

The impact of immigration on Italy's society

Over the past three decades, Italy has undergone a major transformation, shifting from an emigrant nation (there are currently four million Italians still living abroad) to an immigrant destination. From 1970 until today, the foreign citizens with regular residence permits in Italy have increased tenfold, and the rhythm of growth seems to be unstoppable. In 2003, following the last act of regularization, almost 700,000 non-EU workers were legalized. This figure, when added to the one and a half million aliens who were already living on the Italian peninsula, increases the total foreign population to two and a half million people, including minors.

These substantial figures outline a complex situation, characterized by immigrant flows from more than 191 countries, especially Central Eastern Europe (Rumania, Albania and the Ukraine), Northern Africa (Morocco), the Far East (China) and the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka).

This historically important phenomenon requires in-depth analysis and more effective intervention policies in order to find concrete solutions to help immigrants settling in our country, with its aging population and its labour market in need of additional workers.

Unfortunately, there is still a great amount of rigidity with respect to this new social phenomenon. Although Italian immigration legislation is one of the most advanced in Europe (Consolidated Act No. 286/98), its application is still difficult.

The quota system still appears as inadequate with respect to labour needs, and the grant of a permanent residence permits is affected in some cases by slow and heavy procedures. In fact, the matching of labour demand and supply may seem as difficult to realize, which may result in encouraging irregular work.

The immigration phenomenon is affecting the various regions in Italy in different ways.

Indubitably the greatest number of non-EU citizens resides in Central Northern Italy, where there are more job opportunities. Large urban centres, especially Rome (more than 200,000 immigrants) and Milan (more than 150,000), host substantial numbers of immigrant populations. Unfortunately, immigrants have difficulties in finding housing, since it is very expensive, especially in the cities, which forces them to reside together.

Various studies have indicated that immigration is not perceived negatively by the native population. On the contrary, the general attitude is more positive than in other European countries, despite the fact that the media tends to focus its attention almost exclusively on the negative aspects of this phenomenon, such as illegal immigration and crime, which, indubitably, are some of the biggest problems.

Over the past several years, great progress has been made in integrating foreign citizens into our country, beginning with the attendance of foreign minors at schools, a widespread phenomenon that has achieved good results.

The annual "Indici di inserimento territoriale degli immigrati" (Immigrant Territorial Integration Index), a study, carried out annually by Caritas on behalf of the National Council for Economy and Labour (CNEL), indicates that immigration is a significant, widespread phenomenon in Italy (it has even affected little towns and agricultural areas) characterized by considerable annual entries as well as by the significant needs of the labour market.

Nevertheless, it still has not been possible to strike a balance between the needs of immigrants and the needs of Italians, even if there are several indications that it is possible to go beyond the image of an immigrant as merely a worker and consider him as a citizen of a new inter-ethnic society with intercultural prospects. Sometimes, immigration is regarded as a temporary, rootless phenomenon that only marginally affects the receiving society. However, reality and, especially, data, prove otherwise.