

# **The governance of counter-exploitation policies in agriculture in Italy**

## Lagging behind despite progressive legislations

Working paper WP4

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## Abstract

This report examines the governance arrangements underpinning Italy's national policies addressing irregular migrant work in agriculture, with particular focus on Law 199/2016 against labour exploitation and gang-mastering. Drawing on desk research, semi-structured stakeholder interviews, and focus groups conducted between May 2024 and January 2025, the analysis reveals complex, multi-stakeholder and multi-level governance arrangements concerning both the formulation and the implementation of Law 199/2016. However, the most effective actions against exploitation and gang-mastering appear to be those governed by hierarchical arrangements and where competences are concentrated in the hands of the central government. In terms of actors, despite the involvement of a wide array of stakeholders, migrant networks and associations have been largely excluded from governance arrangements, with trade unions serving as the only channel through which migrants can participate. On the contrary, UN agencies such as the ILO and the IOM have played a crucial role in the implementation, apparently making up for the weak institutional capacity of both the state and civil society organisations. Finally, actions on the ground have been mainly carried out through local and regional projects, resulting in a differential implementation across the national territory and discontinuity over time.

**Keywords:** migration, governance, agriculture, exploitation, irregular work

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## Introduction

The DignityFIRM project is driven by the ambition to deepen the understanding of and to improve the policies related to irregular migrant work (IMW) in the Farm to Fork (F2F) sector, considering both its economic pivotal role and the EU's commitment to protecting the dignity of all individuals, regardless of their legal and employment status. Within this framework, the aim of this report is to investigate the governance arrangements underpinning a specific national policy addressing IMW in agriculture.

The term 'irregular migrant work' broadly refers to migrant workers facing a totally or partially irregular condition of stay and/or employment. Specifically, we can identify three different categories of IMW:

1. Informal employment of irregularly staying migrants, who do not generally have the possibility of taking up registered work.
2. Informal employment of migrants, both regular and irregular, including where only part of employment is declared (i.e. under-registered work) or labour conditions are irregular (eg. wages below the legal minimum standards, unregulated and unjustified wage deduction, endure workdays, substandard accommodations, etc).
3. Bogus self-employment, intended as 'disguised employment relationships and dependent self-employment'.

This report is part of the research carried out within the WP4 of the DignityFIRM project, aimed at understanding the governance arrangements underpinning the national policies addressing IMW in the F2F sector. For the purpose of WP4 research, the concept of 'governance' is conceived as the process through which a plurality of actors - generally actors with a stake in that particular issue - interact in order to formulate, promote and achieve common objectives. In analysing governance arrangements, we have followed the projects' theoretical framework by adopting the concept of policy cycle, i.e., a more or less complex sequence of stages (e.g., agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy implementation) that ultimately lead to the creation of a public policy, with each stage of the cycle affecting the subsequent one.

Moreover, we have analysed the relations among public and non-public actors. Indeed, the two broad and fundamental categories of actors in governance arrangements are the state and society. Yet, they are far from being unified actors. First, the state is never a single entity; instead, it is articulated in different (and often conflicting) ministries, political/representative bodies and bureaucracies, and different levels of government. Just as the state is an internally differentiated actor, so is society. Among societal actors, private companies and their associations, on the one hand, and migrant workers and their organisations, on the other hand, are particularly relevant in our

analytical framework, because of our focus on IMW. In identifying the actors involved in governance arrangements over IM work in the F2F, we have also paid attention to non-participation, either imposed or voluntary.

Finally, given that we consider policies as purposive actions (or purposive non-action), we focused only on those measures addressing IM workers, rather than on all those measures that somehow *de facto* have an impact on their conditions. Particularly, in this report, we have considered the policies on counter-exploitation that explicitly targeted IM workers.

Specifically, we aimed to understand:

1. Whether a hierarchical or participatory governance model prevails, and with what consequences;
2. What limitations and strengths does the governance of policies against labour exploitation exhibit in Italy, both at the national and local levels.

We used a methodology that combined desk research (based on law and policy documents and on the existing literature) and field research: between September 2024 and January 2025, we carried out 12 interviews with stakeholders, including representatives of political parties, the State and regional administration, trade unions, employers' organisations, and civil society organisations. The analysis has been further enriched by the discussion and insights of two focus groups carried out in April and October 2025, involving experts, academics and members of employers' organisations as well as representatives of central, regional and local administrations.

The report is divided into three parts. First, it presents the main national policies on the prevention and fight against labour exploitation in agriculture. Secondly, it examines the governance arrangements beyond the formulation of these policies. Thirdly, it assesses the governance of the implementation of the identified policies. In the conclusions, we briefly discuss the major implications of such governance arrangements on the effectiveness of the policies aiming at protecting workers, and particularly, migrant rights.

## 1. The salience of IM work

Irregular migrant work (IMW) is particularly common in the Italian agricultural sector, where non-UE citizens make up for the 25% of workers<sup>1</sup>, and migrant workers are often exposed to informal employment, because of the lack of permits to stay, or to irregular work because of several vulnerabilities<sup>2</sup>.

The **growing attention for IMW** in agriculture in public debate has evolved alongside an increasing migrant presence among agricultural workers. Specifically, according to ISTAT data, at the beginning of the 2000s, in Italy the number of immigrants (including both EU and non-EU migrants) employed in the sector was relatively low, but from 2008 onward, there has been a systemic presence of foreigners in agricultural work, who by 2023 accounted for approximately 1/3 of the workforce

The chair of the 'Placido Rizzotto Observatory on Gangmastering', and head of the Department for Migration Policies of the trade union CGIL, noted that these dynamics fostered a broader societal acknowledgment of labour exploitation. Specifically, in public representation **exploitation became strongly related to migration**. A representative of an employer organization, Legacoop, also emphasised that the issue of exploitation has attracted significant institutional and societal attention over the last 10 years, and that it is more pronounced in the agricultural sector due to more visible episodes and cases of serious exploitation, which are further exacerbated by the living conditions of migrants, compared to other sectors.

## 2. An overview of the Law 199/2016: highlights and shortcomings

The **main policy tool adopted in this regard is Law 199/2016**, which tackled the issue at the criminal level by introducing new sanctions against employers and by defining more clearly what should be considered exploitation with a list of indices.

<sup>1</sup> IDOS Annual Report, 2025: <https://www.dossierimmigrazione.it/prodotto/dossier-statistico-immigrazione-2025/>.

<sup>2</sup> Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, VII Rapporto Agromafie e Caporalato, 2023; Palumbo, L., 2025. Taking Vulnerabilities to Labour Exploitation Seriously. A Critical Analysis of Legal and Policy Approaches and Instruments in Europe. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55424-7>.

Before 2016, migrant labour exploitation was addressed by a series of criminal measures sanctioning very serious behaviour, such as slavery, trafficking in human beings with the purpose of exploitation, and the illegal employment of irregular migrants. However, there was no comprehensive legal framework against exploitation and ‘caporalato’. In 2011, Article 12 of the Law Decree 138/2011 introduced for the first time the criminal prosecution of the phenomenon of illicit intermediation (caporalato). However, it did not provide for the criminal liability of the employer. L. 199/2016 has broadened the scope of the crime and simplified the indications of exploitation. Since then, Italian law punishes:

- unlawful **labour intermediation**, sanctioning anyone who recruits persons for work with third parties in conditions of exploitation;
- and **labour exploitation**, sanctioning anyone who uses, recruits or employs workers, subjecting them to exploitation.

