrants by sea, asylum seekers are often forced to reside in such centres for long periods of time. The housing facilities, such as schools, ex-hotels and residences, stadiums, indoor sport arenas, makeshift camps tend to be provisional and sometimes lack services such as legal, social and sanitary assistance that are legally required as the bare minimum (Denaro 2016). Due to the temporary nature of many of the reception structures, it is difficult to provide statistics on the number of asylum seekers that reside in C.A.S.s, but estimated numbers were around 32,000 in 2014 (Denaro 2016) and 50,000 in 2015 (AIDA n.d.; ANCI n.d.).

First reception is further offered in temporary centres aimed at receiving refugees who have been returned to Italy under the Dublin Regulation. Since first and second reception centres lack the capacity to deal with the increasing influx of refugees, Italy also offers temporary facilities. These are small-scale reception projects set up by the prefecture, often in collaboration with local institutions and N.G.O.s. Like the C.A.S.s, these provisional housing facilities have become regular locations for the reception of refugees (Denaro 2016). The emergency-based nature of the organization of first-line reception facilities which often resulted in a lack of sanitary and socio-economic services, forms a problematic aspect of the Italian asylum system. Of all these types of accommodation, the C.A.R.A.s hold the biggest number of asylum applicants (Ministero dell'Interno n.d.).

Second-line reception is mainly provided under the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (S.P.R.A.R.) and applies to asylum applicants who are identified and have started their asylum procedure. In 2001, the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of Home Affairs signed an agreement with the National

Association of Italian municipalities (A.N.C.I.) and with the U.N.H.C.R. to implement a 'National Project on Asylum'. This agreement was later institutionalized by the Law 189/2002 (SPRAR 2014). Hence, the National Asylum Plan (N.P.A.), later named S.P.R.A.R. The S.P.R.A.R. projects, funded by the Italian government and the European Union (Janot 2015), aim to help refugees to regain their personal independence by organizing 'integrated reception' activities aimed at socio-economic inclusion (SPRAR 2013). The Riace model served as an inspiration for the N.P.A./S.P.R.A.R. system and the policymakers had been regularly visiting to learn from the town. Riace was also accepted in the N.P.A. immediately in 2001 and from then on started to receive funding. Although Riace classifies as a 'S.P.R.A.R.-project', the Riace model by far exceeds the minimum requirements on socio-economic inclusion of refugees for receiving S.P.R.A.R. funds. For example, the associations in Riace actively encourage locals and refugees to participate in work and job training² programmes aimed at restoration and sustainability; initiatives aimed at the revival of local ancient crafts and solidarity tourism which combines volunteering and tourism in order to stimulate the development of a local community (Altra Locride n.d.).

The logic underlying the S.P.R.A.R. projects sharply contrasts with the circumstances in the often overcrowded large-scale C.A.R.A.s, which offer merely primary assistance and few possibilities for social inclusion and legal support (Medici Senza Frontier 2010 in Elia 2013). Besides the challenges posed by the complicated and emergency based asylum and reception systems, the stage after the asylum procedure is quite problematic. Asylum applicants who either successfully or unsuccessfully finish their procedure are often left without assistance from the state: there is a lack of socio-economic support and housing facilities generally are not provided even in the case of homelessness. Due to Italy's high unemployment rate and the remote location of some accommodation many refugees, even when granted asylum, are forced to depend on charity organizations or find their own survival strategies such as building a shelter (Puggioni 2016; Eurostat 2018; AIDA n.d.).

3. Refugee settlement: key challenges

In addition to the challenges caused by Italy's complicated asylum and reception system, refugees are further challenged once they find a (temporary) place to settle. First of all they are often confronted with negative stereotypes or even hostile attitudes, fuelled by the Italian public debate where popular media and politicians often frame them as 'clandestini' ('illegal immigrants') rather than refugees. The use of such language and metaphors contributes to the promotion of fear and creates an atmosphere where social, political exclusion and repression become increasingly socially acceptable (Makaremi and Kobelinsky 2009–16 in

Pinelli 2013a; Sorgogni 2013). Although many Europeans believe that refugees who are facing persecution deserve help, they fear that settlement of (high numbers of) refugees will cause unacceptable cultural change (e.g. Hermanni and Neumann 2019; Abdelaaty & Steele 2018). Abdelaaty & Steele (2018) found that higher levels of diversity in a country (and Italy is high on diversity) were also associated with decreased support for refugees, though this relationship varied depending on the measures for diversity used by different institutions (Abdelaaty & Steele 2018).

