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Immigrant shepherds in Mediterranean Europe

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Abstract. This paper examines recent evolutions of Mediterranean European Union (EUMed) countries agro-pastoral systems, and the problems faced following territorial polarization and sectoral restructuring the region has undergone in recent decades. In most southern EU regions the growing presence of immigrants have come to counterbalance the decline and ageing of the local rural population and agricultural workforce. The work specifically examines the presence, contribution and role of immigrant shepherds, who reached southern Europe from other pastoral areas in the Mediterranean, coming to provide skilled labor at a relatively low cost. Despite this phenomenon seems to reproduce mobility patterns that have characterized Mediterranean pastoralism in the last century, problems exist in integrating and upgrading such workforce with a view to tackle the generational renewal problems that affect the sector, and the EU countryside more in general. The paper suggests that a proactive attitude is needed to facilitate the scaling up of these workers to more entrepreneurial levels and more in general to enhance their long-term integration into the sector – with view to ensure their contribution to the future of pastoralism in the region.

Keywords. Pastoralism – Migrations – Shepherding – Small ruminants.

Bergers immigrés en Europe méditerranéenne

Résumé. Cet article examine les évolutions récentes des systèmes agro-pastoraux de l'UE méditerranéenne (EUMed), et les problèmes qui se posent à eux suite à la polarisation territoriale et à la restructuration sectorielle qu'a subies la région lors des dernières décennies. Dans la plupart des régions du Sud de l'UE, la présence croissante d'immigrés vient à contrebalancer le déclin et le vieillissement de la population rurale locale et de la main-d'œuvre agricole. Ce travail examine de façon spécifique la présence, la contribution et le rôle des bergers immigrés, qui sont venus au Sud de l'Europe à partir d'autres zones pastorales de la Méditerranée, fournissant ainsi une main-d'œuvre qualifiée à un coût relativement faible. Malgré le fait que ce phénomène semble reproduire les modes de mobilité qui ont caractérisé le pastoralisme méditerranéen lors du siècle dernier, il subsiste des problèmes liés à l'intégration et la mise à niveau de cette main-d'œuvre afin de faire face aux problèmes de relève générationnelle qui touchent le secteur, et de façon plus générale les campagnes de l'UE. Cet article suggère qu'une attitude proactive est nécessaire pour faciliter la mise à niveau de ces travailleurs et favoriser leur esprit d'entreprise et, de façon plus générale, améliorer leur intégration à long terme dans le secteur – en vue d'assurer leur contribution à l'avenir du pastoralisme dans la région.

Mots-clés. Pastoralisme – Migrations – Bergers – Petits ruminants.

I – Introduction

While the interfaces between agriculture and migrations are becoming increasingly visible and relevant in current debates about rural development, existing literature mostly focus on the exploitative incorporation of mostly low-skilled and seasonal migrant agricultural workforce in intensive agricultural systems of high potential areas (King *et al.*, 2000; Pugliese, 2011; Ortiz-Miranda *et al.*, 2013; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Corrado *et al.*, 2016). These works come at a time when in Europe the debate is between a multifunctional agriculture or its modernization in efficiency and performance terms (Ploeg, 2008; Marsden and Franklin, 2013)¹.

1. EU Marie Curie fellow TRAMed – Transhumances in the Mediterranean,
<https://me.eui.eu/michele-nori/research/>

There are as well very specialized, high skilled sectors where immigrant communities play a relevant role. This is **the case of livestock farming**, where the presence of the foreign workforce is increasing, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. With their commitment and know-how immigrant workers allow EUMed livestock productions to remain at a level of global excellence. As an example in case immigrants in Italy play a strategic contribution in the value chains of the Parmesan, the Fontina, and of the Pecorino cheeses – all important components of the ‘made in Italy’ brand. Although such contributions have been appreciated to an extent for intensive production systems (Lum, 2011; INEA, 2009), extensive livestock farming remains little investigated, despite its multifaceted relevance throughout the Mediterranean.

II – Results and discussion

Agro-ecological marginal lands - mountainous areas, drylands and many island territories – constitute about one third of the territories of the EUMed region. Through mobile livestock that mostly feed on natural grazing, pastoral resource management represents the main livelihood on these lands where other forms of agriculture are unfeasible. Through this system significant proportion of livestock production takes place in the Mediterranean, especially when it comes to small ruminants. Pastoralism provides thus a relevant perspective to look into Mediterranean food production and natural resource management. Extensive grazing is still predominant for meat production, while semi-intensive systems often apply to milk production farms. Overall, despite the lack of precise references, it can be assumed that more than half of the EUMed small ruminants’ flocks take advantage of open grazing during a significant period of the year.

