

THE EXPERIENCE OF ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES

***DAILY LIFE OF REFUGEES HOSTED BY
“DONA UN SORRISO” ASSOCIATION IN
MILAN***

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1 DONA UN SORRISO IN SHORT

DONA UN SORRISO (from here onwards DUS) is an association created in 1998 and based in Bresso, a town of 26,000 inhabitants situated in the outskirts of Milan, Italy.

It belongs to the “*Third Sector*”, the denomination in Italy for volunteer organizations, philanthropic institutions, social enterprises, associative networks, mutual help societies and associations of any kind, recognized or not, foundations and more private entities other than companies formed to pursue non-profit responses to social needs by carrying out activities through voluntary work, the liberal provision of money, goods or services, or the loan, production or exchange of goods and services.

The areas of intervention are extremely varied. It ranges from recreational and social activities, to artistic and cultural activities, to those regarding health or economic or humanitarian support. It is an increasingly vital and dynamic reality, with an economic value estimated at about 80 billion euros, equivalent to 5% of Italian GDP.

The aim of the association is to give support to the most disadvantaged people in the world. This is made possible through the involvement of people or bodies, to back initiatives that reduce social exclusion, with a particular attention to children and adolescents in state of need and abandonment, offering them human dignity, otherwise ignored or trampled.

The activities of DUS are ruled by certain principles considered as essential. As far as foreign countries are concerned, we rely only on local entities, strongly integrated into the social context and aware of the country dynamics. The partners are required to submit final reports at the end of projects and an accurate accounting of the costs incurred. For our choice, moreover, operating costs are equal to zero. This means that the funds received by DUS are used entirely to support its projects. All activities are carried out only by volunteers, who bear the costs arising from the management of the association.

In the Dominican Republic and Bolivia, the food support provided in these past few years has allowed hundreds of children to overcome malnutrition and continue their studies.

In Uganda, the support given to the Bishop Caesar Asili Hospital helps to save many lives, counteracts the spread of malaria and AIDS and allows to carry out activities of economic and social promotion in small local communities.

The sources of DUS entry proceed from:

- private benefactors;
- the Italian State, through a share that is allocated by citizens in the tax return to charities (the so-called *5 per thousand*);
- bodies and foundations which finance specific projects.

Since 2012 a new area of intervention has been added, aimed at the welcoming and social inclusion of political refugees and similar categories.

2 ACTIVITIES FOR REFUGEES

2.1 The legislative situation

Italy recognizes the right of refuge on the basis of the 1951 Geneva Convention to persons who, fearing justifiably of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, for being part of a given social group or for political opinion, are out of the country of which they are citizens and cannot or do not wish to, out of fear, remain in the country of origin.

The broader right of asylum is stated by art. 10, paragraph 3 of the Italian Constitution:

”A foreigner, who is prevented in his country from exercising the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian Constitution, has the right of asylum in the territory of the Republic, in accordance with the conditions established by law.”

The right of asylum granted in our Constitution does not coincide with the recognition of refugee status under the Geneva Convention, and represents a broader protection extending it to applicants fleeing from countries that deny fundamental freedoms, regardless of the requirement of the danger of individual persecution as well as of the condition of the existence of a state of armed conflict or the risk of death penalty and inhuman and degrading treatment¹.

However, the lack of an organic legislative framework and the overlapping of heterogeneous rules, on the basis of different political orientations, have so far prevented the full application of the constitutional statements on asylum.

In addition to the political asylum proper, which grants refugee status under the Geneva Convention, subsidiary protection is currently recognized, a further form of international protection recognized in the European Union. Those who benefit from it - even if they do not qualify to obtain the status of refugee - are protected since, if they were to return to their country of origin, they would face a risk of serious harm. Serious harm means death or execution, torture or other form of inhuman treatment, the serious and individual threat to one’s life resulting from indiscriminate violence in a situation of internal or international armed conflict.

Finally, a third protection measure, defined as special protection, has been in place in Italy since the end of 2020.

This form of asylum is the result of a troubled history deriving from the evolution of events related to migration flows and the governments of various political orientation that have alternated in Italy in the course of a few years².

The “*Testo Unico sull’Immigrazione*”, issued in 1998, had previously established the institute of humanitarian protection [art. 5, paragraph 6]: "The refusal or revocation of the residence permit may also be adopted on the basis of international conventions or agreements, rendered enforceable in Italy, when the foreigner does not meet the conditions of residence applicable in one of the contracting states, unless serious reasons occur, in particular of a humanitarian nature or resulting from the constitutional or international obligations of the Italian State".

This definition did not set any clear limits around the notion of "humanitarian nature", which initially, even because of the instability of the boundaries of the norm, had led to a very rare practical application. It will be enough to consider the percentage data for 2007 - that is almost 10 years after the beginning of validity of the institute - when the residence permits for humanitarian reasons represented only 3,7% of all protection institutions granted in the reference year.