Discrimination, fear and social exclusion have led, amongst other things, to the continued existence of a so-called 'refugee gap' in various European countries: a lower labour market participation rate of refugees compared to natives and even other types of migrants (e.g. Ager and Strang 2008; Bakker, Dagevos and Engbersen 2017). Even in countries characterized by strong welfare states, such as Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, that sometimes also offer intensive labour market integration programmes, unemployment amongst refugees remains relatively high (Bunar and Valenta 2010; Brekke and Brochmann 2014). The fact that refugees often live in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods hampers their access to formal and informal social networks that can promote labour market participation (Brivio 2013). As labour market participation is influenced by both individual skills and characteristics as well as (discriminatory and restrictive) policies, settlement programmes should focus both on individual employment as well as overcoming structural barriers to the labour market (Bloch 2008). Qualitative research (Bloch 2008; Phillimore 2011) in the U.K. also showed that the current policy environment, characterized by the politicalization of migration, limits refugees to choose an acculturation strategy (as defined by Berry in 1997) that suits their personal, psychological and experiential characteristics. This lack of choice makes them vulnerable to psychosocial stress which in turn hampers successful settlement.

The relation between refugees' individual aspirations and local settlement experiences on the one hand, and the structural constraints shaped by (trans-) national policies on the other hand, has been widely studied in both the European and Italian context (e.g. Brekke and Brochmann 2014; Pinelli 2013a, 2013b; Sorgogni, 2013). Brekke and Brochmann (2014) for example found that national differences in reception and welfare standards inspired Eritreans to (illegally) move on from Italy to northern European countries like Norway, even though refugees are officially bound to fulfil their asylum application in the first country of arrival according to the Dublin Regulation. In conclusion, refugees are challenged by direct experiences, for example with discrimination and unemployment, but also by the ways in which national and European policies interact with such experiences.

4. Research setting and methods

4.1 *Refugees in Riace*

Riace is located in the southern Italian region of Calabria, an area that for decades has been characterized by waves of emigration and a declining population. Between the Italian unification in 1861 and the Great Depression of the 1930s many Calabrians left for the U.S., driven by poverty. Sizeable numbers of people continued to leave Calabria between World Wars I and II, and again after World War II to destinations like Argentina and Western Europe. The emigration reached another peak in the 1960s and 1970s when many people moved to the industrial north of Italy (Borzomati 1982). Due to poverty and a corrupt political system supported by complicated laws and the traditional power of the 'Ndrangheta mafia, Calabria remains underdeveloped and attracts little external investment. The area has high unemployment rates (21.6per cent according to the Eurostat report, 2018, compared to 10.2per cent on average in Italy), an ageing population and a lack of social services.

In this context, Riace has been hosting refugees since 1998. One year after the arrival of the first Kurdish refugees, a group of young people including the current mayor Domenico Lucano, founded the Città Futura Puglisi association, named after a Sicilian priest who was murdered by the mafia. In collaboration with the municipality, the association started to organize the reception of refugees and combined it with restoration and sustainability projects, initiatives aimed at the revival of local ancient crafts and solidarity tourism. Città Futura's main goal is to create a different socio-economic environment characterized by a culture and economy of welcoming refugees and solidarity tourism, and by actively combating economic exploitation and social exclusion of migrants. This has led to intimidation and violence towards local authorities and refugees by local 'Ndrangheta members who try to maintain their power position (Sasso 2012). The last attack in Riace took place in 2009 when 'Ndrangheta members shot through the door of Riace's solidarity restaurant, run by refugees and locals, when the mayor was having dinner. Despite such intimidation the mayor continued running the association and the programme has expanded, especially since the end of the 2000s. Financially and bureaucratically, a single S.P.R.A.R. project can handle a maximum of about forty refugees so six additional associations were created in collaboration with the community, all hosting refugees according to the principles of Città Futura. This growth was supported by additional funds that Riace receives from the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria since 2014. In addition to the planned growth, refugees have been making the journey to Riace independently to request residency within the project, motivated by the positive media coverage about Riace and communication within refugees' social networks. Finally the municipality organizes reception projects aimed at individuals belonging to vulnerable categories, such as unaccompanied minors.

After decades of population decline the settlement programme resulted in a population increase. Between 2001 and 2014 the number of Riace inhabitants rose from about 1,600 to 2,150. On average between 300 and 400 new inhabitants were refugees, mainly originating from Nigeria, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Gambia. Others are locals who had previously emigrated to the North and decided to return as business opportunities presented themselves due to the influx of new young inhabitants. Over the years around 6,000 refugees have passed through Riace, and about 100 of them are now living or working there permanently (Comuni Italiani 2015; Tutti Italia 2016). Others have stayed for about one to three years, until they received the decision on their asylum application by the Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection (Italian authority that processes international protection claims). Shortly after the asylum procedure ends the S.P.R.A.R. and prefecture stop the funding for that individual and many refugees therefore decide to move on to more prosperous areas.

5. Methods

5.1 *Ethnographic fieldwork*

I collected empirical data during three stages of ethnographic fieldwork from October 2015 until February 2016, from August 2016 until September 2016, and in August 2017. By volunteering as an English teacher during the first months I was able to build trusting relationships with parents and project staff, who often also introduced me to friends and family. The effectiveness of such 'snowball sampling' (Silverman 2010) depends on the skills of the researcher and the social networks of the informants and therefore raises the question of selectivity. However, due to the small size of Riace and the traditional hospitality I became acquainted with a large number of residents. Even small encounters, for example informal dialogues at the local bar, often resulted in invitations to people's homes or workplaces which were common places for locals to gather. The fieldwork also took place in various formal and informal settings, such as hospitals and schools as well as celebrations of religious holidays at refugees' homes.

