

## THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF THE IMMIGRANTS IN SICILY

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**Abstract:** *The social-economic integration of the immigrants in Sicily.* Sicily, a traditional geophysical bridge between the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, became after the world energy crisis of 1973 the ground for final acceptance by people coming not only from Africa but also from southern and eastern Asia. The current war in Libya and the serious economic, political and environmental crises in the countries of the Maghreb, the Horn of Africa and sub-Saharan Africa finally are feeding huge migratory flows pouring into the island. Sicily became not only the first stop for the *boat people* of the Mediterranean Sea, but also the permanent venue for many of them. By the analysis of some indicators relating to the working activities and the level of integration of the old and new immigrants it will be finally possible to reliably anticipate the main characters of the future multicultural framework of Sicily.

**Rezumat:** *Integrarea social-economica a imigranților în Sicilia.* Sicilia, pod tradițional între țărmul sudic al Mării Mediterane și Europa, a devenit după criza energetică mondială din 1973 locul care a acceptat populația care a emigrat pe insulă nu numai din Africa ci și din sudul și estul Asiei. Războiul din Libia și criza economică din statele Maghrebului, regiunea costieră a Africii și zona sub-sahariană hrănesc fluxurile migrației spre Sicilia. Insula nu devine doar un prim popas pentru populațiile alogene ci mai mult decât atât, rămâne un spațiu geografic în care acestea se stabilesc definitiv. Prin filtrul analizei unor indicatori legați de activitățile și specificul forței de muncă, precum și de nivelul de integrare al imigranților este posibil să anticipăm principalele caracteristici ale viitorului context multicultural al Siciliei.



**Key words:** *Sicily, immigrants, economy, reception, integration.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Sicilia, imigranți, economie, receptare, integrare.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its geographic location in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily has always been since the most ancient times the geophysical link and the crossroads of cultures and trades of peoples from Africa and the Middle East. Today the situation seems substantially different: the Island is in fact the first reception land for men who have forgotten their glorious pasts as rulers and who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, braving much peril and hardship in their “coffin ships”, to escape war, famine and poverty in their homeland. Not just Africans, but also peoples from Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Asia pour into Sicily, the starting point of a longer path towards the central and northern regions of Italy, where they would have a better opportunity of finding a job.

Nevertheless, by the last decade of the 20th century the foreign presence had considerably increased in the territory of “Trinacria”(Sicilian triskelion), reaching, on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011, approximately 140,000 units (ISTAT 2011, p.8), which represented a substantial increase in the immigrant population when compared to the reported 18.12% foreign population in December 2008. The reason for this rise could be partly associated with the pervasive financial crisis, which created a culture of “return immigration”, that is to that those immigrants who, after arriving in Sicily (and other regions such as Campania and Apulia) decided to leave again to head towards more economically appealing destinations, and then deciding to return to the South where they know they can find a particularly welcoming and hospitable atmosphere. Moreover, in the light of the new emergencies due to the unrest in the Maghreb and the Middle East, and due to the war in Libya, there has been a considerable increase in people coming from the other shore of *Mare Nostrum*, which will certainly have a key role in the distribution of foreign inhabitants on the Island.

