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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Agroecology for migrant 'emplacement' in the left-behind European countryside

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Abstract

We explore the nexus between the green and demographic transitions in the European Union (EU) through the analysis of the challenges and opportunities that agroecology offers for the settlement and socioeconomic participation of Italian city-dwellers-turned agroecological farmers and non-EU agroecological farmworkers in ageing and marginalised rural areas in Italy. Many such areas in Italy have recently experienced an influx of newcomers, including non-EU labour migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and Italian city-dwellers looking for a different lifestyle. Municipalities and NGOs have developed initiatives, like agroecology, for newcomers to participate in local societies while simultaneously contributing to sustainable rural (re)development in the context of the EU Green Deal. We discuss the potential of agroecology for the 'emplacement' of diverse groups of newcomers in these unlikely places through the analysis of the interpersonal, cultural, economic and institutional relations between newcomers and long-time residents, and across different groups of newcomers, in two Italian villages. Our findings suggest that everyday interactions among long-time residents and newcomers contribute to the emplacement of the latter. The analysed agroecological initiatives show potential for the emplacement of newcomers through their strong ethical

stance and aspirations for environmental sustainability and improved life quality. However, short-term contracts for the non-EU farmworkers combined with tight economic returns for the Italian agroecological farmers may lead to distributional and procedural injustices, including the hyper-exploitation of migrant farmworkers in the name of environmental sustainability.

KEYWORDS
agroecology, demographic transition, green transition, migrant farmworkers, migration to rural areas, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Europe is at a crossroads of two of the most momentous socioeconomic transformations of our time—the demographic and the green transitions. In 2019, the European Union (EU) agreed on a 'Green Deal' to make the transition to a low-carbon economy its main compass for future economic growth and sustainable development (European Commission, 2019). The Green Deal states that 'European funds will help rural areas to harness opportunities in the circular and bioeconomy [...] taking into account their [...] unique assets: biodiversity and renewable energy sources' (European Commission, 2019, p. 23). The plan is for sustainability transformations to attract investments, technology and people in ageing and marginalised rural areas (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), which account for 40% of the EU territory and one third of its population (Copus et al., 2020, p. 13).

In this article, we examine the nexus between the green and demographic transitions in the EU. Particularly, we discuss the challenges and opportunities that agroecology offers for the socioeconomic participation of two distinct groups of newcomers in ageing and marginalised rural areas in Italy—namely, Italian city-dwellers-turned agroecological farmers[1] and non-EU labour migrants, asylum seekers and refugees working in agroecological farms.

As one of the countries with the oldest population in Europe and the world (UNPD, 2024), Italy is particularly affected by the demographic transition. Additionally, since 2014, the country has been among the main entry points in the EU for migrants through the so-called Mediterranean route. At the same time, the Italian government has spearheaded efforts to seize the opportunities offered by the green transition to drive the local (re)development of the country's rural areas.

Agriculture is a common livelihood in these areas (European Commission, 2021; Galera et al., 2018a). However, there are several environmental issues linked to today's conventional, industrial agriculture: from greenhouse gas emissions (Schutter et al., 2021) to biodiversity loss, soil erosion and worsened human health (Eyhorn et al., 2019). Additionally, industrial agriculture raises a plethora of socioeconomic concerns. The dependence on market-led commodity chains and costly external inputs results in petty agro-commodity producers struggling to remain afloat due to increasing costs of production and decreasing returns to labour (Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2020; Ploeg, 2021). As for the farmworkers in conventional farming, these are mostly seasonal migrants with precarious and low-paid yet physically demanding jobs (Rye & Scott, 2018). Italy has seen a significant rise in migrant workers in agriculture over the last decade (Caruso & Corrado, 2015).

Media and civil society organisations have highlighted issues of undocumented migrant workers and the potential for abuse under the *caporalato* system in southern Italy (Corrado & Perrotta, 2012; De Meo & Omizzolo, 2018).

Agroecology, on the other hand, is considered a harmonious way of living with nature by privileging an ecologically sound farming model grounded in social and environmental justice principles (Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2020; Nyéléni Forum, 2015). Agroecology has been praised because it

> 'increases employment, reduces indebtedness and the consumption of fossil fuels, increases the opportunities for farm succession making it easier for the next generation to take over the farm, and it comes with a quality of work that is more varied and attractive' (Ploeg, 2021, p. 280).

Thus, the contributions of this article are twofold. Politically, this research brings together two major socioeconomic transformations, namely, the green and demographic transitions, through the lens of the migrant question; these issues are high on the agenda of EU policymakers as explained earlier. Academically, the analysis of the dynamics of migrant participation in the ageing and marginalised European countryside is gradually gaining currency (for reviews, see Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023; Bock et al., 2016; Geuijen et al., Forthcoming; Kordel et al., 2018; Membretti et al., 2022; Natale et al., 2019). This is especially because the question of the new immigration destinations in the EU (McAreavey, 2017a) intersects with that regarding the future of the European left-behind areas (Copus et al., 2020; Hudson & Sandberg, 2021; Membretti et al., 2022). However, the literature on the nexus between the green and demographic transitions in Europe is scarce (Barca et al., 2014; Rangone & Ali, 2021; Moralli, 2022; Westerby et al., 2022; Arora-Jonsson & McAreavey, 2023), especially regarding the labour relations and other dynamics shaping the involvement of non-EU migrant workers in sustainable agriculture. The latter is the first knowledge gap this article contributes to address.