One of the most praised aspects of Law 199/2016, as highlighted by a representative of CGIL union, was its precise definition of labour exploitation, listing specific indicators that legally codified exploitative practices: a) repeated violations of hours of work and rest period regulations; b) no salary or salaries below those established by collective bargaining agreement; c) violation of occupational safety and health rules; and d) degrading living or working conditions.

Starting from 2016, it has been possible to extend the protection afforded by a special permit to stay, which used to be granted to migrants subjected to “violence or severe exploitation” and in need of immediate protection, to migrants involved in situations of labour exploitation (in the past the permit was mainly issued to victims of trafficking or of sexual exploitation). Moreover, migrants with an illegal status, and involved in situations of “particularly serious exploitation” as defined by Law 199/2016, could also obtain a humanitarian permit if they had collaborated with judicial authorities in criminal proceedings against their employers. Therefore, the widening of the definition of labour exploitation provided a strengthened ground for applying for special permits to stay for irregular migrants exposed to a situation of particularly serious exploitation.

In 2022, only 69 migrants obtained a permit for “special cases” for labour exploitation (ISMU, 2023), but in 2024 (DL 145/2024, conv. L. 187/2024), the possibility of recognizing a residence permit for victims of labour exploitation was expanded, when the person provides elements useful for initiating or continuing investigations against employers. This permit is now convertible into a work permit.

Given that a key feature of ‘caporalato’ is gangmasters’ frequent monopoly on transport and occasionally on housing and other services, with workers paying a fee to use these facilities, the 2016 Law also addresses these aspects. Specifically, it



prescribes that the Ministries of Labour, Interior and Agriculture had to draft an action plan to provide accommodation and social and logistic support to workers in agriculture, with the support of regions, municipalities, trade unions, employer organisations and civil society organisations. Indeed, the law has been the starting point for improving the institutional efforts and tackling the issue not just from a criminal perspective, but also from a social one: following the adoption of the law, a set of interinstitutional tools was launched with the aims of identifying and preventing exploitation, as well as to support the victims.

Nonetheless, despite these efforts to adopt a comprehensive strategy, most interviewed stakeholders, including public authorities, employer organisations, trade unions and CSOs, point to the **law's prevailing focus on sanctions**. Moreover, the focus has been placed mostly on 'serious exploitation' which can be sanctioned in criminal terms, following the approach previously used for the victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, but this might not be effective in terms of the protection afforded to migrant workers. Some stakeholders considered this approach inadequate:

*"The legislation, even if it is in the forefront of the fight against 'caporalato', can never be decisive on its own if it is not accompanied by a whole series of corollary actions. Reliance on being able to tackle irregular work and exploitation with spot measures or measures concerning labour regulations alone means having lost at the outset"*  
[ITA\_WP4\_11]

*"In recent years, we have had very strong tools for certain categories of victims, those of severe exploitation who are victims of violence, threats, or danger, for whom we can act with anti-trafficking measures and recognize a permit under Article 18. Then there are those without residence permits in a situation of serious exploitation, for whom there is recognition of a permit under Article 22. But if you look at our data, there is a whole segment of workers, which is currently the vast majority, who don't have the right to protection provided by regulations, such as Article 22 and Article 18. These are effectively all regular workers, therefore legally residing, who are in a situation of exploitation that doesn't qualify as severe exploitation, where the element of danger is missing, and they are the vast majority"* [ITA\_WP4\_10]

As we will better explain in the section devoted to implementation (par. 3) another major explanation of this prevailing focus on sanctions consists in the difficulties in carrying out the other lines of action established by the law because of the complex multilevel governance they require.

Finally, the 2016 law aimed at strengthening the **Network of Quality Work in Agriculture**, introduced in 2014. The Network is a whitelist of companies operating in the agriculture and fishing sector that fulfil their obligations with labour and social

legislation, as well as income tax and value-added tax. It is managed by the Social Security Institute (INPS) in cooperation with national authorities from the Ministry of Labour and Agriculture. The Network was created and strengthened in 2016 with the aim of encouraging ethical practices among agricultural businesses. The interviews underlined a generalised perception of a lack of effectiveness of the Network, which is generally explained by the lack of advantages for the employers who join the Network, either in terms of taxes/funding or public acknowledgement.

*“There have been many initiatives, including private ones, NO CAP, something from the Coop, but clearly a more systemic action with respect to that Network was definitely a failure, I would say. In fact, companies never really understood whether there were and what the advantages of joining the Network were” [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

*“Surely what is missing is an incentive for companies to make sure that where you ask for a commitment to guarantee employment contracts, etc., then you secure a minimum of advantage over those who do not respect any rules” [ITA\_WP4\_12]*

*“From a political point of view, the most serious shortcoming is the lack of a reward system for ‘healthy’ enterprises linked to membership of the Network of Quality Agricultural Work, in order to create a virtuous circle that would give new impetus to the system” [ITA\_WP4\_11]*

Despite the effort to address the role of the companies through the Network of Quality Work in Agriculture, several stakeholders underlined that the main policies on IM work in agriculture shall consider the entire food chain, i.e., from production to retail. This is particularly problematic because retail companies are generally able to dictate prices to producers who are pushed to cut costs primarily by reducing labour expenses, perpetuating exploitation. For instance, the president of the Association NO CAP offers the following analysis:

*“The approach followed by the government was to focus only on the labour aspects and the relationship between the workers and the company. It has forgotten that important part of the supermarket that leverages, that uses its strength to crush the whole supply chain (...) Logic would have it that the price of a product should be determined by the producer, not the buyer, not the supermarket, because the supermarket buys the product, it does not produce it. It is therefore a perverse mechanism, very liberalist, applied to agriculture that produces these effects of slavery” [ITA\_WP4\_7]*

Similar considerations are shared by interviewed employer organisations, such as Legacoop and Coldiretti:

*“In our opinion, the main objective is to ensure a fair income for the agricultural enterprise in order to eliminate any alibi that often serves as a justification for ‘dumping’ the economic problems of the enterprise to the workers, their rights, and their wages” [ITA\_WP4\_11]*

A representative of the employers suggested addressing this gap by integrating agricultural policy with market-driven measures, such as ethical certification and the promotion of KMO, or direct sales, to enhance sustainability and fairness<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Triggers

The set of policies on labour exploitation and gang-mastering, of which the 2016 law has been the milestone, was **triggered by social and trade union mobilisation**. One of the first mobilisations was initiated by migrant workers following the Castel Volturno massacre in 2008, when six migrants were shot by several masked men. While national media initially framed the attack as a gang-related dispute, migrant communities and activists denounced it as the targeted killing of innocent workers trapped in exploitative labour conditions.

In the following years, other mobilisations were promoted by **migrants involved in labour exploitation** in agriculture in Gioia Tauro (Calabria) and Nardò (Apulia). In July 2011, several migrant workers in Nardò self-organised and promoted a strike that lasted several days, after which they were involved in formal dialogues between trade unions, employer organisations and local institutions. Those protests sparked a new attention among the public opinion on the issues of exploitation and influenced the

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<sup>3</sup> During the field research two notable initiatives addressing exploitation along the F2F chain have been identified. On the one hand, Legacoop tackles the issue thanks its integrated structure, encompassing the entire supply chain from primary production to organized retail distribution. Its model enables a collaboration across different cooperatives involved in the chain, including retail, logistics and agriculture. On the other hand, the Association NO CAP, founded in 2011 by a former agricultural worker, which brings together agricultural producers and the largest Italian retailer company (Coop) with the aim of signalling to consumers which producers adopt fair labor practices through its ethical certification label ("bollino etico"). As explained by its founder, the label also educates consumers, emphasizing that organic certification does not necessarily equate to ethical labour practices, thus raising awareness about the need for social sustainability alongside environmental considerations.

adoption of the abovementioned art. 12 of Law Decree n. 138/2011, which introduced the crime of illicit intermediation.