Table 1. The sheep sector in EUMed countries (rounded data for 2010)

Pays	Sheep farms	Sheep flock	% meat production	% milk production
Italy	50,000	7,5 millions	35%	65%
Spain	110,000	22 millions	82%	18%
France total				
Fr. mediterranean	35,000	6 millions	70%	30%
	8,000	1,5 million		
Greece	200,000	9,5 millions	15%	85%
<i>Total EUMed</i>		<i>40,5 millions</i>		

Sources: ISTAT, 2010; INE, 2013; Magrama, 2013; CIHEAM, 2011; Thales, 2014 ; Laore, 2013.

The multifunctional character of agro-pastoralism manifests itself through the wide range of goods and services provided alongside with the production of quality food. Apart from economic and ecological aspects, Mediterranean pastoralism plays as well an important socio-cultural and political role, as it contributes the management of public goods, while supporting cultural heritage and territorial identity. These socio-ecosystem services *benefit not only pastoral communities, but also those living in farming areas, urban centres and coastal regions, who all profit from nutritious animal proteins and related value chains as well as from environmental services* (IFAD, 2016).

For these features pastoralism is increasingly estimated in Europe and elsewhere; such societal appreciation is though only limitedly reflected in market pricing and recognized by European policies. This leads to the fact that such increasingly-appreciated practice is decreasingly practiced by European citizens. Although sector data are not always consistent, medium-term trends indicate a decline in numbers with a marked overall reduction of about 30% of the EUMed flock in the last two decades; the size of remaining flock has grown dramatically as a way to adjust cost-benefit ratios. The classic refrain, everywhere, is that “*20 years ago with a flock half size of the present*”

*one we had a decent life and we could even make savings and investments. Now with a double-sized flock, it is difficult to make ends meet by the end of the year*².

One of the reasons for such sector restructuring is to be found in agricultural and trade policies that have contributed transforming not only the agricultural economy, but the rural society as a whole all over the Mediterranean, with little regard for socio-cultural and ecological variables. As elsewhere, the polarization of agricultural development has widened the gap between intensification of agricultural production in the plains and coastal zones and a gradual abandonment of marginal areas (Gertel and Breuer, 2010). For pastoralism, a practice forged to produce in marginal ecosystems, it is obviously difficult to be competitive on parameters defined solely by performances on productivity.

The restructuring of the sector has profoundly changed the size of the enterprises and the nature of the work, marking the separation between the managerial and the field levels. Despite the extensive characterisation of pastoralism, the work of the shepherd is intense and encompasses both physical labour as well as technical and managerial skills - ranging from climatology to botany, animal physiology and health, ethology of predators, etc. (Meuret, 2010). Most of the shepherd's time is spent in harsh settings, with limited access to public services, scarce connectivity and few opportunities for leisure and alternative activities. Continuous mobility and processing of milk add further burdens to daily mansions, while the growing presence of predators and climatic vagaries represent further hardening factors.

Through this restructuring, living conditions of shepherds have hardly improved, while working conditions have intensified, through a significant increase in their tasks and responsibilities. Such restructuring has thus contributed to creating unattractive conditions for the new generations, who have often decided not to follow their fathers' footsteps, and to avoid engaging in a profession with an uncertain perspective. Through these lenses one can understand the crisis of pastoral "vocation" and the relative problems of generational renewal which is affecting this sector.

In order to deal with the scarce availability of human resources, the supply of immigrant workforce has been strategic in many cases. Notwithstanding the important contributions received by the Common agricultural policy (CAP) and whatever the entrepreneurial strategy pursued to cope with and adapt to restructuring (extensification, intensification, diversification, etc.), immigrant shepherds have provided a quite skilled labor force at a relatively low cost for livestock farms operating in EUMed marginal areas. Without foreign workers, many pastoral farms would face today great difficulty in pursuing their activities. The immigrants workforce represents as well a critical asset for young European entrepreneurs who take up this activity (INEA, 2014; Nori and de Marchi, 2015).

Though strange it might seem, the fact that a generational change is accompanied by an ethnic one is nothing new to the region. Mediterranean pastoralism has witnessed in the 19th and 20th century Sardinians colonizing abandoned pasturelands in central Italy, southern Spanish herders moving to graze the Pyrenees, northern Italian shepherds migrating to Provence and Switzerland, the moves of Valachos and Arvanites flock and shepherds throughout Greece and Kurdish shepherds in several regions of Turkey (Lebaudy, 2010; Meloni, 2011; Nori, 2016) (Fig.1). These communities have contributed substantially to keeping pasturelands of destination countries populated, alive and productive. In this regional rationale, it is thus not surprising that most immigrants who work as shepherds come from other parts of the same Mediterranean ecosystem, as mobility and migration are features embedding pastoral systems.