Moreover, most of the literature on migration to marginalised areas in Europe and in Italy more specifically (see Dematteis & Di Gioia, 2018; Ferrario & Price, 2014; Gretter et al., 2017; Perlik & Membretti, 2018; Ravazzoli et al., 2019) adopts the lens of 'integration' of newcomers to refer to the range of socioeconomic and cultural processes of adaptation of migrants to their new circumstances (Ager & Strang, 2008). However, the term integration is often politically charged as it has recently been subject to significant attention in the public domain and political debate across Europe (Driel, 2020; Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018). Additionally, this approach usually fails to acknowledge the mutual efforts from both newcomers and long-time residents to build a network of connections and resources and create a place together (King, 2020; McPherson, 2010; Phillimore, 2012; Woods, 2022).

Therefore, with a view to analyse the ways social relations and place shape the conditions for migrants' belongingness and socioeconomic participation in host societies over time, Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2016) put forth the notion of 'emplacement' or 'the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city' (p. 21). So far, the emplacement lenses have mainly been applied in urban settings (see Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2021; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Thus, a second way this article contributes to the literature is through a double shift in the usual analytical focus, namely, from 'integration' to 'emplacement' and from 'urban' to 'rural' emplacement (for Italy see Moralli et al., 2023).

We begin by providing a concise overview of population ageing, socio-spatial marginalisation, international migration and sustainable rural development in Italy, focusing on two case-study

areas. We then outline our analytical approach and research methodology and methods. In the subsequent sections, we present and discuss our findings on the interpersonal, cultural, economic and institutional relations of emplacement between long-time residents and newcomers and across non-EU migrant agroecological farm workers and new Italian green farmers. We conclude by highlighting our contributions to understanding the challenges and opportunities posed by agroecology for the emplacement of these two groups of newcomers in the left-behind rural Italy.

MARGINALISATION, NEWCOMERS AND SUSTAINABLE (RE)DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL ITALY

In this section, we briefly discuss the three main components of our research problem, namely, socio-spatial marginalisation, migration to ageing and marginalised rural areas and sustainable rural development, all grounded in the context of Italy and our two case-study areas.

The Italian 'inner areas'

After World War II, Italy saw polarised economic development, with rapid urban growth at the expense of rural areas. By the 1980s, a clear North/South divide and regional disparities emerged, leading to the identification of 'inner areas'—regions far from urban centres with limited job opportunities and services. These areas, depicted in Figure 1, face ageing populations, high unemployment, environmental degradation and a lack of innovation (Borghi, 2017; Renzoni, 2018).

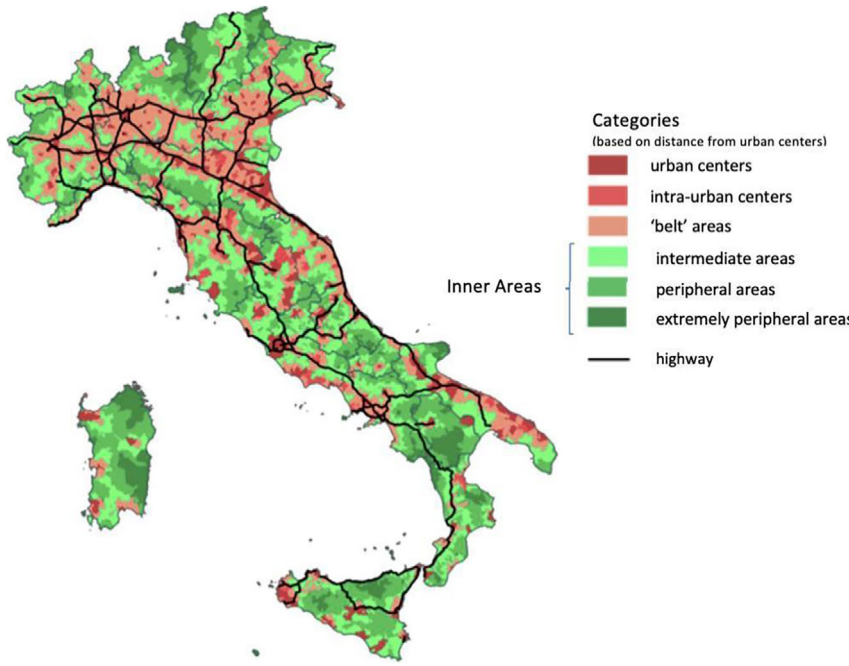

FIGURE 1 Italy's inner areas span over 60% of the Italian territory and include over 4000 municipalities that barely host 22% of the country's population. *Source*: Barca et al. (2014).

Newcomers in Italy's inner areas

The recent political and social attention to migration issues has been especially salient in Italy, which has been among the main entry points in the EU for migrants, together with Spain and Greece (Frontex, 2021). Arrivals come through the so-called Mediterranean route, which recorded its highest peak in 2016 and the first half of 2017 (UNHCR, 2022).

Italy did not have a national reception system for refugees and asylum seekers until the early 2000s. Law 189 of 20/07/2002 established the National Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR). The system, based on the collaboration between local public and private actors, was grounded on voluntary membership on the side of the local municipalities (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2002) and aimed to provide asylum seekers and refugees with high levels of reception services, including housing, food and legal support (OECD, 2014). In 2018, the SPRAR was reformed, and its services restricted to refugees only; more recently, in 2020, the scheme morphed into the System of Reception and Integration (SAI), which reopened its services to asylum seekers (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2020).[2]

In Italy, large cities were primary immigration hubs from the 1980s to the 2000s. However, since the late 2000s, trends have shifted. Following the 2008 economic crisis and job losses in urban centres, many migrants resettled in less populated towns and rural areas, particularly in Southern Italy, where the cost of living is lower (Caruso & Corrado, 2015). Additionally, the government has relocated more refugees and asylum seekers to these areas to ease urban pressure (Barbera, 2016). Consequently, while outmigration and ageing persist, rural areas have seen an increase in foreign-born residents. By 2017, about 30% of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy were in rural municipalities, where the ratio of foreign-to-national-born residents was higher than in cities (Di Gioia, 2018).