The strikes contributed to exposing the severity of exploitation (migrants were paid 3.50 euro per hour). To this end, the **CGIL trade union** played a key role through its "Oro Rosso" campaign, during which union representatives from CGIL went into the tomato fields to meet workers and inform them about contracts, rights, and labour laws through an innovative 'street union' approach. This approach contributed to transforming migrants and grassroots protests into institutional actions by facilitating negotiations with policymakers:

*"Without the support of trade unions and civil society, which included various associations backing our struggle, the movement wouldn't have gained momentum. Then, the trade unions and other associations joined in, and unity became our strength. What did we know about negotiation tables or meetings with government officials? Workers, especially migrants, don't have those tools. So, without someone to facilitate the opening of a dialogue, to channel the protest toward a concrete objective, it would have remained a futile demonstration and would have faded away". [ITA\_WP4\_7]*

However, the real turning point for the adoption of the 2016 law came in 2015 with other great mobilisations in the Latina region (Lazio) following the death of Paola Clemente, an Italian agricultural worker exploited under gangmastering conditions. Her case, which attracted large media coverage, "broke into the national scene" demonstrating that exploitation was not limited to foreign workers and generating widespread outrage that accelerated the legislative process.

On the contrary, the research showed that **EU legislation** did not influenced so much the adoption of the law on exploitation: while the process of implementation of the 2009/52 Directive on the unlawful employment of irregular migrants introduced some safeguards for migrants, it did not act as trigger for the adoption of laws on exploitation, which gained a mainstream credit only in 2015.

## 4. Governance of the policy formulation

The formulation of L. 199/2016 involved several stakeholders, both among Ministries and private actors such as employers or unions. The law against labour exploitation has been **adopted under a centre-left government**, led by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and the two Ministries that mostly pushed for the adoption of the law (Maurizio Martina, from the Ministry of Agriculture and Andrea Orlando, from the Ministry of Justice), both of which belonged to the Democratic Party. According to Caritas, the

main push for the adoption of the law has been the death of Paola Clemente, but that was combined with the political sensitivity in the 2016 Parliament, particularly among Democratic Party members:

*“The curious thing for me that's worth highlighting is the fact that despite the constant complaints we were making at various tables we participated in, both at the national and local level, we couldn't find a way to bring about a change. Unfortunately, it took the death of an Italian citizen to awaken, to open up, to definitively tear through the truth about this unbearable situation, and also in this case, as you mentioned, perhaps even a government a bit more attentive that wanted to establish credibility on certain issues” [ITA\_WP4\_17]*

Despite the formulation of the law took place in the Chambers of the Parliament, **its process was primarily led by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Agriculture**, but there has been a significant involvement from the Presidency of the Council of Ministries due to the sensitive nature of extending criminal liability beyond direct exploiters. During the draft and discussion of the law, several civil society associations as well as employer associations and trade unions were heard by the Parliament, based on an established model of consultation of both sides:

*“Following what is the custom in our country, where fundamentally there is a relationship that I wouldn't exactly call tripartite, but almost, meaning with institutions, employers' organisations, trade unions that discuss the same problem. In this case too, the approach is certainly the same (...) The dialogue is certainly both technical in nature, at the working group on illegal intermediation, and political in nature, dialogue with the relevant ministries and the government regarding the legislative changes being planned” [ITA\_WP4\_16]*

The Senate approved the bill on August 1, 2016. During its examination in the Agriculture Committee, a brief cycle of informal hearings was conducted and involved several representatives of farmers and workers: Agrinsieme, Copagri, Fna Consai, Ance, Italian Cooperative Alliance for Agri-food, Federdistribuzione, Cgil Cisl and Uil. The consultation included interventions from the the Ministry of Labor and the NGOs Emergency. The Justice and Labour Committees of the Chamber of Deputies began examining the bill on September 2016, and the law was then adopted at the end of October. In the Chamber, a new brief round of hearings involved Agrinsieme, Coldiretti, UE Coop, unions as FLAI-CGIL, FAI-CISL, UILA-UIL, UGL Agri-food, academic and experts, and the Minister of Agriculture.

While numerous stakeholders were consulted, **employers' associations emerged as particularly influential** actors in the formulation process, as they faced the most direct risks from expanded criminal liability provisions. Initially, many of them strongly

opposed extending criminal responsibility from illegal labour intermediaries to employers, and this delayed the parliamentary discussion, as the opposition parties backed up the position of certain employers. However, a significant shift occurred when some employer organisations in the field of agriculture, especially the largest one, Coldiretti, became more receptive to legislation that would distribute responsibility throughout the supply chain.

*“The push in favour, besides public opinion’s reaction to certain events and the commitment of agricultural workers’ unions, in my opinion also depended on the openness that some employers’ associations, particularly Coldiretti at that time, showed toward a law that would somehow make the supply chain accountable [... employers] were somehow worried about the possibility of being involved in judicial proceedings because of this concept of more widespread responsibility, which wasn’t only about the person who goes with a van to the square in Cerignola, but also about those who purchase, market, and process products that have been cultivated through that type of labour exploitation” [ITA\_WP4\_6]*

The adoption of Law 199/2016 confirms that employer organisation are often influential actors both on issues related to agriculture and about immigration policies, as emerged also with regard to Covid19 regularisation. While the main association of the agricultural sector shared a similar approach towards the need of tackling irregularities and exploitation - and therefore did not oppose strongly the adoption of L. 199/2016 - they also have internal differentiations as for the modes of implementation of the law, and for the content and definition of exploitation.

The **confederate unions** have been widely consulted both during the formulation and implementation of the 2016 law, following an established model according to which both employers and unions are consulted by the government when promoting legislative changes or implementation amendments to certain issues related to work. On the other hand, grassroots unions and movements had not been formally involved in the institutional decision-making tables, even though they have been consulted locally during the implementation phase of anti-gangmastering policies.

The consultation process included then various civil society organisations and international agencies: for instance, the International Labour Organization provided technical expertise that shaped the indicators of labour exploitation incorporated into Article 603bis of the Penal Code.

Overall, civil society organisations, similarly to the trade unions, promoted an approach that could protect the victims of exploitation and the confiscation and reuse of assets of the farmers involved in exploitation, but also the reinforcement of the territorial monitoring and control over crimes:



*“One of the main requests that we had put forward concerned strengthening the role of the provincial labour offices, of labour inspectors in particular, because we noticed in the territories that there was generally a sort of disconnection between what was happening and the awareness and intervention by the designated authorities”* [ITA\_WP4\_17]

Finally, the process of formulation of Law 199/2016 have shown an almost complete exclusion of **migrant associations** from both policy formulation and implementation: several actors agreed that is a fundamental issue of limited political participation among migrants in Italy. As pointed out in some interviews:

*“Migrant associations had no role whatsoever. Migrant protagonism in Italy equals zero, so they cannot have any role... Immigration is irrelevant in Italy because integration equals zero... What we call participatory democracy excludes migrants. The only place where migrants can have a say is at work, in large structured companies, because they can vote for representatives”* [ITA\_WP4\_8].