However, only slightly less than 10 years thereafter, humanitarian protection recorded a powerful reversal in the trend of use, reaching in 2015 28.5% of all permits granted in Italy. Various factors were deemed accountable for the soaring figure, including the significant increase in migratory flows, as well as the substantial vagueness of the concept of "humanitarian" protection, the recognition of which was subject to wide discretion on the part of the responsible judges.

¹ Online-Content:

Rita Russo, “Neverending story”
<https://www.giustiziainsieme.it>

² Online-Content:

Annalaura Carbone,

<https://www.altalex.com/documents/news/2020/11/02/nuova-protezione-speciale-straniero-ai-sensi-del-dl130-20-eredita-della-vecchia-protezione-umanitaria>

That is why, while jumping on the band-wagon of European nationalism of the last few years, the Italian government, by the D.L. 113/2018 (so-called "*Decreto Sicurezza*" or "*Decreto Salvini*"), had proceeded to the abrogation of humanitarian protection [art. 5, paragraph 6, "*Testo Unico sull'Immigrazione*"], replacing it with a reduced series of "special cases", not convertible when expiring, not even for work reasons.

The "*Decreto Sicurezza*", over the few months it was in force, in addition to strong opposition of a political nature, had encountered various application difficulties in its turn, which had authorized the courts to mitigate its harshness.

Then, the change of government of September 2019 led to one more review of the matter: in fact, the "*Decreto Legge 21 October, 2020, n. 130*" has redrawn the special protection in a more guaranteeing perspective, as far as to obtain what could be considered an enhancement of the original humanitarian protection.

It is now planned to extend the principle of non-refoulement to cases where not only the person is at risk of undergoing torture or inhuman treatment at the place of expulsion, but also to the case in which that country may be subject to violations of the right to private and family life not justified by reasons of public security, also taking into account (art. 19 of the *Testo Unico*) if, in the state of origin, there are systematic and serious violations of human rights.

Political refugees can apply for family reunification without any particular restrictions. Holders of other forms of international protection must give proof of their availability of housing and of a certain income.

2.2 Timing, deadlines and renewal of residence permits

The application for international protection must be submitted in person to the Border Police or the Police Headquarters of the place of residence. The authorities receiving the application, within 72 hours, summon the person to carry out the photo-signaling tests and, if more than 14 years old, take their fingerprints. The application is then formalized in writing, with the assistance of a cultural mediator or an interpreter, and the applicant receives a temporary residence permit, valid or renewable until the application has been accepted or rejected. The decision should be taken by a Territorial Commission after a personal hearing and should be notified to the person concerned, as a general rule within six months of the hearing. This is the official timing: as matter of fact, in order to obtain the status of political refugee one has to wait at least a year on average; in some cases it takes even two years before obtaining the document.

In general, those who have the status of political refugee, lasting five years, do not encounter difficulties in obtaining renewal and may apply for Italian citizenship after five years of legal residence.

The situation is different for those who have subsidiary protection permits or permits for special protection, with usually biennial deadlines, the renewal of which depends on the permanence of a situation of danger in case of repatriation. For these, it is convenient to try to convert their permit into a work permit. By doing so, they are no longer subject to the risk of not obtaining a renewal of protection.

For these categories ten years of residence are required to obtain Italian citizenship.

Due to administrative problems, it happens that some cannot renew the permit within the deadline (in particular during this pandemic). In these situations, the refugee is only in possession of a receipt where the date of the appointment is notified, which should be considered as proof of the pending request for the renewal, but there may be employers who do not feel sufficiently guaranteed from legal consequences and, therefore, prefer not hiring or not renewing the job contract, until the new permit has been actually issued.

After five years of stay in Italy refugees can usually apply for EU residence permit for long-term residents, provided that they prove the availability of a minimum income not lower than the annual social allowance (€5,953.87, in 2019).

This residence permit does not expire and does not need to be renewed, but only updated, and grants the foreigner a larger number of rights than the ordinary residence permit.

The EU long-term resident permit allows to:

- enter Italy without a visa;
- carry out any job, as self-employed or as an employee in Italy (for the latter the validation of the contract of residence is not required, while it is mandatory as a rule on first entry into Italy in order to be employed);
- access the services and benefits of the Public Administration, in the fields of health, education, social security and pensions (including access to the procedure to apply for social housing);
- have a pension as a social invalid or a social allowance;
- participate in the local public life, including voting at elections (if applicable);
- no longer be expelled from Italy, except for serious national security reasons.

The EU residence permit for long-term residents does not mention an expiry date but is issued with the indication "unlimited" and is valid as a personal identification document for 5 years.

2.3 Work access

Applicants for asylum may seek employment after two months from submitting their application and may work regularly.