The difficulties faced by immigrants to scale up in socio-economic terms through upgrading from pastoral workforce towards livestock ownership and more entrepreneurial levels provide relevant

2. Refer as well to the working group www.agricultures-migrations.org/en/ for migrants in intensive agriculture.

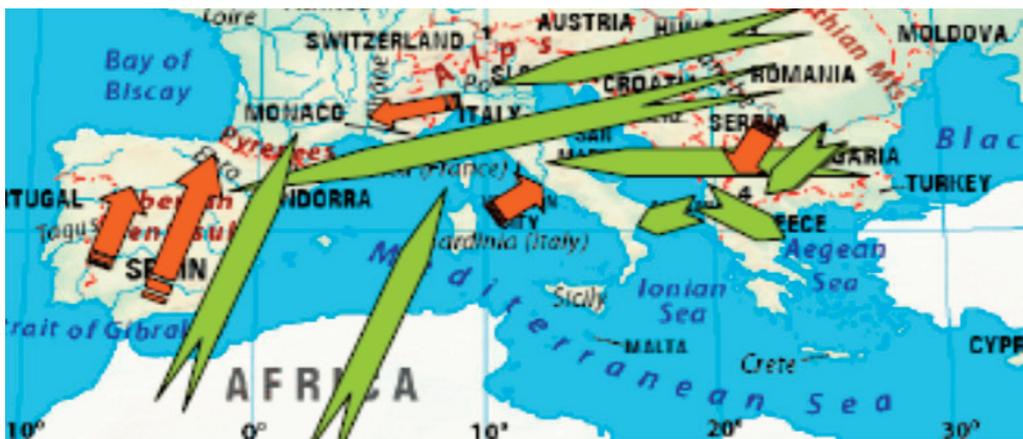


Fig. 1. Trajectories of past (flat bottom) and present (arrowed bottom) patterns of shepherds' migrations. Source: TRAMED³ data elaboration.

constraints to the capacity of the incoming population to contribute to the sustainability of pastoralism in the longer term. Cases where shepherds have graduated to livestock owners are rare exceptions, but represent important opportunities to capitalise upon.

BOX – *Becoming a pastoral entrepreneur*

Cases exist where foreign shepherds have engaged and succeeded in scaling up to livestock ownership and farm management. For instance, Mario, a Romanian shepherd who has come to Triveneto, Italy ten years ago. Initially, he worked without a contract or insurance. Seven years ago, he got a contract which finally made him eligible for Italian citizenship, which is needed to register as an entrepreneur and to legally own a flock. With his savings, he was able to accumulate a few animals each year, which he kept within the flock of his employer. Recently, he and his employer have been talking about jointly managing a common flock. They plan to share the costs and responsibilities, as well as the profits. With an established business, Mario will be able to bring his wife and children to Italy. Other examples of such socio-economic graduation exist where two immigrants have shared resources and responsibilities or in areas where pasture lands are communal and therefore more easily accessible.

Yet oftentimes, this is a lose-lose situation. Migrant shepherds do not evolve in their socio-economic position while elderly livestock owners do not find people capable of taking over their farms when they retire. And society witnesses the disappearance of flocks, the abandonment of marginal lands, together with the loss of quality products and services.

III – Conclusions

Pastoralism provides a representative case study to analyse the growing interfaces between agriculture and migrations. In this sector migrant shepherds provide a relatively experienced and qualified workforce at relatively low cost, thus importantly contributing to overcome the human resource problem for this activity increasingly recognized as vital to the preservation of our natural and cultural heritage, but decreasingly practised by Europeans.

3. TRAMED interviews: Josetxu Larraz, Fustiñana (Navarra) 4/15; F.Ili Costa, Grotte di Castro (Lazio) 6/15.

Enhancing the integration of migrant workers in non-temporary, longer term position into the EU agrarian world provides in such framework an interesting development opportunity for depopulated rural areas as well as for agricultural activities where labour force is scarce. Adequate policy choices and strategic investments are needed to ensure that this phenomenon brings mutual benefits to all stakeholders, so to reflect the Europe 2020 vision for a *smart, sustainable and inclusive development*. The forthcoming CAP mid-term reform should consider these options - as a young and motivated workforce is a key asset for a healthy and vital agriculture and for a resilient rural world.

Sustainable pastoralism will not though be merely the result of subsidies, schemes and incentives, but rather the outcome of a comprehensive, integrated policy framework, including the review of agricultural, trade, migration and labour market policies. The viability of shepherding, the attractiveness of mountainous areas, the profitability of extensive livestock production along with efforts to support integration of foreign shepherds are the key challenges for the future of an ancient activity that is vital for the Mediterranean identity and for the resilience of its territories (Nori, 2015).

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