At the same time, **migrant workers play an active role in grassroots unions** such as ‘Unione Sindacale di Base - USB’<sup>4</sup> and **confederal trade unions**, especially CGIL and its agricultural section (FLAI-CGIL), **have successfully incorporated many migrant workers** into its membership (as in the case of the national coordinator of CGIL’s migration department), a process that dates back to a trend of the 1990s-2000s. However, while the unions effectively represent workers’ needs and concerns to decision-making tables, they sometimes face challenges in the communications and connections with those same workers in the field:

*“The flow of information from unions and civil society understanding workers’ needs to the discussion tables works relatively well. The real challenge lies in how to translate into practice the decisions taken at those tables, not only at the Italian level but also at the European level”* [ITA\_WP4\_SECT2.2\_civil society organisation]

The governance of the policy formulation has shown that, although the main triggers for the adoption of Law 199/2016 relate to social mobilisation, including protests and strikes promoted by migrant networks, their role is largely disregarded when it comes to the policy formulation itself, where their needs are conveyed only by trade unions. Overall, the law has been the result of a **top-down approach**, in which the content of

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<sup>4</sup> This is for instance the case of the now MP Aboubakar Soumahoro, a high-profile union organiser originally from Ivory Coast who has become a national symbol of the resistance to these policies and had been active in USB first, and then created in 2020 the ‘Lega Braccianti’ (Fieldworkers Union), particularly rooted in the southern region of Apulia, L. D’Agostino (2020): <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/09/08/Italy-agricultural-migrant-workers>.

the policy is primarily designed by members of Parliament, with significant dialogue with the competent Ministries' offices and the consultation of the most structured and well-established organisations representing the unions and the employers. Ultimately, the consultation with trade unions, employers, civil society and academic experts has turned the adoption of the law into a participatory policy-making process, but nonetheless the way the actors were selected, and the Parliamentary consultation was carried out, **structurally excluded informal networks and migrants representatives and associations**, mirroring a more general deficiency of the policy-making concerning migration policies<sup>5</sup>.

## 5. Governance of the policy implementation

### 5.1. Overview of the main policy tools which implemented Law 199/2016: the National “Plans”

Following the adoption of Law 199/216, a number of ad hoc roundtables were convened among the policy actors involved in the implementation of the law at the national, regional and local level: they involved the various Ministries that contributed to the adoption of the Law, the National Labour Inspectorate, and several private actors and NGOs such as “Libera – Associations Against Mafias”, Terra!, Caritas, the Italian Red Cross. Those meetings were then institutionalised by the Law Decree 119/2018, converted into Law 136/2018, which officially established a “**Inter-institutional Committee on gang-mastering and labour exploitation in agriculture**” (hereinafter, the ‘Committee against gang mastering’), chaired by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies<sup>6</sup>.

The Committee is the national coordination body responsible for the planning and implementation of the policy interventions adopted following the 2016 law. The first of these interventions has been the “**Three-Year Plan to tackle labour exploitation and**

<sup>5</sup> Caneva E., 2015. The integration of migrants in Italy: an overview of policy instruments and actors. INTERACT; Country report, : <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/8220339f-8c2a-5bd1-a032-bd8b99993263/content>

<sup>6</sup> Within the Ministry, the Directorate-General for Immigration and Integration Policies is responsible in general to promote the labour and social integration of foreign workers. Moreover, the Ministry has been the main coordinator of the policy actions within the Inter-institutional Committee on gang-mastering and labour exploitation in agriculture, and the DG Immigration has the task to provide administrative and coordinative support to the Committee.



**unlawful recruitment in agriculture”, covering 2020 to 2022** (hereinafter, the Plan against labour exploitation).

The Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies formally engaged ILO to operationalize the 2016 policies: therefore, ILO provided counselling and technical assistance to support the drafting the Three-Year Plan. The organization promoted a comprehensive approach based on four pillars (prevention, legislative enforcement, protection and inclusion measures for victims, and access to justice) which has been incorporated into the actions of the Plan.

*“With the Plan, a step forward was taken with respect to the law, by developing a comprehensive strategy that includes prevention alongside counteraction. The Italian Plan is one of the few examples of a strategy that operationalises a comprehensive approach to preventing and combating labour exploitation across an economic sector. The vast majority of EU countries have approaches limited to a few specific types that fall within the broader scope of labour exploitation [...] The Plan also acted as a promotor of an integrated approach to preventing and combating labour exploitation, which until then had been based on interventions that were limited in scope and time, without coordination or synergies”. [ITA\_WP4\_14]*

The Plan has been praised for being a step forward when compared to the law, and for promoting a **new, integrated approach** to the fight against gang mastering and labour exploitation:

*“Then, the three-year plan was a model in some ways. The multi-agency approach that took root thanks to the three-year plan was then used as a model also for the definition of the national plan against undeclared work, which is more recent and still ongoing. The new key to multi-agency intervention is to bring together all the public and also private actors who can, each for their own competence, contribute to a synergic, structured, non-occasional action”. [ITA\_WP4\_15].*

The multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach developed during the 2018-2021 period within the Committee and during the implementation of the Three-Year Plan has been maintained in the following years, with the development of a distinct **2023-2025 Plan Against Informal Work**, which replaced the previous one and introduced some innovations.

*“The multi-agency approach that has taken shape thanks to the three-year plan was then used as a model also for the definition of the national plan against undeclared work (...) the new key to multi-agency intervention is to bring together all the public and also private actors who can, each for their own competence, contribute to a synergic, structured, non-occasional action” [ITA\_WP4\_15]*

The two most innovative aspects of the 2023-2025 Plan Against Informal Work, compared to the previous Plan, have been: the extension to other economic sectors beyond agriculture (e.g. construction, logistics, and hospitality); and the fight against all forms of informal work beyond severe exploitation or gang-mastering.

Despite the broader focus has been praised for addressing labour exploitation in a holistic manner, some stakeholders have expressed concerns about dispersing resources and attention from the agricultural sector, where exploitation remains severe, and from the focus on migrant workers, that might result in jeopardising the intervention aimed at the social and labour integration of migrants carried out under the 2020-2022 Plan.

Although distinct, the two Plans share **overlapping goals and governance structures**: several representatives from the ‘Committee against gang-mastering’ participate in the implementation of the 2023-2025 Plan, ensuring synergies between the two initiatives. In this vein, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), which is the Italian plan related to the Next Generation EU Fund, stated that the actions planned under the 2023-2025 Plan Against Informal Work should complement those already implemented under the Three-Year Plan against gang-mastering and labour exploitation, whose implementation ceased in 2022. However, the concrete instruments to monitor how to avoid risks of overlapping and duplicating interventions under the two Plans remained unclear.

Some interviewees highlighted that the **political orientation** of the governing majority can influence how policies are implemented. For instance, each government tends to restructure the organisational arrangements developed by the previous Ministries, preventing procedures and practices from consolidating and becoming efficient. In 2022, government changes lead to the replacement of institutional representatives in the Committees. According to other stakeholders, the role and ‘prestige’ of the ‘Committee against gang mastering’ has been downgraded by the institution of a new national ‘Committee on prevention and contrast of undeclared work’ (under the 2023-2025 Plan): such Committees have been convened less frequently and with reduced urgency under the current administration. This recurring **organizational discontinuity** complicates efforts to tackle exploitation systematically and weakens institutional capacity over time.