The holders of refugee status and subsidiary protection status are entitled to benefit from the same treatment as Italian citizens in the matters of employment, self-employment, registration into professional bodies, for vocational training and professional training at their workplace. Only holders of refugee status are allowed access to the civil service, in the forms and limitations established for citizens of the European Union [*art. 25 Decreto legislativo 19 novembre 2007, n. 251 Attuazione della direttiva 2004/83/CE*].

The state does not give any support in the research for employment, no help in finding a job. It is nominally possible to recur to the Employment Centres, which, however, work little and badly even for Italians.

No other forms of aid are provided by the State: asylum seekers are housed in first-reception accommodation facilities (usually affiliated bodies such as the Red Cross or other associations), until they receive an answer regarding whether their request has been accepted or not. In that period of time, they are assured food and lodging. They also receive small sums (4 or 5 euros per day) for small expenses (for instance, travel by public transport).

If the facilities have a good standard, they attend Italian language courses.

They are all registered with the National Health Service and the Reception Centre is registered as their official residence.

If there is no place in reception centers, the asylum seeker can apply for a state contribution of about 1,000 euros.

No other form of aid is provided and therefore the risk of remaining homeless and with problems in obtaining a living place is very high. This concerns both people who are not welcomed in first aid centers, but also those who leave the centers. In the aftermath of the recognition of their right to remain in Italy, the state no longer assumes the costs for food and accommodation and asylum seekers are invited to leave the Reception Center that housed them. Thus, those who have been recognized are left without a home. DUS intervenes by helping refugees at this stage.

Without residence one cannot then obtain documents (ID card, renewal of the health insurance card). Some municipalities grant a fictitious residence so as to prevent refugees from remaining without documents.

Refugees who have resided in Italy for ten years can apply for citizenship revenue. It is a monthly income granted for a maximum of 18 months to those who do not have other forms of subsistence. It is about 500 euros per month per person.

Those who lose their jobs, if they are employed legally, can obtain temporary forms of financial support (redundancy fund).

However, there is a lack of specific forms of economic support and social integration for refugees.

More generally, in Italy there is a lack of an organic policy to fight poverty and unemployment and refugees suffer from this, as well as Italians do.

2.4 Procedure of selection and reception of refugees in DUS

Refugees and asylum seekers are reported to DUS by first reception facilities (for example other municipalities, the Italian Red Cross, Third Sector entities already engaged in reception), which regard them as not yet capable of leading an autonomous life, normally due to lack of accommodation and/or work. Later, the people in charge at DUS assess the possibility of building a path of autonomy that can lead guests to leave the accommodation and start an independent life within 12 to 24 months.

They are housed in 4 apartments, all located in Bresso. This municipality, like most of Northern Italy in general, is a destination for foreign immigrants; a reception center for asylum seekers, managed by the Italian Red Cross, is located in the town (about 400 foreigners welcomed in tents and containers).

The metropolitan area of Milan has about 5 million inhabitants, with a high population density. With 367 billion dollars, the metropolitan area of Milan is the first area in Italy and the eleventh in the world for gross domestic product; it is the main hub for foreign investment in Italy, the sixth in Europe, after London, Paris, Dublin, Madrid and Munich.

Since 2012, 63 refugees (including those currently hosted) have been welcomed by DUS.

Of these, 48 (76%) are African (from countries in the Horn of Africa or sub-Saharan West Africa), 15 (24%) come from Asia (Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan).

DUS has taken over the refugee reception activity in Bresso carried out by another Milanese association (Associations Friends of the Marta Larcher house), which had been operating without interruption since 1998 (34 refugees hosted from 1998 to 2011).

These are always men, usually young, not women or families. This is due to the fact that we are not able to respond to situations requiring a high level of assistance, given the nature of our service, illustrated below.

Two accommodations are provided on loan free of charge by the Pastoral Community Madonna del Pilastrello (the local Catholic parish). DUS is supposed to reimburse the owner for the costs of utilities and ordinary maintenance.

Two apartments are made available by the Municipality of Bresso. Also in this case, we have to reimburse the Municipality for utilities (water and electricity).

Two volunteers are assigned as referees to each accommodation: their first task is to welcome new guests and start the slow process of mutual knowledge. One of the primary aims is establishing a relationship based on trust, a fundamental prerequisite to be able to stand next to migrants in their new path of life.

The relationship is not built, where possible, as a bond between the person assisted and the person providing assistance, which would inevitably place the people involved in the project on two different,

distant levels. Instead, the numerous contacts, in person or by telephone, mean to become moments to listen and exchange on equal levels.

This is also achieved thanks to convivial moments experienced together organized by volunteers and their families in their homes.

Entering an Italian family's home is an important moment, because it knocks down the wall of separation between Italians and foreigners that is almost always perceived by migrants as an obstacle impossible to climb; these meetings, instead, open the perspective of a different mode of insertion into the social context. Unfortunately, the arrival of Covid-19 has severely limited these occasions of encounter in the last period.