In addition to participant observation, the main research method, I conducted in-depth interviews, focus-group interviews, and informal interviews on a daily basis. Informal interviews were held with a variety of residents (including refugees) and I deliberately choose to include the perspectives of representatives of different institutions involved in the settlement of refugees including Mayor Lucano. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty local residents, sixteen institutional representatives, the mayor, and ten refugees benefiting from the reception programme. I always explicitly indicated that people could end a conversation at any time and checked whether locals felt comfortable when

discussing more sensitive topics like nepotism. I consistently explained my position as an academic researcher trying to understand Riace and its model, and explained that all information is treated confidentially and anonymized. Finally, I collected and analysed written resources like local media, Facebook posts, documentation obtained from local authorities and photographs taken during fieldwork.

The ethnographic method enabled me to participate in informal and spontaneous meetings during which participants were willing and more open to share perceptions, emotions, gossip and critical reflections on the reception programme. The three periods of fieldwork also made it possible to develop close relationships which resulted in locals expressing not only popular positive images of Riace but also being more critical regarding, for example, alleged local corruption. For comparative purposes I regularly visited and interviewed staff in surrounding Calabrian towns with settlement programmes, like Gioia Ionica, Camini and Stignano.

6. Analysis

Interviews were tape-recorded if respondents agreed and analysed together with daily fieldnotes divided into observational, analytical, and methodological notes and reflections on one's position and role as a researcher. For example, the mere presence of a foreign researcher might stimulate a tendency to present Riace in a favourable way or to more openly express doubts or criticism.³ Analysis was mainly done following an inductive approach, starting from empirical findings in the field (Silverman 2010). For this article, Italian notes and extracts have been translated into English. When words could not be translated literally, the researcher aimed to use definitions closest to the related field.

7. Findings

7.1 *Settlement of refugees in Riace*

The associations and municipality of Riace offer refugees a comprehensive settlement programme, which starts immediately upon arrival. This programme is intertwined with initiatives aimed at the revival of local ancient crafts, with restoration and sustainability projects and with solidarity tourism. The goal is to connect the settlement of refugees with the development of the local community.

Besides employment programmes the associations provide housing, health care and legal aid, for example during the application procedure. In Riace, refugees live independently in houses spread throughout the town, in contrast with many other Italian regions characterized by spatial

concentration of migrants in certain disadvantaged urban areas (Sorgogni 2013). They live either with their families or in small groups of single refugees and are preferably grouped with friends or with people from the same country of origin. During the first period of residency the project staff clearly communicates local rules and legislation and manages expectations. Adhering to these rules is a condition of participation in the project and necessary for receiving funds, like the monthly bonus of €250 for groceries. Città Futura developed a special currency that refugees can use for their groceries in local shops. This so-called 'bonus money' portrays freedom fighters and local anti-mafia heroes who inspired the mayor. Using a local currency is necessary as the project depends on government funds that are often paid with a few months delay. Once the funds arrive local shop keepers can exchange the bonus money for Euros. The bonus money provides refugees with some financial autonomy and supports the local economy because the currency can only be spent in Riace.

In the different 'Laboratorio' or workplaces/workshops, traditional Calabrian handicrafts are produced by refugees and local Italians together. For example, there are workplaces and shops for dressmaking, joinery, pottery and glass-blowing. These activities offer employees both a learning experience and gainful occupation. For every Italian employee the project hires one refugee in order to promote social relationships and the learning of Italian language. The same principle is applied in the different restoration and sustainability projects, such as the 'murales' (wall-painting project), the fruit- and vegetable-terraces and the hydraulic project that offers free drinking water to all inhabitants. From the collaboration in the 'laboratorio' and restoration and sustainability projects many interethnic friendships have begun. Colleagues regularly meet outside the workplace, and some of the refugees have even named their children after the mayor or local saints. Although friendships seem deeper among project staff than between other residents, the overall atmosphere in Riace is peaceful with people from different backgrounds interacting in a friendly manner in public spaces such as the town square. Furthermore, adult refugees attend Italian classes and children and adolescents go to school together with Italian peers, once their Italian language skills are sufficient. This has resulted in friendships between classmates of different backgrounds. Additional classes and after school meetings are organized to further promote Italian language skills and to offer extra help with other subjects.