*“An effective reform of the active labour policies system has paid the price of transitions between different governments: we went from a system completely internalized within the Ministry of Labour, to the establishment of the more independent National Labour Inspectorate, which was responsible for all inspection bodies, including control agencies. [...] So, in this varied landscape that finds its*

*foundation in the different ideas that each successive government has had regarding this issue, we have lost opportunities” [ITA\_WP4\_16]*

Finally, other stakeholders have pointed to the fact that the political orientation of the government influence the level of attention given to the fight to labour exploitation, noting that the different ‘political seasons’ bring varying levels of commitment, with some governments demonstrating a proactive stance, while others deprioritising the issue of exploitation, which is framed as less urgent.

## 5.2 Implementation at the central level: a multi-stakeholders and multi-level approach

The field research covered the implementation of policies in the 2019-2024 period: most of the implemented actions and measures over this period directly originate from the 2020-2022 Plan against labour exploitation, while the second national plan (the Plan against informal labour) was not yet implemented. Therefore, the following section will focus on the instalment of the Committee against gang-mastering, and the development of the 2020-2022 Plan against labour exploitation.

Given that the Plan has been debated and written within the Committee, through the deployment of multi-actor consultation, we first describe the governance structure of the Committee and then present the content and features of the Plan. As anticipated, a coordinated approach involving both central and regional bodies, as well as a number of local projects was developed through the ‘Committee against gang-mastering’ and it was then laid down in the 2020-2022 Plan.

The **Committee against gang-mastering** is a central national body, chaired by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. It holds the responsibility for identifying the priority action on exploitation, planning the institutional activities and monitoring its implementation. One of its main features in terms of governance is the **involvement of both public and non-public actors**. It is composed by law of representatives of 11 institutional bodies: Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests; Ministry of Transport; National Agency for Active Labour Market Policies (ANPAL); National Labour Inspectorate (NLI); National Institute of Social Security (INPS); the Army (Carabinieri); the Financial Police (Guardia di Finanza); State-Regions Conference; National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI). A Technical Secretariat was established at the Directorate-General for Immigration and Integration Policies of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, to support the activities of the Committee.

The International Labour Office (ILO) and the European Commission (EC) provided technical assistance to the Secretariat. The **ILO**, besides providing technical support in the writing of the actions, also played a central role in the monitoring process of the implementation, which has been carried out together with the Ministry of Labour both through internal reports, but also with the public reports to the Parliament and targeted researchers. On the other hand, the International Organisation for Migration (**IOM**) has been involved in implementation phase through projects aiming at identifying and supporting victims of exploitation, particularly through its cultural mediators. The involvement of the international organisations could be linked to their capacity to operate across the entire national territory with consistent recourses, to their international legitimacy and prestige that allows it to be accepted by a wide range of all stakeholders, and eventually to IOM's perceived ability to represent migrant perspectives, as most of its workers were migrants themselves, working as cultural mediators.

Additionally, since the very beginning of its activity, the Committee has been **extended to include non-institutional actors**, representing the employers, the workers and the civil society, with the aim of broadening the participation and including into the formulation of the actions also non-institutional actors. Those actors were selected through an informal expression of interest, collected during the first meetings of the Committee in 2019 and include mainly employer organisations, trade unions, and nation-wide NGOs. Since the Law Decree 119/2018 establishes that non-institutional actors must operate in the field of labour or agriculture, CSOs active *only* on migration, including migrant organisations, are not eligible: this rule further aggravated the lack of representation of migrants in the process of formulation and implementation of national policies in this field.

As for the working method of the Committee, according to interviewees the meetings of the have followed a 'participatory' approach facilitated dialogue and an exchange of views and positions. The central state keeps a privileged position, as it is the actor who selects, convenes and coordinates the participants. However, priorities and actions seem to be decided in a rather consensual way rather than through a hierarchical approach. Therefore, the Committee can be somewhat regarded as a '**governance network**'<sup>7</sup> involving both public and non-public actors operating at different levels of government.

*"With respect to participation, I have always found that everyone has participated. So, really all parts of the institutional world participated: there are at least four ministries, various agencies, all the police forces, carabinieri, finance guards, etc., all the regions,*

<sup>7</sup> Torfing, J., Peters, B.G., Pierre, J. and E. Sørensen. 2012. *Interactive governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*many municipalities. It is a really weighty taskforce with respect to coordination on the public side. But if we then look at the third sector, international bodies, etc., there are many more. So really a very, very broad participation and it was certainly a very demanding job that of coordination". [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

The Committee has been in force for three years, then **extended for a further three years (until 2025)** by an inter-ministerial decree. The Committee is organised into six Working Groups:

1. prevention of labour exploitation and unlawful recruitment, coordinated by the **National Labour Inspectorate (NLI)**<sup>8</sup>;
2. agricultural supply chain and prices of agricultural products, coordinated by the **Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry**;
3. labour intermediation and enhancement of the role of the Employment Centres, coordinated by the **National Agency for Active Labour Market Policies (ANPAL)**<sup>9</sup>;
4. transport, coordinated by the **Basilicata Region**;
5. housing, coordinated by the **National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI)**;
6. Network of Quality Work in Agriculture, coordinated by the **National Social Security Institute (INPS)**<sup>10</sup>.

The practical implementation of the Plan has been in place only since 2021, because of the delays related to the articulated governance combined with the consequences of the pandemic. Moreover, **the sub-Committees have progressed at different paces**:

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<sup>8</sup> National Labour Inspectorate (NLI)'s mandate encompasses the enforcement of labour, employment, and social protection regulations, alongside the management of inspection and enforcement activities. The Inspectorate serves as an enforcement body, working in close coordination with the Army (Carabinieri) special unit for labour protection. NLI coordinates and provide guidance to local labour inspectors on the methods and priorities for labour inspections.

<sup>9</sup> Until 2023, the National Agency for Active Labour Market Policies (ANPAL), has been responsible to coordinate the network of public employment services and manage the national register of licensed private employment agencies. In light of this role, the Agency was directly involved in the prevention of unlawful recruitment. The Agency was suppressed in December 2024, and its tasks were transferred to "Agency for Italian Development" (Agenzia Sviluppo Italia), whose dependence on the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies has increased.

<sup>10</sup> The Institute processes the registration and de-registration of enterprises in the Network. Moreover, INPS should also monitor, through its databases, patterns of informal employment and the evasion of social security contribution dues in agriculture.

*“The challenge of such a broad and inclusive governance model lies in involving so many actors, not just in planning but also in operational management. While this inclusivity can be enriching, it also creates significant complexities” [ITA\_WP4\_9]*

The Plan itself is – similarly to the governance structure – quite articulated. It envisages a three-year strategy to be implemented through ten priority actions aimed at preventing and countering labour exploitation. The actions refer to 4 “pillars”:

- 1) Prevention<sup>11</sup>;
- 2) Enforcement<sup>12</sup>;
- 3) Protection and assistance<sup>13</sup>;
- 4) Labour and social reintegration<sup>14</sup>.