The accommodation is self-managed by refugees and supervised by volunteers, who regularly visit individual homes.

Action towards hosted migrants focuses on four areas:

- Home

To live with other guests is not always easy, although in the choice of guests, we usually avoid the cohabitation of people from countries in conflict with each other or belonging to opposed ethnic groups under the same roof. Therefore, our aim is to ensure that guests experience a respectful cohabitation and, in order to achieve it, we discuss the issues related to the sharing of common areas with them

We pursue their ability to:

take autonomous care of the apartment (cleaning, tidiness etc.);

maintain constant relations with the volunteers of DUS

- Bureaucratic and legal practices

The regulations and current practices are difficult to understand to those who do not have a specific competence and even more so to people who have recently arrived in Italy, with limited knowledge of languages. Guests are explained, as situations arise, the functioning of reception by the Italian State and how to carry out the procedures related.

- Work

Together with guests, we focus on the areas of activity that could be more suitable for each of them, taking into account their previous education, personal inclinations, the level of knowledge of the Italian language.

In addition to drawing up curricula, an active search for work is carried out, relying on an association of the same municipality, specialized in this target.

Training courses for professional activities are also set up, through the enrolment in courses or through work grants, as described below.

- Social inclusion

Improvement of the knowledge of the geographical context and of the Italian language, by participating into courses offered by educational agencies in the area.

When guests do not have a minimum income, we provide them with a small economic contribution and reimbursement of medical and transportation expenses.

Fifteen refugees are currently hosted by DUS, all of them proceeding from African countries: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Guinea Conakry, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Somalia, Togo. These are all countries of the Horn of Africa, or belonging to sub-Saharan West Africa, which all share political instability and/or authoritarian governments.

Their legal situation is the following:

- Nine have obtained political asylum;
- Four converted humanitarian permits into work permits;
- Two of them are appellants against the rejection of an application for asylum or other forms of protection;

As far as their employment is concerned, this is the current situation:

- One was hired under an apprenticeship contract (normally later converted into a permanent contract) in catering;
- One is self-employed (he opened his own tailor shop in Milan);
- Two work on call (cleaning, unarmed guard): this is a kind of flexible employment, through which a worker offers the employer his work at intermittent, and therefore discontinuous, intervals over time.
- Three are hired on a temporary basis (one in logistics for one month, one in public gardening for five months, one in health care for 10 months);
- Two work occasionally in cleaning services, but without a formal job contract;
- Two are unemployed; they used to work precariously in catering and logistics, but lost their jobs due to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Four have been employed permanently in catering, mechanic factories, car repairing.

3 ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES

With reference to asymmetrical dependencies, our Association expresses considerations that are not raising from rigorous sociological analyses, but come directly from the experiences we shared, in line with our mission, with the people hosted over the years in the apartments we manage.

Taking into consideration the stories of the various guests, we observe that only in the first decade of the new century it was possible for them to find a permanent, regularly paid job with a certain ease, while afterwards difficulties have increased and the experience of this form of dependency has become more and more frequent.

We believe that there are several causes that led to this progressive situation of disease:

- The financial crisis of 2008, with its heavy impact on the economy of the whole nation. On one hand, the closure of many production and commercial companies has made more manpower available on the market, ready to accept less paid activities just to have a job. On the other hand, companies in difficulties have decided to use less and less qualified and underpaid workers, aiming to minimize production costs, to be able to continue with their business.
- The introduction of new types of employment contracts, aimed at facilitating the job collocation of young people and the unemployed. The government's intent was acceptable, because it aimed to solve a dramatic problem in the country; however, these new contractual forms have proved to be a double-edged sword in the hands of those entrepreneurs who have identified in the legislation a mere tool for reducing costs, without any considerations for the conditions of the workers.
- A change in the characteristics of foreign people coming to Italy. While our first guests frequently had a good education level, most of the recently hosted people are lacking it. When they have a diploma or a degree, those qualifications are not recognized in Italy or they allow them to obtain the secondary school license (the lowest step of mandatory school). Moreover, generally they do not know the Italian language sufficiently. Those who obtain a B1 knowledge degree are rare.
- The complex and in some respects incomplete immigration legislation.
- The explosion of the Covid 19 pandemic and its impact on the nation's economic system.

4 THE WORK PLANET IN ITALY

The low level of education and the lack of knowledge of the Italian language are the two factors that are a real handicap for those people when looking for a job, relegating them to few sectors of activity (catering, logistics, cleaning, care of the green, caretaker) with low remuneration and high precariousness, which can be carried out even if they are not able to understand fully the language of the host country.

Works not regulated by contracts (in Italian “*lavoro nero*”) or without the protections provided by permanent contracts are concentrated in those sectors.