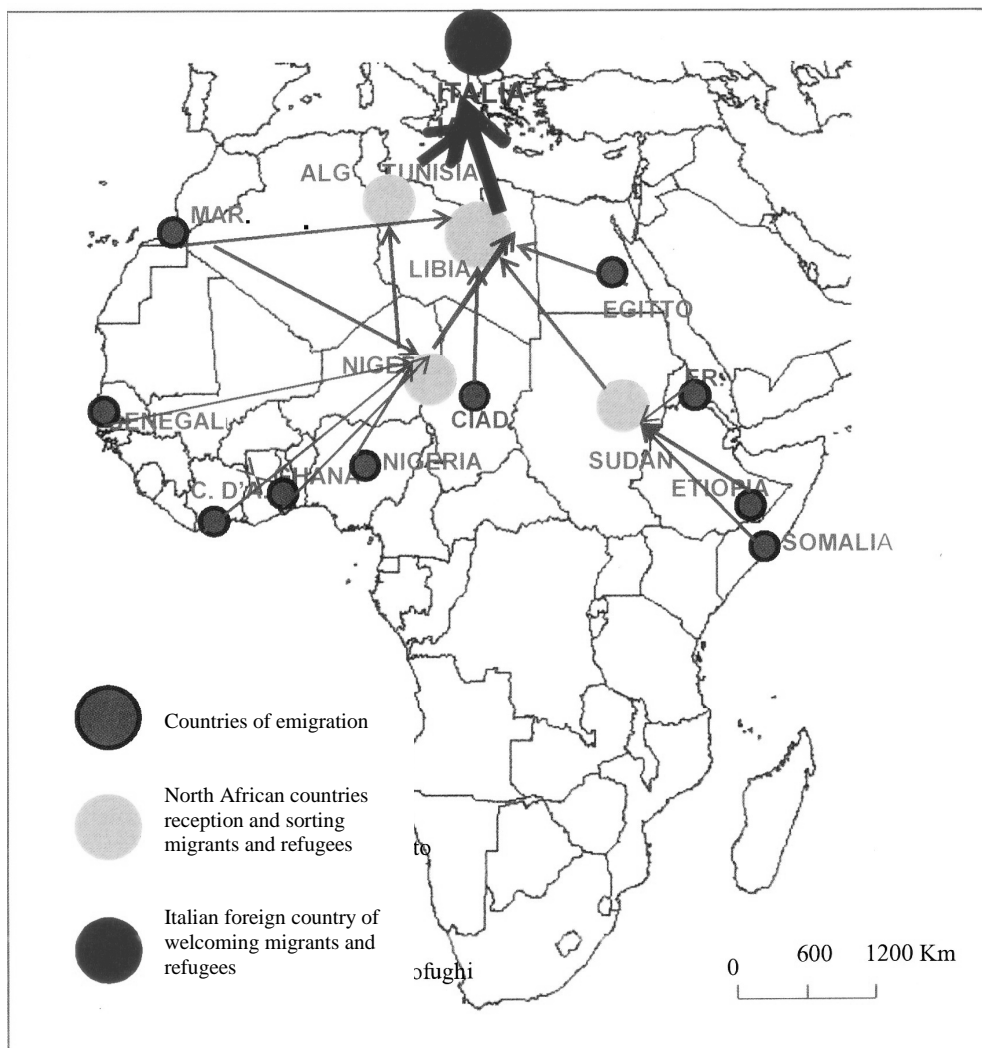
Unfortunately, the Barcelona Declaration, which established the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and set as a principal goal the economic and financial security and the establishment of a common area of peace, stability and dialogue between peoples of the two shores, through the implementation of a free trade regime, today seems more and more like an unachievable dream and the stream of desperate people who part their country which is bound to increase excessively.

## 2. MIGRATIONS IN SICILY FROM THE 1960s TO 2011

The classification of the various ethnic groups in Sicily into old and new immigrants requires a digression back to the time when migration began in Sicily with the arrival of the North Africans, in particular Tunisians, who, since the late 60s and early 70s, have come and gone through the Strait of Sicily, which has turned into a corridor, sorting workers into the fields of agriculture and fishing, both in Trapani and Catania.

In a short time this has created a real chain of migration, made up of immigrant workers who have replaced the common Sicilian labourers and workers, who, in the meantime, have emigrated into the “industrial triangle” and abroad. After 1973, due to the energy crisis that had closed the borders to many immigrants in industrialized countries, Italy turned from a “country of emigration” into a “country of immigration”, where you can

go without restrictions, and the Island once again became the access door of a sustained flow of migrants from Africa (fig. 1), resulting from changes in developing countries due not only to economic causes but also ethnic and religious ones. Since the 80s, there has been a second wave of migration in Sicily, which added to North Africans some new groups from West Africa (Senegal), sub-Saharan Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Congo) and also Southeast (Mauritians) along with others from Central, Southern and Eastern Asia (Sri Lankans and Filipinos), thus beginning the internationalisation of foreign immigration in Sicily.