Besides facilitating social inclusion and fostering economic development, the workshops, restoration and sustainability projects also include strong messages of solidarity. These messages are reflected in the handicrafts, art-work and public services that the projects produce. One of the key messages that the projects spread is that the local history of Riace is a history of migration. For centuries people have been migrating into the region, for

example from Greece and Albania, and Italians have been emigrating due to poverty, political oppression and the mafia. Although a history of migration characterizes all of Italy, the specific history of population movement in Calabria and Riace was essential for establishing a local culture of solidarity and hospitality (see also Driel and Verkuyten 2019). Locals often mention how they identify with refugees because they understand how difficult it is to migrate, either from their own experience or because of the stories of direct family members who returned to Riace. The town and the Calabrian region in general have been characterized by waves of emigration to (South) America, Australia and Northern Europe ever since the 'Risorgimento' (the Italian Unification) in 1861, which marked the start of a decade of poor land management practices and extreme poverty (Borzomati 1982). Therefore almost every family has their own 'migration narrative'. Furthermore, locals point out that immigrants and refugees have always brought prosperity to the town and the most well-known story is the one of the local saints of Cosma and Damiano. After much suffering in Syria, these refugees brought crucial medical knowledge to Calabria and for centuries up to the present day they are honored during a three-day festival in September. This festival has always attracted pilgrims from all over Europe, resulting in a thriving trade in local products. In summary, inhabitants often refer to the local history of immigration and emigration, and the refugee projects use these narratives to enhance support for refugees (Driel and Verkuyten 2019).

Therefore the handicrafts and wall-paintings depict both Calabrian and foreign traditions, like a wall painting near the main square that shows Calabrian and Arab pottery traditions typical to the region. Likewise, a welcoming sign at the entrance of the village reads 'Riace, paese dell'Accoglienza' ('Riace, a town of hospitality') and another one depicts children from different backgrounds forming a circle around a globe. At the main square a colourful gate surrounded by wooden ships is decorated with a text that welcomes people into the 'villaggio globale' (global village) of Riace. Another example is the 'solidarity calendar' that hangs in almost every home and portrays locals and refugees from Riace and the surrounding towns together at their workplaces and at local festivities. The community also organizes cultural events aimed at promoting awareness of (institutional responses to) the refugee crisis. Most events take place during summer and are combined with the celebration of local traditions and customs. An example is 'Riace in festival', a music, film and theatre festival centred around the topics of migration, local culture and (traditional) resistance to mafia (Riace in Festival 2016). In July and August festivities take place almost daily and aim to create awareness of these topics among tourists as well. Simultaneously they stimulate social relationships between locals by offering an opportunity to celebrate local and foreign traditions together. The 'solidarity tourism' in

Riace offers various Italian and international scout associations, school camps and many international tourists a cultural exchange experience with an option to participate in the restoration and sustainability projects together with locals and refugees. Tourists can rent a house from Città Futura or stay in a 'solidarity hotel', and have dinner in Taverna Donna Rosa where local citizens prepare traditional Calabrese dishes and typical dishes from the countries of origin of Riace's refugees.

In addition to the activities organized by Città Futura, citizens spontaneously started to organize activities that complement the programme. For example, some refugee women take care of the elderly and thereby create their own employment and cultural exchange. Market vendors from the wider region started to accept the local bonus money for their products and the local church organizes baptism ceremonies for children of refugees. Religion plays a dominant role in the lives of both refugees and locals and to create support for a cause or mission it has traditionally been of key importance to have the support of the Catholic Church. Pope Francesco declared his support for the reception programme on national television and even invited Mayor Lucano to the Vatican to promote his mission. Moreover the rapport between the municipality and the Bishop of the local diocese have traditionally been strong. The fact that the local pastor, who is a migrant from the Congo, is always present at important local events promotes a sense of inclusion amongst refugees and further encourages local support for the settlement programme.

8. Community development, pride and attitudes towards refugees

The various activities, through a combination of intended outcomes and side effects, has created a supportive attitude towards the reception of refugees among the majority of locals. For example, ninety-two-year-old N said:

They are 'molto bravi' ['very good people'], they are friendly and greet you, and they never bother anyone. I also understand that they want to leave Africa! (male, has lived in Riace all his life)

The project's aim to connect the settlement of refugees to the development of the local community seems to be largely achieved. Inhabitants realize that the projects have stimulated the local economy and the town's social life. They often explicitly express to feel 'molto orgoglioso' ('very proud') of the ways in which their Riace and their mayor helps refugees and simultaneously reversed the socioeconomic decline of the village:

I travelled the world, and realized that Riace really is not a bad place, or actually it is even a very good and special place – compared to other cities. A small town, that serves as an example of hospitality towards migrants, of different ways to create a social and fair economy. (V., male inhabitant, 28)

These feelings of pride are reinforced by the positive attention that Riace receives from Italian and international journalists, academics, politicians, artists, tourists and film makers. People from all over the world, ranging from EU Parliament Members to professors of renowned universities, have been visiting to learn from this exemplary case where the refugee 'crisis' has been turned into something positive. Several films have been made about the town and Italian media often refers to 'il modello Riace' as an innovative model that has managed to establish a new multi-cultural community based on inclusion. Locals consider this positive attention exceptional, especially given the fact that the Calabrian region is mostly known for its corruption scandals.