The employer takes benefit from the possibility to draw out of this pool of workers who are always available and at low cost, as they are willing to carry out tasks that Italian people with higher level of education (or higher expectations) would hardly do.

Moreover companies benefit from a workforce that never “raises problems”: in the above mentioned context workers do not protest about working conditions or ask for salary improvements, fearing they will lose the little they have got.

In Italy in the last twenty years different types of contracts have emerged (temporary, on-call, occasional, outsourcing) defined as “flexible”, but which inevitably expose to risks of unemployment or exploitation. As a summary:

- Temporary work: With the DL (Government Decree) n. 34/2014 converted into Law 78/2014, employers - without the need for explanatory reasons (technical, organizational, production related and replacement), previously mandatory - can freely stipulate temporary contracts as long as they do not exceed a total duration of 36 months, extensions included. A single contract can be extended for a maximum of 5 times. This, of course, exposes more than in the past to possible work overloads, blackmail and exploitation, especially in case of less qualified jobs.
- On-call work: on-call contracts, also called “intermittent” or “on call job”, are a kind of employee contracts that may be used for works difficult to be determined in advance, for example in the event of production peaks or in special periods, such as summer or holidays. They can be applied for a maximum of 400 days in three years, with the exception of workers in tourism, bars, hotels, entertainment. Quite frequently our guests apply to such kind of jobs, but obviously those contracts do not offer any guarantee of stability or long term perspectives.
- Occasional work: The occasional service contract is an employment relationship established between an employer and a person who carries out an occasional or small-scale activity (maximum € 5,000 net per year). It is addressed mainly to micro-enterprises with no more than five employees or public administration (for which further limitations are foreseen). It is not typically used by refugees.
- Outsourcing: it is a particular type of employment introduced in 2003 defined by the law as “the permanent or temporary contract, with which an authorized subject (Employment Agency) makes available to a customer (Company) one or more of its employees”. The relationship established between the worker and the Employment Agency is a subordinate employment.

Furthermore, the salary moderation policy had affected employee wages till the point that now they are among the lowest in Europe and expose to the risk of poverty in case of not qualified jobs.

The presence of other type of contracts available when starting a job relationship (internship / stage, work grants) very often does not lead to regular hiring and are seen by employers as a way to save labor costs. This risk is very high for all the first steps in the work market, but mainly for low-qualified jobs as it often happens to the refugees we host.

Moreover, Milan and its surroundings have an economy based on services more than on manufacture (while the prevalence of production firms is the case of Brescia and Bergamo areas). Manufacture companies can offer better salaries and contract stability.

Our guests often find only part-time jobs, experiencing uncomfortable working time shifts and locations far from home, with no accommodation or facilities on site offered by the employers.

For instance, one of our guests works from 10 pm to 4 am in a site far from home: 3 hours travel to and fro, with 2 additional hours waiting for the first public transportation that starts at 6am.

Searching for a job, as it can be understood well, is an absolute priority for migrants. It happened that some of our guests have expressed the intention to leave for Southern Italy during the tomato harvesting period. We have always strongly advised against it. This sector is almost completely deregulated and migrants can be exposed to serious forms of exploitation with serious risks for their own safety, while landowners and organized crime (that provides this “slave” workforce) take the big advantage from the illegal situation.

In 2020, the year in which it was not possible to bring seasonal workers from abroad (in particular Eastern Europe) to Italy due to the pandemic, it was possible to experience the strategic importance of those workers for the country. Without them, it was not possible to proceed with the harvesting of some fruits and vegetables, resulting in heavy losses for the producers and a significant increase in prices for the final customers.

Another sector of activity that our association discourages is that of meal delivery (Glovo, Just Eat, Uber...).

This is a sector that has experienced a strong expansion, also thanks to the pandemic and the closure of restaurants, but it does not provide any protection for the workers, as they are underpaid and exposed to multiple risks.

Without people assigned to meal delivery, the new home catering service would not exist; however, the company policies still have the target to keep costs as low as possible at the expense of employees.

5 THE EFFECTS OF COVID ON THE WORK PLANET

The Covid 19 pandemic has caused a crisis on those sectors of activity that mostly employ the refugees we host: catering, logistics, cleaning, landscaping, security.

Furthermore, as they have generally short-term contracts, they did not benefit from the recovery funds (economic subsidies for employees of companies in difficulty).

Those who had a fixed-term contract did not get the renewal and lost it.

Economic stagnation then made impossible to find work for those who were already unemployed.

Out of fifteen guests hosted in our premises, eight suffered negative work repercussions.

Three refugees lost their jobs in 2020 because of their precarious employment; now they are severely damaged in the search for work, given the limitations imposed on personal travels and economic stagnation.

Two guests, hired by catering companies, stayed at home for months, given the closure of these businesses due to the lack of customers.

They were laid off and have recently resumed to work part-time, just few hours a week.

A guest, hired on a temporary basis in the care of green, has been at home for months without income and has now obtained a contract for only five months.