The pillars reflect the effort to **combine a repressive approach with a preventive one**:

*“Not only was it a multilevel and multistakeholder approach, as previously mentioned, but it also represented, for the first time, a critical bridge between repressive and preventive actions. The plan sought to integrate measures aimed at strengthening enforcement mechanisms, such as inspections and oversight, with preventive initiatives”. [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

However, the most active Group has been that on ‘Prevention and pursuing of labour exploitation and unlawful recruitment’ and the most developed Pillar has been that on enforcement. Specifically, the **enhancement of National Labour Inspectorate (NLI) and its integration with cultural mediators hired by IOM** can be regarded as the most developed line of action, confirming the prevailing focus on the sanctioning components. On the one hand, at the national level, the NLI has assumed a proactive

<sup>11</sup> Under the first pillars, the interventions should aim at: managing and monitoring labour demand peaks during harvesting periods; curbing unfair market practices, by promoting the traceability of agricultural products and expanding the Network of Quality Work in Agriculture; increasing the transparency of intermediation services; providing transport services and decent housing for agricultural workers.

<sup>12</sup> Under the second pillar, the main goals are the expansion of inspections, the increase in coordinated trainings targeting labour inspectors, and the enhancement of a coordination among enforcement authorities.

<sup>13</sup> The third pillar focuses on the establishment of health and legal aid services for victims of exploitation, as well as on the access to labour and social reintegration programmes. It also promoted trainings for the organisations responsible to protect and assist the victims of exploitation.

<sup>14</sup> The fourth pillar is strictly coordinated with the third, and aims at expanding the availability of longer-term labour and social integration services for victims and the strengthening of coordination among service providers at national, regional, and local level.



role in promoting inspections in the field of agriculture. On the other hand, due to a Protocol signed in 2019 between the NLI and IOM, within the context of the “SUPREME” Project, inaugurated a new form of cooperation. This intervention contributed to change the attitude of the NLI and of labour inspectors towards a more cooperative method of work with non-governmental associations and civil society organisation.

*“Working in this coordinated way has demonstrated that collaboration yields significantly more impactful and efficient results. Conversely, failing to network and cooperate with other authorities and stakeholders greatly weakens the effectiveness of any single intervention. Collaboration introduces a genuinely multiplier effect, amplifying the reach and success of actions [...] For example, there is closer cooperation with anti-trafficking agencies and projects focused on these issues. Authorities not only report victims but, thanks to this collaboration, ensure their protection, access to socio-economic reintegration, and comprehensive support systems. This holistic approach underscores the importance of cross-sector partnerships in achieving sustainable outcomes”. [ITA\_WP4\_ 9]*

*“That aspect of institutional coordination that we have in our DNA, of creating working groups for the repression aspect. Especially with Carabinieri and Guardia di Finanza we have several forums where we can discuss, but also with INPS and INAIL...The coordination of inspection action in labour matters has been always entrusted to the Inspectorate. There are tables, periodic coordination commissions, absolutely frequent, and so coordination is actually already in place” [ITA\_WP4\_ 15]*

Another action, belonging to the first pillar, that has been considered in positive terms by most of the stakeholders, was the development of common **Guidelines for the identification of the victims of trafficking of exploitation**. The document was published in 2021 by the DG Immigration and Integration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and adopted by different public bodies (the police, the bodies responsible for the international protection determination, the Regions) and disseminated amongst NGOs and social workers. The support of ILO has been crucial in the drafting of the guidelines, but the process also benefitted by a consultation and participatory drafting carried out with civil society organisations, particularly those who are in charge of anti-trafficking programmes. However, it has also emerged that the process of implementation and application of the Guidelines has been fragmented, as not all the Regions had adopted – through regional acts – the document.

Moreover, in areas that require genuine multilevel governance—such as **housing and transports**, where responsibilities fall to local (housing) or regional (transportation) authorities—it has proven much more difficult to intervene effectively: many civil society actors underlined that in the field of housing and informal settlements very few results have been achieved, despite addressing illegal settlements and ensuring reliable

transportation to and from workplaces were two key goals of the Plan. Efforts to address these issues were hampered by overlapping responsibilities among the state, regions, and municipalities. This fragmentation of authorities and competences poses a structural challenge to coordination at the national level: the inherent complexity of the Italian governance system is not specific to this policy but reflects broader issues of institutional structure.

Another field that has been less developed was the one of **regular intermediation**, between employers and workers: this was an action coordinated by ANPAL, which however was dismissed with the change of government in 2023. This change has contributed to undermining this strand of actions, which are also affected by structural deficiencies in the approach towards supply and demand matching. To this regard, it has been noted that the effectiveness of implementation has been undermined by reforms of the institutional structure of public bodies, which undermined the need for certainty and stability.

This difficulty related to the coordination among the national, regional and local levels is not specific to the counter exploitation policies, but it is embedded into the Italian institutional setting, beyond the specific field on labour exploitation in agriculture.

*“There is an overlap of competencies between the State, Regions, and Municipalities that has been difficult to coordinate at the national level [...] it is a structural difficulty, of division of competencies, specifically stemming from Article 117 of the Constitution [...] The Italian system is complex in general, so one hopes to be able to simplify it, but the system is already complex, and it doesn't depend on the governance of this phenomenon, of this policy, but it's really a general issue” [ITA\_WP4\_9]*

Overall, it can be concluded that the lines of action that have made the most progress are those where coordination and, above all, the necessary competencies for their implementation are in the hands of actors located at the central level, such as the Ministries and the National Labour Inspectorate. Conversely, where responsibilities lie with the regions or local authorities, such as housing and transport, implementation has faced relevant obstacles. This reveals how the complex governance structure of the Committee does not immediately translate into a real ability to mobilise and coordinate all actors. In practice, although decisions regarding the implementation of Law 199/2016 do indeed involve a large number of actors, **their translation into action seems to be more effective when governed by hierarchical arrangements.**

Moreover, while the new approach followed by the labour inspectors, at least in terms of enhanced coordination among public and private actors, has been generally praised, challenges remain when looking at the implementation, both because of the relatively small number of inspections, but also because of the various discrepancies and



differences in the approach of each territorial offices, and in the responses of the Public Prosecutors:

*“What on paper appears more or less linear, in practical implementation reveals a whole series of complexities and difficulties that are also very localised and very patchy. We have territories where the system works perfectly for the repressive part and functions terribly for the preventive part, other territories where exactly the opposite happens” [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

With regard to the financial aspect of the implementation, it has been additionally underlined that even if some resources have been increased, it remains a **significant time gap between resource allocation and tangible results**. This is the case, for instance, of the resource for labour inspections:

*“From the moment resources are allocated to when these resources actually produce results in the field, at least 2-3 years pass. So right now, in terms of increased field controls, we're seeing the results of what was done from roughly 2021, or early 2022” [ITA\_WP4\_16]*

### 5.3 Implementation at the local level: the role of funding and projects

The priorities outlined in the Plan were thus operationalised through numerous projects which involved various actors at both central, regional and local levels, resulting into ‘project-based governance’<sup>15</sup>. Most of the projects were developed in specific areas or region, so there has been a **differential implementation across the national territory**.

The projects were funded through EU and national mechanisms, such as the ESF (European Social Fund), the AMIF (Asylum and Migration Fund) and the PNRR. Indeed, the institutional complexity explored above is also mirrored in the funding landscape, as the funds are managed by different Ministries: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies oversees several significant funding streams, including AMIF, ESF and national funds devoted to migrant integration, but also the Ministry of Interior manages its share of AMIF funds at the national level, alongside the National Operational Programme on Legality, while the Equal Opportunity Department (established at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers) administers the Anti-Trafficking Fund, which can be used during the integration process of victims of trafficking for labour exploitation.

<sup>15</sup> Ponzo, I. and E. Milazzo (2025), ‘Exploring the impact of EU funding on the local governance of migrant integration: the rise of project-driven governance’, in *Local Government Studies*, published online on 1st January 2025, pp. 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2024.2447880>.