**Figure 1:** North African immigration to Sicily.  
(source: author's processed data based on ISTAT)

In the late '90s, the influx became increasingly multi-cultural with the influx of admissions from China and Eastern Europe (Albania, former Yugoslav countries, Romania, Poland and Ukraine) escaping from poverty and dictatorial exploitation, reaching Sicily and often settling there permanently with men generally working either in the processing of the lava rock, the construction industry or in agriculture and with women, more often than not, choosing to work caring for the elderly.

At the beginning of the year 2000, in addition to the usual component of the Maghreb, a growing number of migrants started to land on the island. They came from Iraq, Pakistan, Liberia, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sierra Leone and many other countries, where the repatriation is prohibited by international conventions as well as by national law, because of ethnic persecutions and ongoing armed conflicts.

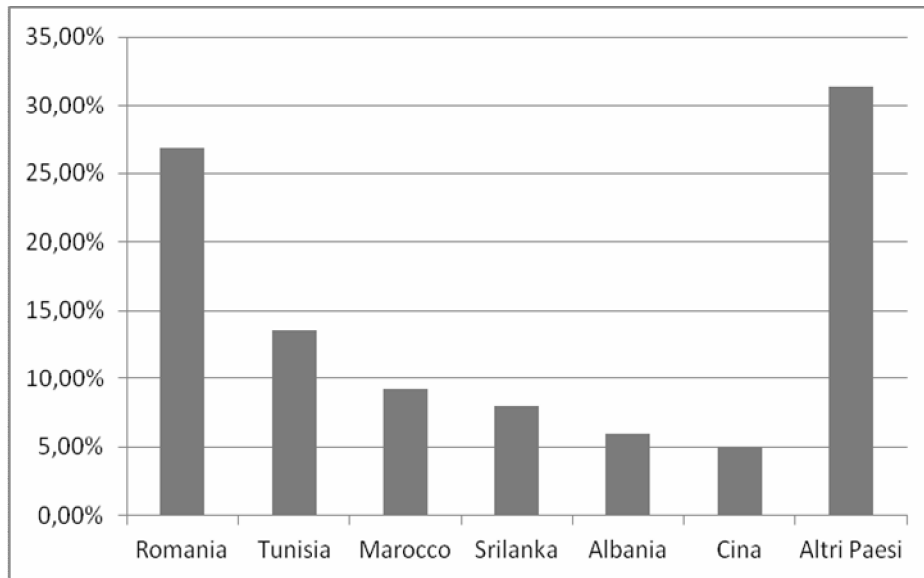
Since the end of 2010, the uprisings across North Africa (in particular the war in Libya) have generated much migration from the Tunisian and Libyan coasts in the direction of Sicily, with the majority landing on the small island of Lampedusa, where, in February 2011, the number of immigrants exceeded five thousand and therefore the limited food and water supplies caused disorder and unease between the local population and the new arrivals; people who had already endured many kinds of danger and were now being forced into the sorting process in the country's various reception centres. It is estimated that from January to July 2011, about 50 000 refugees (Regional TG3, 17<sup>th</sup> august 2011), including asylum seekers and illegal migrants, landed on the coast of Lampedusa and the stream continued relentlessly, highlighting the urgent need for sufficient welcome facilities to host decently the men, women and children arriving mostly from countries in sub-Saharan Africa, especially Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Nigeria.

### **3. FOREIGN PRESENCE IN SICILY**

After Campania with 164 268 foreigners, Sicily has the second highest foreign population in Italy (141,904) (ISTAT, 2011), the majority of which come from Eastern Europe and Mediterranean Africa, where stability has recently been upset by the Arab Spring Uprisings. The level of legal immigration now accounts for a tiny 3.1% of the national total (4,570,317), but the estimate for next year includes a strong increase in the foreign presence on the island.

Among other things, the official figures on foreign citizens are not the accurate ones, since the phenomenon is certainly much more extensive, if you take into account all the immigrants who are scattered throughout the territory and, due to legal or bureaucratic difficulties, have not registered at the registry office, therefore the foreign population in Sicily is estimated to be at least 163,000.

However, the main reason for the considerable increase in the number of immigrants from 2008 onward is due to the enlargement of the EU, which has allowed a massive influx of Romanians, who today form the principal migrant community on Sicily (28.4%). The other communities on the island include the ones from Maghreb (Tunisians and Moroccans, covering respectively 12% and 9% of the total foreign population living on the island), and those from Sri Lanka (7.5%), Albania (5%) and China (4.6%) (ISTAT 2010) (fig. 2).