Another guest now works occasionally as a security employee, as many locations (hotels, companies) are closed or only partially open.

The story of one of our guests is particularly significant and can make us understand the effects of the pandemic in the world of work.

5.1 The Story of A.A. (ERITREA)

This guest arrived in Italy in 2013; he was a tailor in Asmara and had the dream of being able to carry on the same job in Italy.

He then began to work in a tailoring workshop owned by a Pakistani, who kept most of the income for himself, giving only a small part to A.A. Reflecting on this, he understood that it would have been much better to open his own workshop.

With this goal in mind, he started doing two jobs: during daytime in the laboratory and at night in a warehouse with an on-call contract.

After two years of sacrifices and savings, A.A., helped by DUS, identified a suitable place to be rented and completed the necessary bureaucratic paperwork to start his new business. The inauguration of the store took place in September 2020, while our country was experiencing a relatively quiet period from the point of view Covid -19 spreading.

Unfortunately, due to further lock-down periods, reduced mobility of people in the area, drop of economic resources of the target customers and the difficulties that are usual at the start of a new business, there was a very negative impact on A.'s activity, barely covering the rent.

A.A. is painfully considering to close his business. Only State aid support to autonomous activities could allow him to survive, waiting for better times, but for the moment no news have come in this sense and in the meantime the rent of the shop has to be paid.

Against our will we are facing, in the above mentioned case, a failure in the attempt to overcome the condition of dependence.

5.2 The Story of I.D. (Guinea Conakry) - one of the testimonials of our video

It is the unique case in which the pandemic did no harm, but actually favored the inclusion in the working world.

I.D. was born in Conakry in 1994. After the sudden death of his father and mother, he remained the unique family reference, so decided to leave for Europe to look for a job and support his wife and the younger brothers who are still studying. He immediately committed himself both to the study of Italian language and to the search for a job. He is hosted by Dona Un Sorriso after spending a long period at a First Reception Center in San Donato where, among other things, he took his middle school license and began to volunteer for the Red Cross. In Bresso he was addressed to participate to a course to become a Social Assistance Auxiliary (support for non autonomous people). The pandemic increased the demand for these jobs, given the widespread contagion also among health operators and the subsequent prescribed periods of isolation.

Thanks to his training, I.D. was hired in the nursing home for non autonomous ancient people in Bresso, with a long-term contract. He is now finishing his studies to graduate as a Social Health Worker and hopes with this new qualification to achieve economic independence and to obtain family reunion with his wife.

6 ASYMMETRIC DEPENDENCIES IN THE FIELD, SOME LIFE EXPERIENCES

The search for work is the main goal of migrants. It allows to start a completely autonomous life with dignity, but is mandatory also because often they have left a family in their country of origin, a family which counts on their help to survive. This money to be sent to their relatives is the reason that pushes them to adapt to everything, even to illegal or underpaid works.

6.1 The story of A. and Y. (Y. is interviewed in our video)

A., a 23-year-old young man from Ethiopia and Y., a Somali, aged 30, arrived in Italy in 2017 and were initially hosted at a small Reception Center in Cormano, a town near Bresso.

In March 2019, after a trial period, the two young people were hired by a tire dealer with a permanent contract. Unfortunately salary payments were made irregularly. In the two-year working period the unpaid backlog of each employee amounted to approximately € 18,000.

As the two young guys had no accommodation, due to the precariousness of their situation, they agreed to sleep in the workshop (unheated, without shower and hot water), paying 200 euros per month.

This situation was accepted by the two employees, tied to the employer both by the salary (even if unstable) and by the night accommodation. The alternative would have been the road, which unfortunately is not an uncommon solution in Milan and its hinterland.

Now they are hosted in a DUS apartment and a legal action is underway with the support of trade unions in order to assert their rights.

A. and Y. faced an extreme situation, in which not even the condition of regularly hired workers has allowed them to achieve economic and housing autonomy.

6.2 The story of I.N. (South Sudan)

Arrived in Italy in 2009 from South Sudan, I.N. started working in the cleaning sector; in the meantime he was following an Italian language course and another one to get the middle school diploma. Having expressed a lot of interest in the plumbing and electricity sectors, he enrolled in a professional training course that gave him the opportunity to join a heating system maintenance company. This allowed I.N. to find a small apartment to rent, to live independently and to think about the reunion with his family.

Unfortunately the maintenance company where he was working stopped operations due to economic issues and for a certain period I.N. was able to find random jobs only, ruled by short-term contracts.

Shortly before the burst of Covid in Italy, he was hired for a six months period by a hotel in Milan, which, however, laid him off due to Covid lockdown. Upon expiry, his contract was not renewed, due to the difficult situation of the whole hotel sector.

At this time I.N., who in the meantime has re-joined with his wife and daughter, is in a very difficult situation, unable to find a work and a suitable home.