Agroecology for migrant emplacement in Italy's inner areas: The cases of the Camonica Valley and the Monferrato

Italy's left-behind but resource-rich inner areas may significantly benefit from sustainability initiatives and climate stewardship efforts. The 2014 Italy's National Strategy for the Inner Areas (SNAI) targets these regions to counter depopulation through sustainable local (re)development (Barca et al., 2014) focusing on environmental sustainability and landscape preservation, sustainable tourism, sustainable agri-food systems, renewable resources and local handcrafts (Italiae, 2021). Emphasising place-based approaches, the SNAI underscores the importance of local ownership in combining the environmental benefits of the green transition with socioeconomic gains for local communities (ENRD, 2021). Local territories play a strategic role in supporting sustainable business development and creating new participatory, bottom-up business models (Rangone & Ali, 2021).

In northern Italy, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like K-PAX in Breno and PIAM in Asti, depicted in Figure 2, exemplify these principles within the SAI system, fostering rural regeneration by integrating refugees, asylum seekers and Italian agroecological farmers (Conticelli et al., 2019).

K-PAX, operating in the Camonica Valley since 2011, spearheads a consortium of small municipalities to resettle refugees and asylum seekers through a dispersed reception model, thus preventing socio-spatial segregation. Their collaboration with the local bio-district (a network of local producers focused on promoting agroecology in the valley) fosters agroecology, training

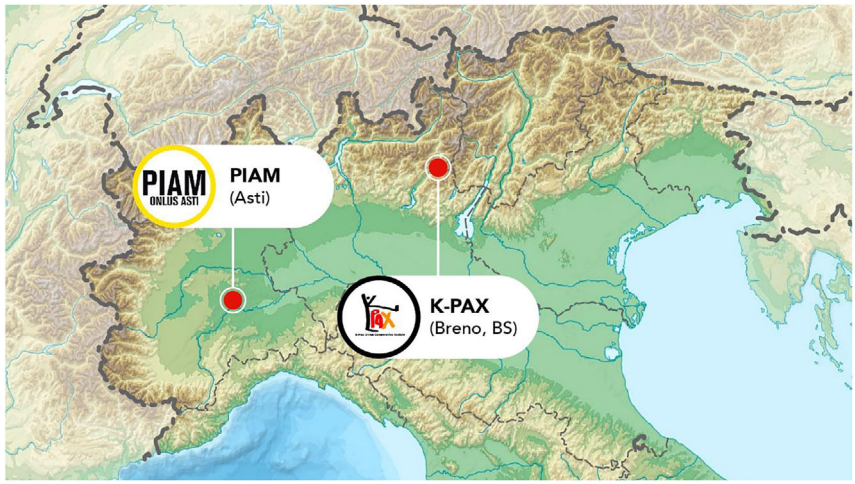

FIGURE 2 Research areas in Italy. *Source*: adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

newcomers in sustainable agriculture and creating permanent jobs for migrants and refugees (K-PAX, 2021).

Similarly, PIAM in Asti integrates refugees and asylum seekers into local agri-food systems and environment conservation efforts (Conticelli et al., 2019), enhancing their role in sustainable agriculture activities alongside local farmers, such as the cultivation and distribution of ancient grains and the recovery of vineyards (PIAM, 2022).

Over time, both NGOs have evolved from service providers to refugees and asylum seekers, to key local welfare entities (Galera et al., 2018b). Here, we focus on the rural regeneration projects linking refugees and asylum seekers under the SAI system with Italian agroecological farmers in the Camonica Valley and the Monferrato. Both groups are 'newcomers' to these two regions. On the one hand, the refugees and asylum seekers are resettled into these areas under the aegis of the Italian migration and asylum framework (Perlik & Membretti's, 'migrants by force' (2018)). On the other, a cohort of new young Italian agroecological farmers chooses to swap the city for the countryside as a lifestyle decision ('migrants by choice').

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The traditional model of integration hinges on the notions of the migrants' bonding and bridging social capitals, building on the concepts first elaborated by Granovetter (1973) to refer, respectively, to relationships established with members of the same ethnic group and to those created with members of the host society. In policy discourse, bridging relations with the local community are seen as instrumental towards integration, whereas migrants who primarily form relationships with co-nationals are general regarded as not integrated (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019).

This approach has been criticised for placing the onus on migrants to integrate (Hickman et al., 2012). Glick Schiller and Çağlar's (2013) notion of 'emplacement' looks at a person's 'efforts to settle and build networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific locality' (p. 495). The authors break down the distinctions between co-ethnics and majority residents and shift away from the emphasis on bridging social capital. Recent research has indeed highlighted

that a multitude of social relations of differing depths (from fleeting to more enduring) with a variety of people (both other migrants and host communities) is crucial for a successful settlement (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Additionally, Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2013, 2016) stress the salience of the socio-spatial context in the analysis of the social relations of migrant emplacement. This resonates with Phillimore's (2021) call to 'shift the focus from refugees to context', and with Ryan's (2018) notion of 'differentiating embedding' to highlight how both the societal and the territorial dimensions strongly shape the dynamics of incorporation of diverse groups of newcomers in different socio-spatial formations.