Riace's typical hospitality and absence of racism also became well known in different areas through refugees' (informal) social networks. Refugees perceive the town as one of the few places where they are able to work for a reasonable salary in contrast to the exploitation and discrimination that they face elsewhere in the region:

I got shot in Catanzaro – it was a hate crime, possibly fuelled by the mafia. But after this incident 'il sindaco' (the mayor), opened his heart to me, took me into his village and offered me this nice job. I never experienced racism here. (T., male, Ghanaian, construction worker for Città Futura)

Recently, Riace's reputation of 'accoglienza' has even attracted an Northern Irish family to come and live there, as the oldest son explains:

My parents choose to go to Riace, because it's famous for its 'accoglienza'. In Northern Ireland, we lived in some kind of border area between Catholics and Protestants. Houses were burned on a regular base, etcetera. So, they wanted to build a future in Italy. And choose this place. (R., male, Irish, student)

Locals not only support the settlement programme because of feelings of pride, but also due to its socioeconomic benefits. The reception of refugees has stimulated the weak local economy in several ways. For example, some inhabitants have created additional income by renting abandoned houses to the associations in order to host refugees and tourists. Since many of those houses have been family property for decades and are mortgage-free, this constitutes a substantial source of income. Moreover refugees are the most important new customers for local shops, bars and restaurants. Young refugees and their children bring new life to the once-dying town and save public services like schools from closure. The reception projects are also an important employer for locals and refugees and provide sixty to eighty substantial jobs depending on the exact number of refugees at a given period. For example, work is available for interpreters, medical or judicial assistants, chauffeurs or teachers, partly funded by the S.P.R.A.R. or prefecture. The workshops,

restoration and sustainability projects and solidarity tourism initiatives like restaurants, also offer temporary or permanent jobs:

Another important reason for the 'accoglienza' ['hospitality'] is an economic one: Città Futura provides work to many people, and tourists do also come to Riace study the 'accoglienza'. For example in spring and summer, especially in May, many schools arrive in Riace, and they visit the workshops, the countryside. (S., 25, female, Italian inhabitant of Riace)

Furthermore, the creation of new jobs prevents (young and highly educated) locals from moving away, such as L. (30, male, father of two young children) who holds an academic degree and now runs one of the projects.

The workshops and restoration and sustainability projects create support for the reception of refugees in several other ways as well. Locals are proud of their beautiful, clean and well-maintained town, a result of the restoration projects and the art workshops and programmes like the creation of colourful murals. They also benefit from the good condition of the local infrastructure and well-functioning public services such as the eco-friendly waste management service. An additional advantage of such services is that they provide an opportunity for locals and refugees to meet each other. The maintenance of the town is exceptional in the poor and corrupt Calabrian region.

The art and restoration projects also convey messages of solidarity and hospitality and serve as a symbol for the revival of local traditions and ancient crafts, as summarized on the billboard at the main town square that reads: 'Riace ... paese dell'accoglienza e di antiche tradizioni' ('Riace ... town of hospitality and of ancient traditions'). Thus, the symbolic messages enhance the efficacy of the art and restoration projects by adding meaning to them. This fosters a sense of local community and makes people proud to belong to a culture of hospitality. Moreover, the fact that existing projects are continued and the number of projects has steadily increased over time, makes locals feel confident about the future of the village. As D. explains:

The terraces will be like a city. When you return next year you will see a whole new part of Riace, maybe even bigger than the old town! (male, Italian, working on sustainable fruit- and vegetable-terraces for Città Futura)

The fact that the socioeconomic development of Riace is due to the efforts of locals and refugees themselves, causes feelings of pride:

Domenico Lucano, the mayor, is always making our town more beautiful. I'm very proud, also of my own work and my own contribution: to bring people together by art. (A., 33, female, Italian, working at the weaving workshop)

These messages are communicated by locals and refugees who work together in the projects and are proud of their achievements and such feelings have gradually spread throughout the village. Many inhabitants

now express their local pride in face-to-face interactions but also on social media. For example, a recent Facebook post of A. (52, male, Italian) shows a picture of the full and renovated amphitheatre together with the message 'Riace has become a big beautiful city, I am very proud.' The deputy mayor (40, male, Italian) even wrote a poetry book dedicated to Riace and its hospitality.

The mayor, Domenico Lucano, actively stimulates all (cultural) activities organized by the settlement programmes. He used to be a member of Italy's 'Student Movement', a revolutionary left-wing organization in the 1960s and 1970s. Since 2009 he has been a member of the civic list, a name given to parties campaigning on local issues without being affiliated with a national political party (Comune di Riace, 2016). Lucano still expresses his political ideals in several ways and his heroes like Che Guevara and Mandela have now become symbols depicted on the murals throughout town, the bonus money and on posters in the projects' offices.