6.3 The story of S.C. (Guinea)

Our guest S.C., 33 years old, has left his family (wife and two children) in Guinea and he needs to provide them the means to live there. He works only few hours in the evening gathering garbage containers in the houses of the neighborhood, preparing them on the street for pickup.

This activity gives him a monthly income of approximately € 300 and for this reason S.C. needs to integrate it with other money. Therefore he has recently formalized an on-call contract at a freight warehouse, which occasionally requires him to perform duties at night.

This second income varies from month to month depending on the days worked and does not give any kind of security. So, in spite of these works in the evening and night time shifts, S.C. cannot be left alone by our organization and he cannot start the paperwork to for his family reunion here in Italy.

Without the support of DUS, he would be a “homeless” in our country.

6.4 The story of M.D. (Iran)

M.D., 44 years old, arrived in Italy in 2011. After several work grants and internships, which have not resulted in any concrete end, he found a job at the warehouse of a large food company, which employs staff provided by service cooperatives.

M.D. has been working overnight in the same company for sixteen months, the contract was renewed from time to time for periods ranging from three to six months.

The lack of a permanent contract prevents him from finding an apartment for himself, so our ex-guest was bound to sleep in a dormitory run by the Franciscan friars in Milan, which, with € 150 a month, guarantees him a bed and the usage of toilet and shower.

The family of M.D. was scattered by the events of life: the brothers live in Germany, while he is in Italy. He would like to rejoin his brothers, but he is waiting for the documents to do so.

6.5 The story of C.G. (Central African Republic, interviewed in the video)

In 1995, in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, C.G. was a taxi driver. One day he was forced by some rebels to follow them with his taxi. The vehicle was used inside the coup d'état that was going on in that country.

The attempted coup failed miserably and C. would have been at risk to be accused of active participation to the revolt. So he fled, not to fall into the hands of the rough justice of that country.

Initially, here in Italy, he worked in a shoe factory, then in a restaurant and finally was hired in a company that provides services in the security sector. Unfortunately, due to a series of family and work problems, he found himself in serious difficulties both from the housing and economic point of views. Not knowing what to do, he again came back to our organization that found him temporary accommodation and supported the reunion with his wife and daughter, who are now in Italy.

6.6 The story of Hope (Nigeria, interviewed in the video)

Hope was born in Nigeria in 1999 and decided to leave his country with the hope to study, as his parents were unable to sustain his school fees. He arrived in Italy in 2016 and enrolled immediately to an Italian language course and then to a middle degree school. He participated to a training project in the catering sector, which allowed him to work for some time at a sandwich shop. With the Covid emergency and the consequent suspension or limitation of work that hit those activities, Hope was left at home. He is now following a mechatronics course, hoping to be able to start a new activity soon.

7 OVERCOMING ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES

The experience gained over these years leads us to believe that overcoming asymmetrical dependencies is made possible when certain conditions are fulfilled:

- The knowledge of the Italian language ("It is only the language that makes equal. Equals are those who can express themselves and understand someone else's expression", Don Milani). The ability to understand requests and instructions in the workplace allows access to more complex employment activities, therefore better paid and better protected.
- An understanding of the social context, the system of rules and the way of relating to others in the hosting country. The way of speaking and the body language itself may sometimes differ when one comes from different countries. These differences can lead to misunderstandings, both in everyday life and during possible job interviews. By staying among Italians and talking to them, migrants are able to develop a respectful, trusting and open attitude to relationships.
- The knowledge of their rights and the awareness of their equality with Italian citizens.
- Learning working skills when there is no prior specific training.
- Integration into society. The more Italian people they meet, the easier it becomes to find work and solve everyday problems.

DUS tries to enable its guests to acquire skills that may be useful to overcome the unfavorable situation they find themselves in through different actions.

Firstly, through the personal relationship between volunteers and refugees: this allows the latter to know the geographic context and the resources of the area (use of public services, location of commercial services, knowledge of associations and institutions that can help them).

To feel welcomed by Italians is even more important for refugees: this makes their integration easier and diminishes the risk of sadness/depression. More than once we heard from people who have been in Italy for several years say: "It is the first time that some Italians have invited me to their home".

More than half of the refugees have a poor knowledge of the Italian language. They are encouraged to follow basic literacy courses organized by public institutions or local volunteering associations.

We encourage their acquisition of a first-level secondary school license, corresponding to the minimum level of education in Italy which gives access to vocational training. Without it, they often remain trapped into the vicious circle of low education - unskilled jobs - low remuneration - chronic poverty risk.

As far as job search is concerned, we have always turned to entities that verify their skills, identify the know-how they should acquire, seek opportunities for training or professional integration.