The complexities in the use of funds exacerbated the differential implementation at local level.

Within the implementation of anti-exploitation and anti-gang-mastering policies, calls for projects have been redesigned over time mirroring the growing awareness of the ‘Committee against gang-mastering’ of the need to overcome the initial narrow thematic and territorial scope and to enhance public ownership of projects.

First, **the focus and approach of the calls for projects have expanded over time.** During the first period of the implementation, started in 2019, the funds have been mainly used for emergency actions or inspections activities (such as in the case of SU.PRE.ME<sup>16</sup>). The projects developed since 2021 onwards had a wider approach, aiming at financing integration measures, and vigilance and inspection not just in agriculture but also in other fields.

Second, **the territorial scope has broadened.** Initially, projects involved mainly the southern regions of Italy, but eventually and over time, all regions have been involved in at least one project aiming at the prevention of labour exploitation and the development of inclusion and integration processes for the victims.

Third, as anticipated, **the economic sectors** concerned targeted by the calls for projects **evolved**: from tackling only exploitation in agriculture, the calls for projects started addressing all the sectors of the labour market. Interestingly enough, this happened even before the formal adoption of the 2023-2025 Plan Against Informal Work: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies has widened the reach of projects beyond the agricultural sector through calls for projects, showing that implementation can sometimes advance ahead of formal policy formulation.

*“There was an attempt, perhaps somewhat forcefully, to try to extend the sectors, because the Guidelines, being a product of the Three-Year Plan’s action, pertain to the agricultural sector. But we strongly wanted the projects to include other sectors as well, in order to try to broaden what is the fight against exploitation in general terms. This is one of the reasons why it is absolutely desirable that this request, now pushed forward by almost all stakeholders, to expand the sectors of intervention, also be incorporated at the regulatory level” [ITA\_WP4\_9]*

<sup>16</sup> SU.PRE.ME. has been one of the first projects promoted by the Ministry of Labour and funded by emergency resources available under the AMIF fund (30 mil). It was implemented by a partnership led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies in collaboration with the regions of Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, and Sicily, the National Labour Inspectorate, the International Organization for Migration, with the technical support of Nova National Consortium for Social Innovation. The project ended in October 2022, with an extension approved in January 2023 to ensure continuity while awaiting the 2021-2027 Programming.

Four, **public ownership** of local projects and especially the **involvement of regions** has been actively pursued, as proved by the fact that several projects are leaded by the regions.

Overall, and despite the last feature mentioned, territorial implementation has remained fragmented. The projects operate somehow in isolation from one another, creating a patchwork of interventions rather than a coherent, integrated approach. This lack of territorial coordination represents one of the most evident flaws in the implementation structure: for instance, projects coordinated at the national level or at the regional one do not coordinate among themselves.

*“IOM in particular goes its own way, among other things working with one Prefecture in particular, which is Ragusa, now perhaps it's moving a little bit toward Syracuse, but just to give you an idea, IOM goes to provide information in one of the emergency centres that we finance, where we also provide information, and there's no connection [between the two activities]. Today the discussion was this: let's find a way to collaborate constructively to avoid finding ourselves you wearing the IOM vest, us with another project vest, and what do we do then? It seems absurd to me. It's all funded by the Ministry of Labour” [ITA\_WP4\_12]*

The **combination of multiple funds** has raised further challenges. The above-mentioned projects have been funded mainly with resources under EU funds, managed by the central government, specifically the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Interior. Other projects have been implemented only through national funds, sometimes creating an overlap with the UE-funded projects.

The use of different funding programmes has created tensions in terms of **eligibility rules**, hindering the involvement of beneficiaries who fall outside the target groups of the various funds, and possible **mismatch with the goals of the Three Year Plans**. Against this background, the central government. Particularly, the Ministry of Social Policies and Labour, when designing the tenders for financing the actions under the Three Year Plans, had to strategically combine different funding sources into a unified approach.

*“Each fund has its rules - for example territorial rules whereby certain resources can only be spent in certain territories - and then clearly synergy and complementarity. Some actions cannot be financed, for example, through AMIF [Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund]. I refer in particular to active [labour] policies, as AMIF is not the principal instrument for active labour policy and labour insertion actions [...] This requires a strategic complementarity approach where different funds are used for different aspects of the same overall goal” [ITA\_WP4\_9]*

The implementation through the use of funding also creates serious challenges in terms of **continuity over time**. Indeed, the intention of the Ministry of Labour has been to support a medium-term programme of action through subsequent projects rather than punctual interventions and it has been everything but easy.

*“Let’s say that the actions have been continuous even if financed in the form of a project, so they are projects but it’s a medium-term program. Anyway, let’s say that until the end of the 2021-2027 programming period, the funding will be guaranteed, and therefore it is difficult to call it a project precisely because of the duration and approach that has been established” [ITA\_WP4\_15]*

To limit the above-mentioned pitfalls, the Ministry of Labour has often adopted a consultative approach in formulating the tenders, engaging both public and private local stakeholders already from the designing process.

*“Methodologically as a process, for example, the 2019 call for proposals was preceded by advance notice, there was an entire phase of consultation with social partners and civil society before the call was issued, meaning it was done as it should always be done. I don’t recall other calls for proposals where this level of preliminary consultation was carried out” [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

Moreover, the mismatch between administrative timeframes and agricultural seasons creates particular implementation challenges arising from the sudden absence of funding in periods when they are more needed.

*“From the negative side, I note a lack of understanding by funders, by those managing European funds, etc., especially also the PNRR... of the fact that implementing these initiatives requires very long fund management periods. We don’t need you to tell me that the project must end in March. How can you make a project end in March in agriculture when it’s the beginning of the harvest?” [ITA\_WP4\_13].*

Finally, this funding architecture undermines sustainability of actions. For instance, although large money has been spent for accommodation of seasonal agricultural workers, almost no permanent solutions have been developed (because non eligible actions, feasible only within longer timeframes, requiring some stability of funding to cover maintenance costs...), so that the interruption of funding would likely lead to ground zero, with a relevant waste of the money spent so far.

#### 5.4 The involvement of the different actors in the implementation

While policy formulation/implementation at the central level effectively engaged diverse stakeholders, the Plan does not provide concrete mechanisms for comprehensive integration of efforts where implementation actually occurs. Such lack

of coordination on the ground, despite significant funds invested in the field, has resulted according to some interviewees, in undermining the effectiveness of the policies, with disappointing results in practice:

*“Everything gets confined to discussions at taskforce meetings, whether national or regional, but nobody coordinates on the ground. Given the complexity, we need to bring multiple elements together—housing, transportation, businesses, labour supply, and intermediation—but there’s no one putting these pieces together. There’s nobody in the territory connecting these aspects [...] Often things are said correctly even at the level of these tables, but when it’s time to translate into practice, into action, that’s where the State is missing. The problem arises at the implementation stage, because if you don’t have an entity coordinating all the various issues, you don’t get anywhere—this is precisely the Italian problem.” [ITA\_WP4\_7]*

Specifically, the research has showed that, on top of IOM, many **NGOs** have been part of the implementation efforts by leading or contributing to ad hoc projects. Most of the organisations have specific expertise on the issues of anti-trafficking, social inclusion of migrants, or legal counselling and orienteering.