Lucano is also visibly involved in daily community life and constantly updates inhabitants through social media. Locals often show how proud they are of the achievements of 'their' mayor who was selected by *Fortune Magazine* as one of the World's 50 Greatest Leaders (*Fortune* 2016). The political direction taken by the mayor is automatically intertwined with Riace's refugee projects, as the municipality applies for S.P.R.A.R. funds (Law no.189/2002 in SPRAR 2014) and has a voice in deciding about the use of financial resources. This strategy seems successful as Lucano and his group 'L'altra Riace, cento passi per il futuro' ('A different Riace, a hundred steps towards the future') has won local elections already three times, the legal maximum. During election campaigns his supporters and opponents were passionately involved, as one supporter recalls:

When the first re-election took place, all citizens originating from Riace returned from the North to vote. There were even fights between youngsters belonging to different groups! When Domenico won, we partied for two days! We drove around town, drunk a lot. (G., male, Italian inhabitant of Riace)

Finally the fact that Riace has already hosted refugees for 20 years seems to have normalized the often unexpected arrival of newcomers, for example when a boat lands on the local beach. Locals assume that everyone knows what they talk about when they refer to 'the project' (the six associations hosting refugees and all activities that they organize) and 'i ragazzi' (literally 'the boys', though often used by inhabitants when referring to Riace's refugees).

9. Challenges

Despite the success of the Riace model some key challenges and voices of discontent continue to exist.

9.1 Economic competition

Notwithstanding the economic development brought by the settlement of refugees, Riace remains a small town in an impoverished region with relatively few (highly skilled) job opportunities and without a functioning welfare state (ISTAT, 2014). Many residents financially benefitted from the arrival of refugees, and this has caused feelings of envy and jealousy amongst some locals who were unable to profit from the situation. They feel left out and accuse the project's employees of having secured their position through corruption or nepotism:

The mayor is very cunning; he gives all the jobs that have been created by the project to Italians with whom he is close or to his negro friends! (C., male, Italian, unemployed)

Some of them also feel at a disadvantage as they do not receive any governmental benefits while refugees receive S.P.R.A.R. funds. They often do not know or do not believe that the S.P.R.A.R. funds are predominantly financed by the E.U. (SPRAR, 2014). Instead they blame refugees for stealing 'the Italian benefits' and disrupting the welfare system, as well as undermining the local economy by working illegally for low wages.

9.2 Temporary settlement: a lack of long-term opportunities

Due to the lack of employment opportunities in southern Italy many refugees are forced to move on to other regions once they have to leave the programme and their financial support ends (after one to three years depending on duration of the asylum procedure, SPRAR 2014). The absence of a functioning welfare state causes those who are unable to find a job elsewhere or to join family or friends to be homeless (confirming previous research, see e.g. Brekke and Brochmann 2014). Men who remain in the region often end up working illegal agricultural jobs, women are at risk of ending up in illegal prostitution and exploitation of vulnerable refugees occurs frequently in the region (e.g. Amnesty International 2012; FRA 2019). Some refugees also leave Riace simply because they do not want to live in a small town. Even though the Riace model only offers them a short term solution, they unanimously agree that their experience in Riace is much more pleasant, instructive and dignifying than the life they often used to have within the (overcrowded) asylum centres or on the streets.

9.3 Hospitality or business?

As mentioned, the reception of asylum seekers increasingly attracts public funds and fosters the creation of jobs. A critique made by some locals,

especially by those who were involved with the project from the start, is that a project that was once created by a group of passionate young volunteers helping refugees nowadays resembles a business:

Inhabitant N: When you – I don't know how to find the word in English ... When you change from 'vero accoglienza, dal cuore' [true hospitality, from the heart], to the accoglienza [hospitality] that is made for business ...

Tourist A: What is the problem with it becoming a business?

Inhabitant N: Nowadays tourism in Riace doesn't exist. The goal of Città Futura was to make Riace come to life again, half through tourists, half through refugees. It was a shared economy. A real shared economy. Now it's a business economy. With the will only to keep the power.

They perceive this change as being problematic, not just because it contrasts their idealism but also because they fear that it endangers the independence of the initiative from government funds:

The political group, that we created, me, D., the other guys.. C., M., I, G.. A group who believed in the idea. Who worked and believed in the idea of the association. We made olive oil, marmalade, soap. We were independent. If you stopped the P.N.A. funds [precursor S.P.R.A.R.], you would still have tourism. Now if the 'bando' ['funds'] stops, you have nothing. Imagine Salvini gets presidency and stops the funds – Riace is finished. It's an economically weaker position. And you're dependent on politics. If somebody wins the next election ... to be part of the PNA [precursor S.P.R.A.R.], you have to have the 'consensus' of the city hall. So if the mayor decides; I don't want refugees anymore ...⁴

Finally some inhabitants fear that the increasing amount of funds attracts administrators and employees who merely want to obtain quick money, instead of knowledgeable people, and that the large amount of funding increase the likelihood of corruption and money laundering. Some of them even suggest that the promise of a S.P.R.A.R. related job is used to obtain votes during local elections. In response to such suggestions, the mayor claims to be as transparent as possible and include citizens in decision making processes. However given the long history of 'Ndrangetha mafia, mistrust and corruption, these sentiments, even though only represented by a small group of inhabitants, might pose a future challenge to the support for the reception project.