**Figure 2:** *The most prevalent nationalities/citizenships in Sicily in 2010 (source: author's processing data based on ISTAT)*

The migrants are concentrated in the major urban areas: the provinces of Palermo, Catania and Messina accommodate between them more than half of the island's foreign residents. The dynamics of the province of Catania is particularly strong (with a +21% in 2008), while Ragusa is characterized by the fact that it has highest proportion of foreigners to that of the total population (5.2%). Looking at the Caritas-Migrantes Statistical Dossier on Immigration 2010, it is also clear that foreigners living in Sicily are young, aged in general between 18 and 39. We also see that, in 2009, their children accounted for 12.4% of the total births, just one percentage point less than the Italian average (13.5%).

In an interview with Monsignor Benedetto Genualdi, director of the Diocesan Caritas in Palermo, we can see how the young age of the immigrant population is also reflected by the composition of school classes. During the year 2009/2010, foreign students (16,521) represented 1.9% of the entire school population, and 2.5% of the total primary school students, showing an increase of as many as 1600 units. Table 1 shows the most represented nationalities amongst students in each province. Although it refers to the previous school year, it is still considered fairly reliable as only small variations are expected in the next two years. This data confirms the dominance of Romanians in the provinces of Catania, Messina, Agrigento and Caltanissetta and the presence of a greater number of Tunisian students in the provinces of Trapani and Ragusa (concentrated to 69% of the total) whilst the Moroccans (1,744) attend mainly schools in Messina, Palermo, Agrigento and Caltanissetta.

The newcomers' level of education is usually low to medium, since only 20% have a different qualification from the junior high school diploma, having attended technical colleges in their country.

**Table 1:** Number of foreign students in primary schools at the level of the nine Sicilian provinces (year 2008-2009)

Province	Number of students	Homeland	Incidence % change
PA	3780	Bangladesh	1,7%
CT	2913	Romania	1,4%
ME	2654	Romania	2,7%
RG	2246	Tunisia	4,3%
TP	1662	Tunisia	2,2%
SR	1156	Romania	1,7%
AG	1163	Romania	1,4%
CL	693	Romania	1,3%
EN	274	Albania	0,9%
Total	16521		

(source: ISTAT data)

In the overview of the academic level of the foreigners it is an exception that women from Eastern Europe are often in possession of a degree or diploma in the health sector and forced to emigrate and do strenuous activities, far below their skill level (working in the fields, elderly care and support activities) because of the lack of skilled work in their countries of origin. We turn now to the analysis of immigrant distribution in Sicily. Among the nine Sicilian provinces, the capital has the largest number of foreigners with 28 496 immigrants, of whom 54% are women and almost 19% minors, followed by the provinces of Catania and Messina with 25 908 and 23 550 units respectively. With 2 874 immigrants, the province of Enna has the smallest immigrant population. (ISTAT 2010).

The work of the immigrants is concentrated mainly in the provinces of Catania (18%), Ragusa (17%), Palermo (16%) and Messina (15%). (RES FOUNDATION, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. The latter city has the highest female proportion of migrant workers (42.7%), followed by Caltanissetta, Catania (with about 39%), while at the opposite end of the scale there are the provinces of Ragusa, Syracuse and Trapani, where women represent just over 30% of foreign workforce. With regard to employment, the fields of work where the presence of migrants is the most significant in comparison to the total number of employees from the local population, is as follows: in first place, is work undertaken in families (27, 5%) followed by that related to agriculture (17.7), fishing (16.9%), hotels and catering (13.1%), whilst in commerce and industry, the share of foreign workers is just over 7% (INAIL

<sup>1</sup> Research Institute on the economy and society in Sicily

2009)<sup>2</sup>. Among the factors that contributed to the increase of foreign residents on the island, from 2008 onward, as well as EU enlargement in 2007, we must also consider the submission of 12 248 applications for position to care for the elderly coming mainly from the provinces of Palermo and Catania (over three thousand) (ISTAT 2010).