The **employer organisations** have been less engaged, compared to the unions and NGOs. However, they have been involved in several projects, and led two of those financed under AMIF (Coldiretti and C.I.A. in specific regions). According to a stakeholder, a change in the employers’ approach toward the issue of labour exploitation can be identified: while they used to deny the problem, or to consider exploitation as an isolated phenomenon, they have increasingly acknowledged the issue and are more willing to cooperate with institution and civil society in order to tackle it.

*“As personal observation I can say that there has been an evolution, I believe, in the last five years, also with respect to the public narrative of the phenomenon by employers’ associations [...] The language has become fairly standardized, so it has gone from ‘no, this phenomenon does not exist in this territory,’ to a fairly clear recognition even by Coldiretti and Confagricoltura, which have also become involved in some territories” [ITA\_WP4\_10]*

As for public actors, the role of the **regions** has been discontinuous, and the one of municipalities rather marginal. In particular, the regions, while having exclusive competence over labour policies, have demonstrated uneven engagement with agricultural labour exploitation policies. For instance, ILO developed a capacity-building program for all regions, consisting of 7 thematic training modules, to which only 15 regions out of 25 participated in. Moreover, such program did not translate into consistent implementation among all the regions involved. Some actors

blame this inconsistency on the regional governance structure, which is ill-suited to managing implementation; others explained it with a reduced political engagement in the issues at stake.

*“The regions have very slowly organised themselves (...) They've made calls for proposals, counter-calls, but they haven't actually begun anything yet (...) it has perhaps also shown a certain incapacity of the regions or at least some of the complexity of the project. But, I mean, they've taken two years just to start implementing a project on topics that everyone had more or less already worked on”*  
[ITA\_WP4\_13]

Interestingly, regional engagement with the issues doesn't follow the traditional North-South divide but rather reflects the relevance of the agricultural sector in the local economy and the public awareness of the exploitation in each region.

*“Southern regions with a stronger agricultural matrix have paid more attention, paradoxically, than rather advanced regions in legislation, which however do not have this centrality of agriculture, have somewhat underestimated the phenomenon”*  
[ITA\_WP4\_6]

The landscape is even more critical and fragmented when looking at **municipalities**, as they occupy an even more marginal position in coordination structure and end up by 'receiving' the actions and fund implemented by the central government through a top-down approach. In fact, they have no direct competences in the field of labour policies. And, even more than for the regional level, the combination of dimensions, technical resource and political orientation of municipalities present an extremely various landscape, and very few municipalities have so far step up as really engaged in the implementation of labour exploitation policies.

*“The only entities with which we have greater difficulties are local authorities. With some of these we have had greater difficulties or at least we don't have this great dialogue on these issues. There are also municipalities that have greater dialogical availability on this, but we have not yet carefully structured this type of relationship”*  
[ITA\_WP4\_12]

Despite these challenges at the local implementation level, the **National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI)** has developed a more constructive relationship with central government, particularly on the actions devoted to mapping housing challenges and informal settlements of migrant workers. ANCI has also produced '[Guidelines on minimum housing standards](#)', targeting explicitly migrant workers, which however cannot be easily enforced at local level. Moreover, within INCAS project, ANCI has supported some municipalities in drafting 8 '[Multi-sectoral Local Plans](#)', which should



guide a coherent implementation of the anti-exploitation projects in certain localities. However, this does not seem enough to systematically be engaged municipalities on the fight against labour exploitation.

This situation may reflect a disconnect between ANCI's engagement at the national level and the actual implementation capacity of individual municipalities on the ground. While ANCI effectively represents municipalities in the 'Committee against gang-mastering' and has contributed to developing important tools with a national reach, it seems that this expertise fails to translate into effective local implementation, particularly when it comes to utilising allocated resources for addressing critical issues like informal settlements.

Finally, it can be mentioned that despite the many limitations of implementation through projects highlighted in the previous section, the implementation of counter labour exploitation policies fostered **the development and establishment of new networks and partnerships** between public and non-public actors, as those partnerships have been generally a requirement or a rewarding criterion in public calls.

*"A positive aspect is that networks were created. When we were made to dialogue as projects, it was very interesting... The projects dialogued, even in complicated territories where they acted against each other, but they dialogued [...] A series of mechanisms were born. By mechanisms I also mean the ways of building infopoints, the ways of carrying out itinerant infopoints". [ITA\_WP4\_13]*

In conclusion, the analysis of the **governance implementation** of the policies on labour exploitation (in agriculture) showed that the vast **participation of different public and non-public stakeholders**, as well as the multi-level nature of the governance represents **both a resource and a challenge**.

Such wide participation can foster new forms of knowledge sharing between different actors (across the Ministries involved and the central and regional levels, as it happened with the development of the Guidelines for the identification of victims of labour exploitation), and innovative actions grounded on a public-private cooperation (such as the one developed by the National Labour Inspector with IOM). Similarly, during the projects implementation new forms of alliances can be built, at the local level, between CSOs and local actors.

However, the research has also revealed structural limitations in translating the participatory planning and projects development into concrete actions that impact directly on the conditions of migrant workers. To this regard, several interventions targeted the capacity building and project development of public or private actors, but

not all actions translated into improved labour and working conditions, particularly in the fields of housing and transports.

## 6. Conclusions

The report has examined the governance arrangements underpinning Italy's counter-exploitation policies in agriculture, revealing a **participatory approach** towards both the formulation and implementation of Law 199/2016 and to the subsequent Plan against labour exploitation, fitting the network governance model. Several public and non-public actors, including international organisations, trade unions, employers' associations and CSOs, have been involved in the multi-level and multi-stakeholder formulation and implementation of the policies. However, and despite migrants played a role in triggering the lawmaking process, grassroots movements and **migrants' network were not formally involved**, according to a trend that mirror broader deficiencies in Italian policymaking over migration. On the other hand, migrants occupy key positions in the agricultural branches of **trade unions**, which constitute **the only channels through which they can participate** in policy formulation and implementation.

Moreover, despite the participatory approach, **hierarchical governance arrangements** involving a limited number of actors tend to lead to **more effective implementation**. In contrast, lines of action that require the involvement of multiple actors across different levels of government often struggle to take shape.

Overall, the governance arrangements reflect the limitations of a system that, despite commitments to participation and protection, struggles to translate migrant agency into institutional influence and to coordinate the diverse actors and competencies required for effective rights protection.

Ultimately, Law 199/2016 and its implementation bodies and plans represent a significant advancement in defining and sanctioning labour exploitation, even though most of the focus – including during the implementation – is placed on the **repressive dimension**, rather than on the preventive opportunities provided formally by the law and the Plan against exploitation.

Finally, **the lack of structural funds and the reliance on projects** to implement actions result in significant limitations, negatively affecting the consistency of priorities and targets, the homogeneity of approaches across the country, and the continuity of measures over time. As a result, despite having one of the most advanced laws countering exploitation in Europe, Italy still lags behind in addressing the phenomenon and, more broadly, in tackling irregular migrant work.



## Appendix 1 - Table of interviews

CODE	ACTOR
ITA_WP4_6	Political party
ITA_WP4_7	CSO
ITA_WP4_8	Trade union
ITA_WP4_9	Public entity
ITA_WP4_10	IO
ITA_WP4_11	Employer
ITA_WP4_12	Public entity
ITA_WP4_13	CSO
ITA_WP4_14	IO
ITA_WP4_15	Public entity
ITA_WP4_16	Employer
ITA_WP4_17	CSO

## Deliverable information

Schedule Information	
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# The governance of counter-exploitation policies in agriculture in Italy

## ABOUT DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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