10. Discussion and policy recommendations

European and national programmes aimed at successful local settlement of refugees can be improved by learning from Riace and the way in which this project is embedded in the S.P.R.A.R. system. S.P.R.A.R. projects are financed by the E.U. and/or the national government, but organized in a bottom-up instead of top-down manner, in close collaboration with

local N.G.O.s. This mechanism causes a social and economic win-win situation in accordance with the specific needs of local communities. Currently refugees in Europe often stay in (large-scale) reception centres while waiting for their documents (Puggioni 2016), with few options to get familiar with the host society despite good intentions of multiple local and national N.G.O.s. The S.P.R.A.R. system could serve as an example to other European countries or even for the creation of a European asylum system, in line with the 2018 aim of the E.U. to create common standards for a European Asylum System (European Commission, 2018a).

In Italy the success of Riace's reception programme has not gone unnoticed. Several surrounding Calabrian villages have started copying good practices such as solidarity tourism projects and became part of the S.P.R.A.R. system and sometimes they actively cooperate with Riace. Yet, in conversations with inhabitants, local authorities and S.P.R.A.R. employees in surrounding towns and by studying the media coverage of different Calabrian projects since 2008 (Altra Locride n.d.; Comune di Stignano 2015; Consorzio Sociale GOEL 2008; Sasso 2012) it became clear that not all of these projects have been equally successful. Some of them never fully started or were terminated after a few years. Respondents gave two main explanations: success depends on: (1) the role played by a strong and influential leader who supports the project even when challenges arise, and who promotes 'a local culture of hospitality' (as in Riace); and (2) whether a reception project involves and benefits the local community and therefore is more than 'just a refugee project'. New (local) settlement projects could benefit from strong leadership that explicitly promotes and communicates a narrative of solidarity with those in need, and from investigating and responding to the specific social and economic needs of the local community.

Perhaps the most crucial weaknesses of the Riace model is its temporality. When funding finishes after one to three years, refugees have to leave the settlement programme. Those without financial resources or family in Europe are often left homeless and at risk of being exploited in southern Italy. This should not be approached merely as a local problem because it is partly a consequence of the way in which the common European Asylum system is organized and can be perceived as a waste of the millions of euros that the EU invests in the socio-economic inclusion of refugees through the S.P.R.A.R. system. The common European Asylum system is currently predominantly shaped by the Dublin Regulation, which states that refugees should fulfil their asylum application in the first country of arrival in Europe, which for most refugees is a southern European country (Brekke and Brochmann 2014). In response to this uneven burden sharing, E.U. member states agreed to relocate 160,000

refugees from Greece and Italy to other countries (proportionally) between September 2015 and 2017. In reality, only about 30,000 refugees were relocated and since September 2017 member states have not managed to agree on new resettlement quota (UNHCR 2017; IOM 2018; European Commission 2018b). At the same time high numbers of asylum seekers keep on arriving in, and living in, southern Italy (IOM 2018). The southern Italian provinces, already facing problems with mafia and high unemployment rates, do not have the people, money nor capacity to structurally organize settlement programmes and (long-term) employment opportunities for all those refugees. Due to the Dublin Regulation and the absence of resettlement refugees are forced to apply for asylum in these areas. This has led to an increasing number of refugees who, after finishing their period of stay in a reception programme, or because they are not able to find their way into a reception project at all, end up being exploited in illegal (agricultural) jobs or prostitution while living in life-threatening circumstances (Puggioni 2016). In January 2018 for example, Becky Moses, a young woman from Nigeria who had recently left Riace after living there for two years, died when an improvised tent camp in an agricultural area near Rosarno set fire at night (Barilla 2018). Only a few months later, the 25 year-old Aldo Diallo from Senegal faced the same tragic fate. In line with the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention to protect refugees, European member states should actively and efficiently restart resettlement programmes. Besides the obvious humanitarian reasons, the distribution of refugees across Europe is also necessary to avoid wasting the talent of people who, in villages such as Riace, gained important skills (language skills, work experience) for which the EU provided the financial resources. As Northern and Western European countries are urgently looking for workers in some sectors such as the hospitality and construction industries (see e.g. European Commission, 2018b), there is a financial as well as a moral incentive for European policymakers to proceed with resettlement as soon as possible.

11. Conclusion

In Riace both refugees and the local community benefit from restoration and sustainability projects, solidarity tourism and the revival of local ancient crafts. The settlement programme created a culture of hospitality, led by a mayor who is actively involved, and supported by symbols and artworks. The support for the settlement of refugees in the community goes far beyond the individuals who directly (financially) benefit from the reception projects. Rather, the majority of locals perceive their hospitality as something to be proud of and as an integral part of the local culture and the identity of the town. These feelings of pride are reinforced by

the positive media attention that Riace receives which is an exceptional achievement in the poor, depopulated and corrupt Calabrian region that is mostly known for the exploitation of migrants. Still future challenges remain. High unemployment rates might jeopardize the support for refugees and fuel jealousy and distrust among some residents. The often successful settlement is put to a test after S.P.R.A.R. funds are stopped and some refugees are forced to move on. Finally the increasing dependency of the programme on government funds, compared to being self-sustainable, creates the risk that projects have to close down if the government decides to stop the funding. European, national and local settlement programmes can learn from the processes that explain the success of the Riace model. The way in which this local project is embedded in a national system can serve as an example for other European asylum systems.