So far, the notion of emplacement has been used mostly to analyse the 'continuing restructuring of a city' in 'super-diverse' urban contexts (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2013, 2021; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Here, we also examine multiple 'sociabilities of emplacement that bring together migrant newcomers and local people' (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, p. 21); however, our focus is on marginalised rural communities rather than urban areas.

We adopt a critical and intersectional rural sociology perspective following the 'multi-dynamic politics framework' (Alonso-Fradejas, 2018) for the analysis of the emplacement relations between longtime residents and newcomers, and across diverse groups of newcomers. We examine four main types of emplacement relations: interpersonal, cultural, economic and institutional. By *interpersonal* relations we mean the bundle of connections and acquaintances, ranging from fleeting to meaningful, between newcomers and long-time residents and across non-EU migrant agroecological farmworkers and Italian green farmers. *Cultural* relations revolve around the knowledge, values, aspirations and motivations of newcomers and long-time residents. *Economic* relations involve labour and other social relations of production between newcomers and long-time residents and across the two main groups of newcomers. Finally, *institutional* relations refer to the interaction of newcomers and long-time residents with the state at the local and national levels. In discussing these four types of emplacement relations, we pay attention to procedural and distributional justice outcomes. Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the decision-making process, often interpreted in terms of the involvement and participation of relevant actors (Svarstad et al., 2011). Distributional justice regards the perceived fairness in the distribution of social and economic outcomes, including both benefits and burdens, among groups (Walker, 2010).

We differentiate across various groups of newcomers according to their main reason to migrate as well as their class and nationality attributes and their intersections. Following Perlik and Membretti (2018), our main research subjects are either migrants 'by force' (i.e., asylum seekers and refugees) or 'by choice' (i.e., the new Italian agroecological farmers). The most relevant differences regarding the nationality of our research subjects are between EU (mostly Italian) and non-EU nationals. Last, we identify different classes following the labour criteria, namely, whether and the extent to which an individual hires-in and/or hires-out wage labour. Thus, among our research participants, there are farmworkers who hire-out their labour and four types of agroecological farmers, including (1) agroecological farmers who do not hire-in farm labour and do not hire-out their own labour; (2) agroecological farmers who do not hire-in farm labour but either hire-out their labour or rely on another off-farm livelihood; (3) agroecological farmers who hire-in farmworkers but neither hire-out their own labour nor have any other non-farm livelihood; and (4) agroecological farmers who hire-in farmworkers and either hire-out their labour or rely on another off-farm livelihood. Considering our research problem, our focus is mostly on farmworkers and agroecological farmer types 3 and 4 who hire-in labour. Figure 3 depicts the main elements of our analytical framework.

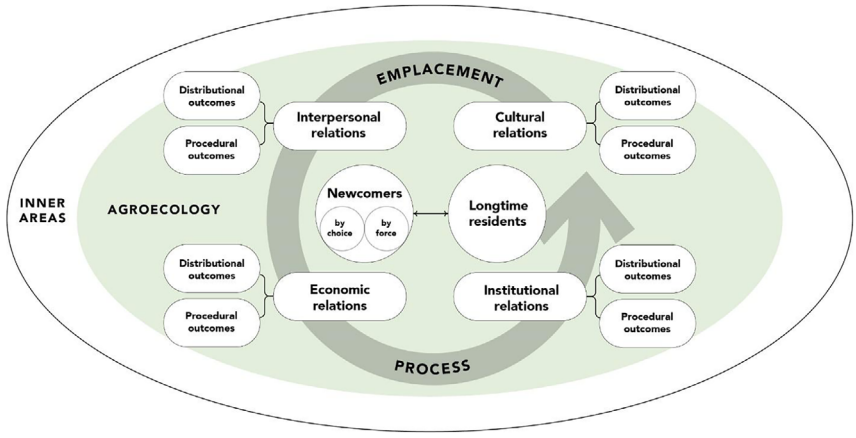

FIGURE 3 Conceptual framework. *Source*: Own elaboration.

Methodology and methods

This case-study research relied on a mixed-methods approach deployed in three phases. First, a comprehensive review of academic literature on migration, rural development and sustainability transformations, as well as relevant policy documents at the EU, national and local levels set the academic and policy framework.

The second phase consisted of data collection during a five-week-long intensive fieldwork in Italy during March and April 2022. Data collection methods included 37 in-depth interviews (IDIs), three focus group discussions (FGDs) and 14 time-use surveys (TUS).[3] The IDIs and FGDs lasted between 30 and 70 min and were conducted in English, Italian or French (all languages spoken by the field researcher) to accommodate the language of the participants. The IDIs and FGDs were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.[4] IDIs and FGDs were complemented by a series of informal conversations with local residents in supermarkets, cafes, bars and restaurants, as well as by ethnographic observation in the two research towns and their surrounding areas, the NGO offices and some of the agroecological farms and produce markets. This enabled the field researcher to assess the everyday context in the localities and the participants' behaviours and interactions to triangulate, nuance and critically reflect on the findings from the IDIs, FGDs and TUS. Most research participants were recruited through the support of the two NGOs, K-PAX and PIAM. Additional participants were identified through snowball sampling. The research participants across the two locations included: 12 refugees and asylum seekers who had arrived in the research areas within the year prior to the interviews, nine NGO employees, eight new Italian agroecological farmers, four school teachers, three mayors and one policymaker involved in the drafting of the SNAI. Purposive sampling allowed for the selection of participants who were representative of the various groups of actors relevant to our research problem. This enabled us to gain depth of understanding and gather a plurality of perspectives. Some interviews took place at the NGOs' premises, but others were carried out at the participants' homes or farms to avoid potential response biases.