#### **4. THE INTEGRATION OF OLD AND NEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE SICILIAN LABOR MARKET**

The ISTAT data on the distribution of immigrants in the nine Sicilian provinces clearly illustrates how the principal communities differ from city to city, following the logic of job opportunities and the presence of community groups belonging to the same country as the newcomer. The older the communities are, the greater is their integration and cultural exchange with the local population. And here is the different ethnic composition of the Sicilian provinces with regard to the oldest immigrant groups: the Sri Lankans, who began to flock to Sicily in the early '80s because of the war between the Sinhalese and Tamil, which caused thousands of civilian deaths, a rise in poverty and created a fear of persecution by the government and the army. These are mostly present in the municipalities and provinces of Palermo. Among the 142 existing groups of foreigners, the Sri Lankans are the most established community, constituting as much as 12.4% (provincial data) and 17.3% (data concerning the single municipality) of the legal immigrants' total number. In Messina the equivalent percentages are 15% and 32%, whilst in Syracuse there is a greater presence of Moroccans (13%), engaged mainly in farming and in street trading, despite the fact that the provincial capital appears more populated by Sri Lankans, covering as much as 19.3% of the ethnic groups living there, as they are well placed in the working fields within families and trade. The ISTAT data of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010 finally reveals the preponderance of Tunisians in the provinces of Ragusa and Trapani, where as much as 66% of all Tunisian immigrants in Sicily live. In the province of Trapani, the Tunisian presence is concentrated particularly in the town of Mazara del Vallo, where, well mixed with the local society, they compose almost 78% of foreign presence and carry out activities relating to fishing, creating the skilled labour which the navy relies heavily upon. Since 2003, after more than thirty years of "cash-in-hand" work and much lower salaries than their local colleagues; the entry of Tunisian community members onto the Mazara City Council shows that they are finally well-integrated into the community, enjoying the same rights and opportunities as the Italian citizens, even to the extent that they consider themselves Sicilians.

Their houses are concentrated in the oldest quarters of the city, in the areas of Porta Palermo and Piazza Regina, once part of the Casbah, have taken possession once again of the houses and courtyards of their ancestors and have opened several shops typical of their culture and tradition. In Ragusa, the Tunisians represent 33.2% of total foreign presence, with the town of Victoria in first place (41.7%). Here they carry out activities related to work in greenhouses and on vegetable markets, and through being in the territory; they are now well blended in with the local society. A special case of this is the Mauritians who, although not numerous compared to other immigrants in Sicily, being just 3 801 of a total 141 904 regional presence from 158 nationalities and thus constituting just 2.6% of the legal

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<sup>2</sup> The data has been elaborated by INAIL: WORKERS COMPENSATION AUTHORITY on the basis of the information contained on the database of the Insured Workers.

foreign population (ISTAT, 2010), are highly concentrated (nearly 96%) in the provinces of Catania (2,480) and Palermo (1,159). After streaming into Sicily in the 70s, Catania was the most popular reception city, followed by Bari, Milan and Palermo. These towns have the most cleaning and maintenance positions. The successful integration of the Mauritian community is apparent by the many associations in the historical centre of Catania. The most important of these are the *Al-Man Mauritian Association* (with a predominance of Hindus and a small number of Catholics), the *Catania Mauritian Association* which Hindu-Tamils are related to, the "Geetanjali Circle" which also consists of Hindu Mauritians, *l'Associazione Socio-Culturale Italo-Mauriziana*, *l'Association Des Immigrantes Mauriciens de la Province de Catane* and the *Italian Federation of Mauritian Associations* (photo 1).



***Photo 1: Example of integration and multiculturalism. Exchange of clothing between two ladies, a local one and a Mauritian one***  
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)

New arrivals have mixed with older immigrants in fact by the second half of the 90s, Sicily became a destination for large waves of immigration from poor regions such as Benin City (Nigeria), China and especially Romania. The data collected on 31<sup>th</sup> December 2009 (ISTAT, 2010) shows the very low number of legal Nigerian residents (588: 250 men and 338 women), which clearly contradicts the reality, characterized by endemic illegality, which represents a real obstacle to quantifying even approximately the number of Nigerian



immigrants. With regard to this ethnic group it is important to highlight the massive presence of women coming from impoverished rural villages and who are affected by difficult socio-economic conditions, arrived in Sicily before being initiated into prostitution.