Notes

1. Social welfare organizations like R.E.C.O.S.O.L. aim to promote local development in the areas of sustainability, democratic skills, solidarity and migration (European Youth Portal, 2016; RECOSOL n.d.).
2. Until 2018 asylum applicants in Riace and other S.P.R.A.R. projects could participate in work programmes and receive a ‘borsa lavoro’ (scholarship). Such programmes aimed to benefit local communities and simultaneously served as internship or vocational training to the asylum applicant. Under Decree Law 113/2018, implemented by L 132/2018 (after the fieldwork period), the possibility for asylum seekers to be involved in job or vocational trainings has been abolished (AIDI n.d.).
3. Such as ‘accoglienza’, meaning hospitality, welcome, reception and acceptance. In this case the researcher decided to use hospitality as it implies a more ‘warm reception’.
4. During fieldwork in 2015–17, respondents referred to the possibility that Matteo Salvini of the far right political party Lega Nord would win the elections. Since June 2018 Salvini actually became deputy prime minister and minister of the interior, and now indeed threatens to stop funding Riace and similar projects. For now the project funds have even been blocked completely. The author aims to further elaborate on this topic in an additional article based on a new phase of fieldwork in August 2019. More information see, for example, *The Guardian* (2018) and *La Repubblica.it* (2019).

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Appendix 1. Topic list open interviews

Date:

Name/number respondent:

Male/female

Nationality:

Documented/undocumented

Age:

Brief description of employment:

Living in Riace since years.

(Leading question: 'Is the Riace model offering a successful alternative for the integration of refugees & revival of local community: which criteria for success and for which domains of life can be identified?')

- a) Che tipo di contesto e quali motivazioni hanno portato all'avvio e allo sviluppo dell'iniziativa?
- a1) Storia della 'città futura'
 - a2) Diffusione dell'iniziativa in Reggio Calabria (e in altre regioni)
- b) Quali criteri di successo possono essere identificati nel settore dell'integrazione
- b1) Dominio strutturale (ad esempio giuridico, economico, politico)
 - b1.1 Amministrazione dei richiedenti asilo
 - legislazione
 - relazione ai sistemi (internazionali) di asilo
 - richiedenti asilo senza documenti
 - b1.2 Alloggio
 - geografia
 - esperienze (ad esempio barriere giuridiche; opinioni)
 - residenza: lungo termine vs breve termine
 - vivere in una piccola realtà
 - b1.3 Economia locale, (riduzione della) povertà e potere
 - la creazione di nuovi posti di lavoro
 - tipi di lavoro/settori e la soddisfazione sul lavoro
 - povertà persistente?
 - cura degli anziani
 - gerarchia di potere (informale): posizioni dominanti
 - la corruzione, il nepotismo e la mafia
 - b2) Dominio culturale (ad esempio l'acquisizione linguistica e la partecipazione alle attività socio-culturali)
 - b2.1 La vita socio-culturale e il coinvolgimento della comunità
 - iniziative di attivisti
 - iniziative culturali
 - chiesa e religione
 - scuola
 - consiglio comunale
 - b2.2 L'acquisizione linguistica
 - b3) Dominio sociale (ad esempio relazioni personali, relazioni tra gruppi, i confini sociali)

b3.1 Coesione sociale

- sub comunità
- relazioni familiari
- relazioni strumentali – relazioni intime
- privacy – accesso
- devianza e controllo sociale
- ruolo di Domenico Lucano

b3.2 relazioni interetniche

- maggioranza – minoranza
- tra le minoranze
- accettazione
- amicizie, relazioni d'amore e matrimonio
- paura e minaccia
- discriminazione e conflitti

b3.3 generazioni e genere

- la differenza di genere e di generazione
- periodo di residenza
- 'le vecchie famiglie'/elite?
- differenze prima/dopo il '98
- nostalgia e memorie condivise

b3.4 Il linguaggio e sua funzione sociale

- terminologia (per descrivere altri gruppi/persone)
- comunicazione: pettegolezzo/chiacchiera; linguaggio simbolico

b4) Dominio psicologico (ad esempio, l'identificazione e sentimenti di appartenenza)**b4.1 identificazione**

- identificazione
- sentimenti di appartenenza
- relazione tra identificazione e il coinvolgimento della comunità
- orgoglioso/'neighbourhood-use' quando si confrontano con altri gruppi/individui
- cosmopolitismo/affinità con persone di diversa provenienza

b4.2 senso di sicurezza e fiducia