In the third phase, the collected empirical material was analysed with Excel and through coding with Nvivo software. This research comes with its inherent limitations, mainly including the risk of generalising research findings beyond the socio-spatial units of analysis. Thus, while we believe

our findings resonate elsewhere in Italy and the EU, we must stress their historically and spatially bound relevance.

In the following four sections, we present and discuss our analysis of the interpersonal, cultural, economic and institutional relations of emplacement between longtime residents and newcomers and across non-EU migrant farmworkers and Italian agroecological farmer newcomers.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS OF EMPLACEMENT

As mentioned earlier, recent literature on migrant participation in host societies agrees that *bonding* relationships with co-ethnics are as important as *bridging* connections with the local majority, and those migrants who lack contact with their ethnic community are at risk of depression and isolation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). How do these dynamics unfold in our research areas?

'Bridging' relations between newcomers and long-time residents

The non-EU migrant newcomers interviewed recount their migration journey as a solitary endeavour, leaving behind their hometown and families in pursuit of a better and safer future. Upon arriving in the Camonica Valley or the Monferrato region, these migrants by force found themselves in unfamiliar territories with no prior acquaintances and no choice in their resettlement locations. Their relative isolation persisted over the following months, and at the time of the interviews, most reported minimal contact with long-time residents. Structural factors such as language barriers, a lack of gathering places, few leisure options and limited mobility further constrained social interactions, leading to increased feelings of isolation, emptiness and marginalisation (Barca et al., 2014; Ferrario & Price, 2014). The long hours spent working on a farm left little time for socialising, whether with long-time residents or other newcomers. Some migrants recalled having broader social networks in larger cities during their migration journey. 'I am alone here, I don't have any friends in Malegno. I have many friends in Milano. But I don't go often because it's far', says M. from Mali, before confessing a desire shared by several others:

> 'I wish I knew more people here. If you live in a place where you have many acquaintances, it's great, because if you need anything—a favour, a job…—you can just ask'.

Conversely, the new Italian agroecological farmers left their city jobs to pursue agroecology as an adventure or a personal challenge. They view themselves as innovators and community mobilisers aiming to transform production and consumption practices in their communities. This aligns with previous studies highlighting that a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, including natural resource stewardship and civic-mindedness, shapes agroecological farmers' aspirations and long-term goals (Han et al., 2021).

'Bonding' social capital

The social interactions across groups of newcomers are predominantly influenced by the services provided by the two NGOs in the framework of the Italian SAI reception system. These services

facilitate connections among non-EU migrants through language classes and shared rent-free apartments, fostering socialisation. Some of the migrants also establish workplace relationships. However, the small size of agroecological farms, typically requiring only one hired labourer, limits these opportunities. 'When we are finished with work at the end of the week, Saturday and Sunday, we [my roommates and I] get together and stay at home. We just chill among ourselves', says E. from Nigeria.

A patronised relationship

The relationship between the two groups of newcomers (the non-EU migrant farmworkers and the Italian agroecological farmers) is primarily defined by employment contracts. In most cases, the relationship remains professional; migrants typically return home after work, though in some cases, they live under the same roof with their employers. 'M. [the migrant labourer] lives at home with us, he has become a part of our family beyond work', explains L., an Italian agroecological farmer in the Camonica Valley.

> 'We have helped him with all the documents, all the paperwork. He is an integral part of our farm and we couldn't do without him. Even if M. were to find another job someday, he will forever be a friend and a part of our family'.

This suggests that agroecology can foster friendly or even familial bonds between employers and employees. This is expected of an overtly transformative agricultural model that aims to go beyond ecologically sound farming knowledge and technologies to free agriculture from exploitation and other forms of discrimination (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). However, such supportive relations between employers and employees are not strange to conventional agriculture either (Alonso-Fradejas, 2013, 2021; Corrado et al., 2020; Scott, 1976). In fact, relationships in which the employer provides extensive support, including accommodation and legal help in our case, run the risk of mirroring the traditional agrarian 'moral economy' (Scott, 1976) and patron–client relations that Michie (1981) describes as 'networks of dyadic relations centered on power figures, the patrons, who control resources essential to the survival and well-being of dependent groups, the client' (p. 23). These dynamics raise concerns about the agency of the 'client' (here: the non-EU migrant farmworker), who is required to fully adopt the lifestyle of the 'patron' (here: the new Italian agroecological farmer-employer) and share everything, from living spaces to the employer's transformative vision and life project. If this imbalance goes unchecked, it may lead to procedural injustices (Svarstad et al., 2011). This is especially the case when the drive to involve migrant farmworkers in agroecology simply responds to a mere 'passive participation for material incentives' (Pretty, 1995), in which migrant farmworkers have none or little control over their labour process, and decisions are systematically and (almost) exclusively made by their employers (Ploeg, 2021). As M. from PIAM argues,

> 'more often than not, especially for small organic farms where there is a big human investment, it's difficult to fit in. The employers are basically telling [the migrants]: "Look, this is what I want to do, this is my life project, my dream" and they are asking them to share it. But maybe a young man who crossed the sea all the way from Africa has a different goal in life'.