Unfortunately it is not possible to estimate the exact number of these immigrants however there is a striking discrepancy between the presence of Nigerian women surveyed by the Police Headquarters and the reality. It suffices to travel the roads of Catania-Gela and Catania-Ragusa or to stroll through the neighborhoods of the historic centre of Catania to notice how numerous they are. The police census has only registered 54 prostitutes yet there have been 330 failed requests for assistance by Nigerian women at the Office of Immigration in the city of Catania concerning this issue. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that it is not necessary to have a residents' permit in order to ask for help at the Office of Immigration. Because of this many women go there looking for aid and information. Considering that not every woman asks for help at the Immigration Office it is clear that the level of prostitution is much higher than the 330 recorded by the City!

Today there are more Chinese than Nigerians living on the island. The Chinese now account for nearly 5% of all the immigrants there and are the fifth nationality of the 157 present on the island, after the Albanians, whose percentage is 5.8%. Although not very numerous, the Chinese are responsible for the striking change visible in many urban areas, especially in older neighborhoods, where their "red lanterns" have emerged between the traditional shop fronts. Sicily is still some way off from having similar levels of Chinese immigrants to regions such as Tuscany (8.6%), where in the province of Prato 39% of the population is Chinese. This figure becomes even higher if we consider just the single municipality of Prato (almost 42%). These immigrants, though still very present in Sicily, are viewed with suspicion by the local population which is influenced by the media describing them as undercutting the wage demands of Italian workers and as the victims of the Triads. They are also aware of the crisis in the Italian textile industry because of this local population fears the immigrants, considering them real invaders, who "make local people feel like foreigners in their homeland" and who import low cost and quality manufactured goods from their country, competing ruthlessly with European products.

Among the various ethnic groups in Sicily, the Chinese community is the most industrious and economically active, as well as being one of the most involved communities within the island's primary and secondary schools, rendering debunked the widespread belief that they find it difficult to learn the Italian language and integrate themselves into the local society. We now turn to look at the largest community on the island, that is to say the Romanian community (28.4%), who flocked to Sicily in large numbers after the EU enlargement. First of all, it must be noted that, before 2007, the presence of young Romanian women had led to profound changes concerning relationships: there were many marriages "of interest" between these immigrants and Italian men of advanced age in order that the women could acquire citizenship.

Today the phenomenon has decreased significantly and the Romanians, having no longer need of a visa or residence permit, continue to come and reside in Italy, being now widely spread in both rural and urban areas. Particularly in the urban areas there is a lot of competition between the locals and the Albanians. In general the Albanian men work in construction whilst the women work in the services sector, caring for the elderly and disabled who themselves find it difficult in Sicily to be covered by the regional health service and voluntary associations. Giving "cash-in-hand" work to those peoples is much preferred to employing local workers and other immigrants, because they can pay the less

and subject them to working conditions which are inhumane to say the least. They live scattered in the countryside and in unspeakably inhumane conditions on the plain that runs for tens of miles between Gela and Catania to Victoria yet they prefer this to returning to their own country, where today there is only poverty and unemployment.

Women working in the rural areas of Ragusa are treated as "slaves", subjected to gruelling work schedules and violence of every kind, as is realistically described in various local newspapers, who describe the conditions of the Romanian, crudely employed "cash-in-hand" in the greenhouses of the territory of Victoria, along with some Belarusians and Ukrainians. They come mostly from rural areas of Romanian Moldavia, settling in the south of Sicily, picking tomatoes, eggplants and zucchini for 10-12 hours a day on ridiculous wages (15-20 Euros per day) and with the burden of leaving a figure of about 200 Euros to the "Gang-master" and the racket that brings the work. Through the numerous complaints to the Women's Service Centre it is clear that it is younger women who are the most exploited and subjected to mistreatment and sexual abuse of all kinds. They cannot live with the pain losing their jobs, which are so necessary for their child support and for their family members back home. The agricultural crisis that is revolutionising the local economy has also caused a strong tension in Victoria, where the old Tunisian community sees some of its members move up the social ladder, opening shops and becoming entrepreneurs, but also because many of its workers have been displaced by the Romanians.

