

Exploring migration networks in Italy: empirical evidence from field surveys

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Framework and objectives

The relationship between demographic phenomena, cultural identity and multiethnic society construction, in a period of migration flows really dynamic and in continuous growth, is a very important theme to thinking about. In this context, the concept of “migration system” could be essential to describe the present situation. It can be said that “calls for a systems approach tend to follow from a recognition that to capture the changing trends and patterns of contemporary international migration requires a dynamic perspective. Consideration of the causes or impacts of international migration from either a sending- or a receiving- country perspective often fails to convey the dynamics associated with the evolution of the flow, from its origins, through the shifts in its composition and volume as it matures, taking account of the return migration and remittances, and of the policy and structural conditions at origin and destination that shape migration” [Kritz and Zlotnik, 1992].

Migration dynamics can be studied at different levels following generally a macro or a micro analytical perspective. Additional attention, however, deserves the so-called meso-level that represents a crucial means to link these more conventional levels of analysis. This approach has emerged more recently in comparison with the other two [Faist, 2000]. Not only families and households, but also other important clusters (besides the economic, political and cultural institutions) influence migrants’ decisions to move, stay or return (IOM, 2001).

Migration dynamics seem to be deeply determined by the presence and the functioning of a variety of networks at different levels of aggregation. Migration networks can be defined as “groups of social ties formed on the basis of kinship, friendship and common origin. They link migrants and non-migrants together in a system of reciprocal obligations and mutual expectations. They develop rapidly because the act of migration itself generates network connections; every new migrant creates a group of friends and relatives with a social tie to someone with valuable migrant experience. Networks bring about the cumulative causation of migration because every new migrant reduces the costs of migration for a group of non-migrants, thereby inducing some of them to migrate, creating new network ties to the destination area for another group of people, some of whom are also induced to migrate, creating more network ties, and so on” [Massey, 1990].

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Furthermore, in many contexts migration networks have been shown to be differentiated by gender. Gender can be assumed as a variable proxy for measuring the quality of migrant networks. The different relationships that men and women have with their villages and natal households, for example, can systematically influence the typology of tie and its quality and thereby affect migrant behaviour [Curran, Garip, Chung and Tangchonlatip, 2003].

Through the analysis of the data collected by different field surveys that took place in Italy few years ago on some immigrants' communities, the objective of this work is to examine the extent to which cumulative migration at the individual, household and ethnic level is differentially important for men and women.

Before entering into the description of the main characteristics of these surveys, it's important to underline that Italy radically changed its role within the European migratory system. Italy passed very quickly to being a post-industrial society and has gone from emigration country to immigration country with the related changes in prospects and problems. The number of foreigners has been growing from year to year and the range of countries of origin has been widening considerably. In fact, one of the most amazing characteristics of immigration in Italy is its multi-ethnicity as consequence also of its weak colonial ties.

Data and methods

The data utilised are the ones of the surveys NIDI-Eurostat on "Push and pull factors of international migration". Surveys have been carried out in two countries that mainly receive migrants: Spain and Italy. In Spain, migrants from Morocco and Senegal were interviewed, in Italy migrants from Ghana and Egypt. For the survey in Northern Italy, four cities and their provinces were chosen (Milan, Brescia, Bergamo and Modena) and for the one in Central and Southern Italy four cities and their provinces (Rome, Latina, Naples and Caserta). The fieldwork was conducted in 1997. On the whole, 745 Egyptians and 834 Ghanaians were interviewed.

In order to study the determinants of migration, it is not only important to deal with individuals and households that actually migrated, but also those who decided not to migrate or who have not yet decided, or who have returned after a longer or shorter period abroad (Hammar, 1995). Therefore, households and individuals are divided into recent migrant, non-recent migrant and non-migrant. Among the recent migrants (those who have migrated from the country of origin at least once within the period of ten years preceding the survey) in any household only one was selected for a long interview: the main migration actor, or MMA. Potential main migration actors (PMMAs) are all recent migrants in the household aged 18-65 who were born in the survey

country and who were 18 years or older at the time of their last migration from the survey country. Among all the PMMAs identified, only the one who was the first to have left within the ten-year period was selected as the MMA.

There are eight types of questionnaires, three for receiving countries and four for sending countries. However, the non-migrant questionnaire for receiving countries differs from the others in that it includes only two modules.

Among the various modules, Module M focuses entirely on migrants' networks, and the role they played, according to the respondent, in facilitating, or not, the process of migration, either of him/herself, or of relatives and/or friends.

Furthermore it is possible doing a comparison of the data previously described with the ones of the field survey on Albanians and Morocco immigrants' integration in some Italian realities conducted by the Universities of Rome and Bari. Even if it isn't a specific module on network it is possible to analyse some questions about these themes that cut in a cross-sectional way all the questionnaire.

The methods utilised belong to the social network analysis that studies patterns of relations or ties. The main approaches are two: "ego-centered networks" that consider the relations reported by focal individuals; "whole networks" that describe the ties that all members of a population maintain with all others in a same group. This second approach, however, is very difficult to reach because it needs data collected in a specific way and generally not referred to a population of large size [Garton L., Haythornthwaite C. and Wellman B., 1997]. In the case of the present surveys the network is ego-centered.

The main characteristics to deepen and measure are: range (size and heterogeneity), content (administrative, personal, work-related or social matters), centrality (great number of connections to others), density (number of actually-occurring relations as a proportion of the number of theoretically-possible relations) and strength (intensity of relations). According to the data collected and to the questionnaire's structure it is possible to single out different types of social relations: kinship, emotional support, support work, foster sociable relations. To identify these relations, McCallister and Fisher (1978) have proposed four different approaches: interaction approach, role relation approach, affective approach and exchange approach. By the way, only the last one permits to build a whole network.

In the case of the application of the methods of social network analysis to migration it is possible to study many aspects like the household structure (family reunions included), the instrumental support (relations devoted to help to entry in the country, to find work, house), the ties with country of origin (phones, letters, remittances), the relations in the spare time (with whom, where and how often), the formal network

(participation in associations) and, finally, the potential network (suggestions to relatives and friends to chose Italy as country of destination).

First results and conclusions

Migration of individuals faces migration with family, clan or ethnic connections. The most powerful mechanism is to be found in the migratory chains or, more generally, in the flow of information linking emigrants to their places of origin. These chains carry the information needed for would-be migrants to decide on a possible move [Eurostat-European Commission, 2000]. For the communities chosen in the NIDI-Eurostat survey, the presence of these networks is quite clear because the 59,4% of the Egyptians (58,9 of males and 70,8% of females) and the 61,4% of Ghanaians (58,3% of men and 74,8% of women) declared to have a network in Italy before departure.

To deepen the structure and the main characteristics of the differentiated typologies of networks, a multidisciplinary approach, included the social network analysis, is considered to be appropriate. However, a systems approach, including elements of the cumulative causation and integrating social, cultural and political data, serves as a theoretical framework for the analysis to be pursued.

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