CULTURAL RELATIONS OF EMPLACEMENT

Due to a combination of historical and geographic traits, the villages in this research have a track record of fragmentation and insularity, with very strong parochial identities that go hand-in-hand with a level of conservativeness and a general sense of distrust for everything that is perceived as foreign.

> 'These areas are a closed-off world, a world that has no exchanges with the outside. It's difficult to establish connections with others. We are used to staying among ourselves. That's why the outsiders are not seen with a lot of benevolence, especially at first', comments M., a former local mayor. 'People from here are extremely close-minded. They are not ready to open their hands towards us migrants', echoes D., a migrant newcomer from Nigeria.

What happens when diverse groups of outsiders arrive in these areas? And what role does agroecology play in this encounter?

A clash of cultures

Both groups of newcomers faced opposition when they first moved to the inner areas, being perceived as the carriers of values, practices and identities that clashed with those of the long-time residents.

The new Italian agroecological farmers, who aimed to revive long-abandoned agricultural practices, were not fully understood by the long-time residents and were benevolently called 'crazy people' and 'fools'. 'Talking about organic agriculture here makes you sound backward, like you're talking nonsense', notes P. from the Camonica Valley bio-district.

> 'The older generations have experience with this kind of toilsome farming practices, where everything was done by hand. And when you say "organic", there is this memory of our grandparents who went hungry'.

The first waves of non-EU migrant newcomers were similarly unwelcomed; local sentiments were often steered by national media narratives and by the general conservative political leanings of these regions. 'These areas are League[5] strongholds', explains M., a former mayor. 'The biggest issue was the fear towards the migrants—people who come from another culture, another world, their skin of a different colour'.

The NGOs K-Pax and PIAM, in close cooperation with local administrations, tried to counter this negative perception by organising awareness-raising festivals to celebrate diversity and inclusion, featuring food, music and culture. While these events were reportedly popular and well-attended, they did not result in long-lasting change: 'These are ad hoc and sporadic initiatives that serve to make people aware of the migrants' presence but remain at the level of raising awareness and do not tackle structural issues', admits P. from the Camonica Valley bio-district.

Agroecology bridging cultures

It was through manual labour in the fields that the perception of migrant newcomers among long-time residents gradually began to shift. The non-EU migrants undertook the hard jobs that

younger generations of Italians had abandoned. And this led to their appreciation by long-time residents as bearers of a hard-work ethic. As C. from K-PAX states,

> 'They (the migrants) are just people who are working. It doesn't matter if you are black or green—it's good that you are working the land, so there will not be a landslide next time it rains'.

Gradually, this changed the long-time residents' perception of non-EU migrants from a threat to a valued resource, normalising their presence in the communities. This aligns with findings from studies on innovative solutions for migrant welcoming in remote areas of Italy (Conticelli et al., 2019; Ponzo, 2020; Ravazzoli et al., 2019; Semprebon et al., 2022), but it also runs the risk of migrant farmworkers feeling compelled 'to simply put up with exploitative practices' (McAreavey, 2017b, p. 11) to meet the expectations of long-time residents.

Agriculture also served to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between the Italian agroecological farmers and the non-EU migrant labourers. Many migrants had a strong farming background and were able to apply their expertise immediately, working alongside their Italian employers. This allowed the two groups to get to know each other better, exchange stories and learn from one another.

> 'In Africa, I always worked by hand. I used to grow different plants. Here I have learned a lot—how to plant the crops, how to tend to them, how to chop wood', explains E. from Nigeria.

Matching aspirations—or otherwise

When work culture and personal aspirations align between non-EU migrant farmworkers and Italian farmers, agroecology offers an opportunity for improved relations of production and life quality (Bouttes et al., 2019; Han et al., 2021). The principled approach common among agroecological farm owners translates into a farm labour regime attentive to individual needs and wellbeing—including working outdoors, adopting sustainable practices and avoiding hazardous chemicals.

> 'Even in Africa, I've always worked as a farmer. That's the only job I know, and I love it. I don't like the other jobs I have tried, and I am not interested in learning any other jobs', argues M. from Mali.

However, the different positionalities of the two groups of newcomers shape their ability to realise their aspirations. As owners of the land and other means of production, the Italian agroecological farmers have the upper hand regarding what, how and why to farm. In contrast, the non-EU migrants, with their tenuous connections to the land and limited resources, get the short end of the stick and are primarily guided by the need for employment. Jobs in factories in cities, seen as more stable and better remunerated, exert a strong pull. Historical patterns suggest that migrants may follow the same path of younger, better educated Italians who migrated from rural areas to cities. Those working in agroecology often do so due to a lack of better opportunities, because of a lack of either formal education or personal connections—an 'involuntary immobility' (Carling & Schewel, 2018) that forces them to stay behind. As S. from PIAM acknowledges,

> 'in the vast majority of cases, non-EU migrants ended up working in agriculture as a stop-gap solution. It was not their passion, or perhaps it could have been but not on these short-term, on-call contracts. It's really a fallback option'.

Moreover, it is common for migrant farmworkers to lack the required knowledge for agroecological farming and hence to simply follow instructions, often unaware of their employers' commitment to high ethical and environmental standards. This differential involvement risks engendering procedural injustice due to the lack of meaningful involvement of migrant farmworkers in the agroecological venture.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS OF EMPLACEMENT

Our research areas have faced socioeconomic decline since the 1960s, when younger generations started moving to the cities of Northern Italy prompted by booming industrialisation. This led to the collapse of the traditional farming sector, once the economic backbone of these rural areas (Conticelli et al., 2019; Perlik & Membretti, 2018; Ravazzoli et al., 2019). How do economic relations of production in agroecological farming shape the newcomers' emplacement in these areas?