## **5. WELCOME AND INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS**

All immigrants upon their arrival are perceived by the local population as something to be endured. However over time they are transformed into agents of economic development and cultural action to the realization of complex societies in which diversity becomes a source of enrichment through its sharing of knowledge and skills. The initial hostility disappears with the passage of time, as demonstrated by a study on over-represented communities in Sicily. This study highlighted how denunciations towards the Romanians and Moroccans increased to a much lesser extent than the increase in the size of these communities (NOZZA V., PEREGO G., FEROCI E., 2010). Now the suspicions concern the reception and integration of many thousands of newcomers, who, after crossing the sea and witnessing countless inhumane deaths, are arriving in Sicily (photo 2). This is made possible by Sicily's proximity to the African coast and the widespread international criminal groups who organize such crossings.

Unfortunately the conditions in which they are received prior to Lampedusa and then that of the shelters (true detention centres) are nothing short of disastrous, not meeting the minimum living conditions established for vulnerable persons such as these, who thus must face new situations of uncertainty and suffering, as they are not permitted to live with dignity because of the poor quality of food and service. In the CARA<sup>3</sup> of Mineo, for example, the main inconveniences concern the difficulty of communication, lack of cultural mediators, the difficulty to contact a lawyer and an inability to walk into the town centre, for which nearly 2,000 asylum seekers are living in a condition of absolute isolation and

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<sup>3</sup> Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers

uncertainty about their future; in despair and disappointment of all.<sup>4</sup> On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2011 ASGI<sup>5</sup> spread throughout Italy a document denouncing the delays of the territorial commissions with regard to applications for asylum and stressed the urgency of closing the mines and the CARA Salina Grande in Trapani, reiterating the 'urgent need to rethink the national reception system.



*Photo 2: Landing of illegal immigrants on Lampedusa  
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)*

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the many initiatives and chains of solidarity to welcome and integrate the immigrants and refugees, such as those undertaken, for example, in the city of Catania, which has distinguished itself for its ability to manage the funds provided by the European Union, for relief to refugees and asylum seekers<sup>6</sup>, emerges in all its drama, the need of aid to

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<sup>4</sup> The nationalities of Mineo that the CARA already recognized 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011 are: Afghanistan 160, Bangladesh 24, Burkina Faso 47, Chad 18, Ivory Coast 133, Eritrea 116, Ethiopia 49, Georgia 1, Ghana 136, Guinea 17, Iran 24, Iraq 11, Kenya 1, Libya 8, Mali 136, Niger 14, Nigeria 328, Pakistan 317, Senegal 54, Syria 1, Somalia 5, Sudan 36, Tunisia 6, Turkey 20, Cameroon 7, Gabon 2, Liberia 5, Morocco 1, Mauritania 3, Guinea Bissau 2, Togo 37, Gambia 32, Sierra Leone 12, Benin 4, Congo 12, Egypt 2, Palestine 1.

<sup>5</sup> Association for Legal Studies on Immigration

<sup>6</sup>The initiatives mainly concern the participation by the *Casa dei Popoli* to the *Programma Nazionale Asilo e Rifugiati*, who organise the implementation of projects aimed at integrating them with: discounts on accommodation and the provision of essential goods, the supply of pocket money for early reception and tickets for public transport, orientation and social support, the 'subscription to the National Health System and the choice of general practitioner.

set up appropriate structures to address the needs of the newcomers, many of whom no longer see the land of Sicily as just a port to better lands, but in fact as a permanent location of residence. And yet the proper management of the growing phenomenon of mass migration could become a successful tool for the implementation of a "Mediterranean model", which combines the common history, cultures, traditions and religions of the peoples on both sides of the sea with innovation, competitiveness and economic growth! Nevertheless the realization of this project requires not only a more efficient creation of structures (already mentioned) and a greater number of professionals working in the social sector to facilitate the integration of immigrants into the local community (mediators for example), but also the involvement of the countries from where they come from in order to create virtuous circles of endogenous development, likely to retain their younger, educated and enterprising population.

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