We are currently helping, even economically, some guests in different ways:

- some have obtained a driving license (highly important to get the job);
- a refugee is finishing a course in mechatronics so that he can be employed in a garage;
- a refugee has obtained the qualification of Auxiliary for Social Assistance (help to people who are not self-sufficient); this allowed him to leave a low-paid and precarious job in the field of cleaning.

We also provide legal assistance to refugees. It is not uncommon that employers take advantage of refugees' situation of weakness in order not to pay them regularly. When this occurs, in more than one circumstance we sent a warning to employers and in some cases we have started legal disputes with the help of trade unions.

Following the abolition of humanitarian permits by the past government, we have given assistance in the conversion of humanitarian permits into work permits. Help is also provided when renewing residence permits for protection reasons. One of our guests also had the opportunity to establish the process of regularization of immigration (named "Sanatoria"), which was introduced temporarily in 2020. The procedures are long and complex even for Italians and our help is essential.

On some occasions we have followed the practices of family reunification, since refugees sometimes left their wife and children in their country of origin or transit (e.g. Sudan or Turkey) wife and children. We have witnessed some beautiful stories of reunification and births of new Italian citizens after the reunification.

8 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE VIDEOMAKER

The main feature of "Dona Un Sorriso" is the personal commitment of every volunteer who questions himself, directly on the field, through a close interaction with the people who receive concrete help. For this reason, we chose to complete the report with a short video contribution presenting the testimonies of some current and former guests of the apartments managed by "Dona un Sorriso".

More precisely, some of the life experiences gathered lately were selected, then its protagonists were asked to leave a direct testimony that could tell their personal stories.

Many refused, either out of shyness, or out of fear of exposing themselves in public, for their difficulty in mastering the Italian language, or again for other personal reasons; all this is understandable since so many of them have stories of torture, violence and persecution behind them, which they hardly manage to overcome psychologically. Finally, some who agreed to participate with their own contribution at first withdrew later.

Nevertheless, four short but significant testimonies were collected and filmed in January, February and March 2021. Due to the pandemic, however, it was not possible to shoot audiovisual scenes that could investigate the witnesses' working life, and the production of the entire film was slowed down considerably. However, thanks to a very light equipment that enabled short and swift trips, it was possible to endow this work with an intrinsic communicative power.

The four interviewees each represent a different moment in the life of our guests. Some have just been admitted into one of the reception homes, some have already progressed very far in their integration

process, some were welcomed by the association many years ago but, thanks to friendly relationships established over time, continue to be helped at particular times such as the current historical period, some are almost at the end of their period of residence in our homes and, by having a regular job, can begin hoping for a more independent and autonomous future.

The opportunity of offering an audiovisual document is very significant especially for two reasons: firstly, it manages to clarify that the association is very close, even physically to the people it helps, accompanying them step by step on their path; moreover, it also succeeds in rendering the witnesses' state of mind by describing their situation in detail and highlighting their thoughts and feelings through their gestures, looks and voices.

None of them wanted to recount private events in detail or the really profound reasons that pushed them to abandon their previous lives, but it was certainly a cathartic moment for them (although very demanding as well) to stand in front of the camera and take part into the project and be able to somehow exorcise their present condition through their own words.

The format of the shooting is 16:9 in high definition, each frame was shot within the municipal area of Bresso, the town in the immediate suburbs of Milan where the association is based, where the four apartments hosting our refugee guests are situated, and which represents the pivot of the area where volunteers operate and interact with diverse individual situations. Each interview is presented by the treasurer of "Dona un Sorriso", since the interviewees do not express themselves perfectly in Italian, and are counterbalanced by the president's final thought, which gives an idea of the methods followed by the association in their actions.

A few years ago already, "Dona Un Sorriso" decided to report some of his activities through an audiovisual document: by this means, in a society ever increasingly characterized by images of fast fruition, the association hopes to leave meaningful traces within a world that seems to be doomed to remain unbalanced for a long time to come.

9 CONCLUSIONS

In the course of the last few years we have all observed changes which have led to an increasing imbalance of power between the employer and the worker, to the disadvantage of the latter.

In order to work, a migrant, who is generally poorly trained and has little knowledge of the Italian language, accepts jobs with low wages in the fields where it is usually difficult to recruit Italian staff.

In addition, it is necessary to point out that specifically these jobs (storage, catering, agriculture, etc.) are essential elements in the country system and that the containment of costs at this level has favoured companies enormously.

Our association does not expect to solve this serious phenomenon: our action is concentrated at a local level and takes place in everyday life, starting from the concrete situations with which it makes contact.

However, we believe that a different culture and a different way of considering foreigners in our country can be originated from below, from actions and events that can be reproduced and imitated.

For this reason, we intend to continue to operate following the line of action which we have defined, by facilitating the learning of the Italian language and of better qualified professional activities, defending our guests from the abuses they may experience, assisting them in the handling of the legal and bureaucratic practices proper to a complex society and establishing interpersonal relationships that can generate equal relations.