Newcomers: From threats to resources

The influx of newcomers provides much-needed resources to ageing and socioeconomically marginalised rural areas, bringing tangible economic contributions. The Italian agroecological farmers invest time and resources into restoring farmsteads, while the non-EU migrants fill labour market gaps by taking on jobs left behind by the Italians. 'The only reason why I got my job is because the Italians don't like working in the fields. If they liked it, we would never find a job here', says D. from Mali. This perspective counters the populist narrative portraying non-EU migrants as burdens on public funds, instead positioning them 'from beneficiaries of assistance services to actors contributing to local development' (Ravazzoli et al., 2019, p. 7).

Working side-by-side in the field

Agroecology, being more labour-intensive than conventional farming, is expected to create substantial job opportunities (Ploeg et al., 2019). The time-use survey reveals no significant differences in the hours migrant farmworkers and their Italian employers spend in the field, a finding supported by interviews indicating that agroecological farmers work alongside their employees.

However, significant differences exist in the labour regimes of the two newcomer groups, reflecting their class position. Agroecological farmers, who own the land and other means of production, run family businesses, reinvest earnings into their farms and aspire to see them flourish. Non-EU migrants, in contrast, are labourers hired due to a shortage of Italian workers, subject to flexible labour regimes with little employment stability and often seek farming jobs due to a lack of better alternatives.

Migrant farmworkers thus stand in a more vulnerable class position, with jobs that often fail to meet the criteria for 'decent' work (ILO, 2012, p. 141). 'The work was not stable. There was not a contract. Some [of the employers] don't like to give contracts. They don't want to pay taxes, they

don't want to spend much', reveals C. from Nigeria. The lack of contractual stability for migrant labourers is concerning. Under Italy's Law 173 of 18/12/2020, NGOs receive funding to support professional traineeships for refugees and asylum seekers to facilitate their employment in local companies, factories, farms or other venues (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2020). This financial support is intended to last three months, after which employers are expected to offer proper contracts. However, in agroecological farming, this transition is rare due to the financial constraints faced by the green farmers:

> 'Traineeships are fine because they are free. Hiring someone on a permanent basis is too expensive. You are better off hiring someone through seasonal contracts. We can't afford more than this', admits P., an agroecological farmer.

Making a decent income remains a common challenge for agroecological farmers due to high logistics and production costs, market access difficulties and unpredictable price and market conditions. Similarly to their conventional farming class peers elsewhere in Italy (Corrado et al., 2018), agroecological farmers in the Camonica Valley and the Monferrato struggle to stay in business.

The traineeship system under Law 173, intended to facilitate migrant emplacement in agroecology and in agriculture more broadly, risks resulting in a perverse incentive for abuse both of public funds and migrant labour. Over-reliance on public resources could undermine good practices (as per findings in Driel, 2020; Urso, 2021). There is also a risk of hyper-exploitation of migrant labour when viewed as a disposable resource, requiring minimal investment. Consequently, migrants may seek more stable and promising jobs in other sectors or in cities. 'Maybe I will go to a city and learn about e-commerce and licensing. I do not want to stay here because this is a village', reveals N. from Pakistan.

This suggests that agroecological jobs are not inherently decent and require careful stewardship by public authorities to ensure workers can exercise their rights (ILO, 2012, p. 134).

INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS OF EMPLACEMENT

State institutions and public administration play a central role in the SAI framework, which is entirely funded and managed by public bodies, including the Ministry of the Interior and the National Association of Italian Municipalities in a multilevel governance model. The SAI reception system relies on voluntary municipal participation in the reception system, placing municipalities and mayors at the forefront of SAI projects in partnership with local NGOs.

Local administration…

The SAI system requires strong synergies and good collaboration between the administration and the organisations that receive their mandate from local authorities. Political shifts in public administration can impact the NGOs' ability to fulfil their reception and integration duties (Ambrosini, 2013). Committed mayors play a key role in connecting various actors (non-EU migrants, Italian green farmers and long-time residents) and establishing mutual trust. Mayors act as guarantors, by vouching for the skills and motivations of migrant workers to ethically oriented entrepreneurs willing to hire them after a successful traineeship. This influence stems from the high level of trust mayors enjoy in small communities, where longstanding interpersonal relationships are crucial.

. . . and central bureaucracy

Newcomers often view interactions with national-level state institutions as hindrances. For non-EU migrants, bureaucracy adds to their sense of precariousness and instability—from limited working rights to lengthy asylum processes. SAI projects funding expires after three months, and beyond these traineeships, agricultural sector contracts offer little stability (Corrado et al., 2018). In our research areas, most agricultural contracts are 'on-call' for temporary or seasonal workers during production peaks or harvest seasons, typically filled by non-EU migrants (INPS, 2021). The latter usually struggle with the intricate Italian bureaucratic system, which 'consistently marginalises migrants and their labour' (Tuckett, 2018, p. 149), creating mechanisms of exclusion. Migrants thus rely heavily on NGO's legal services or their employers' goodwill: 'In Italy, bureaucracy is the problem', complains L., an agroecological farmer.

> 'We had to redo all [the migrant labourer's] documents in order to renew his asylum permit. There is so much paperwork! Luckily for him, we never abandoned him. It's not nice to say, but if I'm the one requesting a document, it's one thing. If the request comes from him, it's a different story'.

The new Italian agroecological farmers also face bureaucratic challenges. The documentation required to certify a farm as agroecological is often so cumbersome and costly that several green farmers opt out despite qualifying in principle (Ghelfi, 2023; Medici et al., 2021). Bureaucratic requirements disproportionately affect small farms, which lack the administrative capacity to manage extensive paperwork. There is a widespread perception that public funding and subsidies favour larger players (Anziano & Riva, 2022), while small-scale agroecological farms are insufficiently supported by public administration and struggle to survive.

CONCLUSION

We have explored the challenges and opportunities that agroecological farming offers for the emplacement of two distinct groups of newcomers in ageing and socio-spatially marginalised areas in Italy: new Italian agroecological farmers and non-EU migrant farmworkers. While our case-study approach provides valuable insights, further research is warranted in diverse contexts within Italy and across EU countries with different statutory migration and asylum frameworks and agroecological labour regimes. It is particularly worth noting that the agroecological initiatives observed in the two locations are still at a nascent stage and involve relatively few participants. Thus, we encourage follow-up longitudinal studies to assess their resilience and socio-spatially differentiated implications.

Our findings contribute to advancing knowledge on the nexus between the green and demographic transitions in two main respects. First, by shifting our analytical lenses from 'integration' to 'emplacement' and from 'urban' to 'rural' contexts, we highlight various challenges particular to ageing and socio-spatially marginalised rural areas that may hinder the emplacement of newcomers, such as limited services and mobility options, a more restricted pool of interpersonal relationships and job opportunities, and the fact that these areas are often regarded as a stepping-stone in the migrants' journey rather than their final destination. Despite these challenges, village life has the potential to mitigate the spatial segregation along class, ethnic or nationality lines that is prevalent in urban settings but also in other small-town hotspots for migrant farmworkers

in conventional agriculture (McAreavey, 2021). Moreover, in the ageing and left-behind countryside, migrant newcomers are increasingly perceived as a much-needed resource that fills a gap for manual labour, albeit in a functionalist fashion.

Second, we enhance the knowledge on the nexus between the green and demographic transitions through the analysis of the distribution relations behind the participation of non-EU migrant workers in agroecology. Bridging rural emplacement and multi-dynamic politics framework lenses, we identified and discussed four categories of emplacement relations: interpersonal, cultural, economic and institutional relations between longtime residents and newcomers and across diverse groups of newcomers. This analysis revealed a mixed record regarding the potential of agroecological initiatives for the emplacement of newcomers in ageing and left-behind rural areas. On the one hand, they facilitate the socioeconomic participation of newcomers thanks to the strong ethical stance of most green farmers and their aspirations for a more sustainable and fairer agrifood system. And when the work culture and personal aspirations of the non-EU migrant farmworkers and the Italian farmers match, agroecology promises to improve production relations in agriculture. On the other hand, these agroecological initiatives resonate with conventional small-scale agriculture in that they are also subject to bureaucratic hurdles and market pressures and constraints that result in tight operational margins for green farmers. Additionally, social relations of production in agroecology are constrained by short-term employment contracts that risk triggering unfair distributional and procedural outcomes, including the hyper-exploitation of migrant farmworkers in the name of environmental sustainability. While not exclusive to agroecology, these adverse labour regimes in agroecology result in most migrant workers ultimately seeking a better job elsewhere—including in urban areas and/or other sectors of activity. This dynamic is intensified when unfavourable labour conditions intersect with migrant workers' personal aspirations for non-agricultural, or even non-rural, life projects. The underlying economic distributions patterns driving this trend and their socially differentiated impacts offer fertile ground for further inquiry in our research areas and beyond.

In sum, our study provides an exploratory but nuanced understanding of the nexus between the green and demographic transitions in the EU through the examination of how agroecology intersects with migration dynamics in the ageing and left-behind European countryside.

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No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In the context of this article, 'agroecological' and 'green' farming are used interchangeably to refer to the farmers that practice agroecology.

[2] At the time of writing the SAI system is still operating; the current government in Italy, in power since October 2022, has so far pushed for stricter laws on migration rather than reforming the existing asylum system.

[3] We carried out the time-use survey in English and Italian to examine the time diverse research participants allocated to various activities in a given day, such as paid or voluntary work, house chores, personal care, travel and leisure activities (Eurostat, 2019).

[4] This research involved engaging in discussions on sensitive and confidential topics, which required conscientiously building rapport with all the participants, and especially the non-EU migrants. Before requesting consent for recording, and to elicit as fair and honest responses as possible, all participants were thoroughly informed about the research purpose, its strictly scientific nature and the lack of any affiliation with the two concerned NGOs. The field researcher maintained an acute awareness of cultural sensitivity issues, including gender, racial, religious and socioeconomic differences, as well as the reasons of non-EU participants for migrating to Italy. This required the conscious and constant recognition of the field researcher's own positionality as an outsider, contrasted with the emic perspectives of the participants, and reflecting their internal viewpoints, perceptions and beliefs. The field researcher conducted every interaction with participants in a manner that minimised potential negative experiences by the latter, particularly when addressing sensitive questions that could evoke traumatic memories. Participants' identities were consistently protected and anonymised.

[5] The 'League' is a far-right populist political party led by Matteo Salvini, the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, at the time of writing.

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