

Understanding the Economic Impact of the Mediterranean Migration in Italy: The Role of Integration and Inclusion Policies (2015-2023)

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ABSTRACT

Migration has long played a central role in the host countries' social and economic structures. Over recent decades, Italy has experienced heavy migration currents from Sub-Saharan Africa, prompting heated political debates and restrictive policy responses. Despite widespread narratives that portray migrants as economic burdens, empirical evidence and lived experiences reveal a more complex reality.

This thesis investigates the economic impact of migration on Italy between 2015 and 2023, with a particular focus on the role of integration and inclusion policies in shaping these outcomes.

Integrating quantitative information with qualitative interviews among Sub-Saharan African migrants, this research examines how migrants are shaping the Italian economy through work, taxation, entrepreneurship, and social security contributions, as well as facing structural barriers in the form of exclusionary policies, exclusion from labour markets, and housing discrimination.

The findings show that, despite facing significant obstacles, migrants contribute positively to Italy's economy, generating a net fiscal benefit and addressing critical labor shortages. However, the missing disaggregated data on Sub-Saharan African migrants still hides their economic contribution. This thesis calls for more inclusive policies and targeted research to fully recognize and harness the economic potential of migrant communities, particularly those most marginalized.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **David Joseph**, candidate for the BA degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics Department declare herewith that the present thesis titled “**Understanding the Economic Impact of the Mediterranean Migration in Italy: The Role of Integration and Inclusion Policies (2015-2023)**” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

David Joseph

Vienna, Austria
26/05/2025

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, I embarked on a dangerous journey through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to Italy, a journey that thousands of others also undertook in search of safety, opportunity, and a brighter future. Like the majority of migrants, I did not only risk my physical life but also struggled with the deeply challenging task of creating a new life in a new society. This personal experience shaped my academic interest in learning how migration influences host countries economically and socially.

Migration remains one of the most politically sensitive and debated topics in Italy today. The past decade has witnessed large migration flows to Italy, which was mostly caused due to the Arab Spring (a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that swept across many Arab countries in the early 2010s). In spite of political discourse typically depicting migrants as an economic burden (Statista, 2018), increasing evidence refutes this, showing their positive impact on labour markets, population renewal, and public finances (OECD, 2018; IMF, 2020). Despite this evidence, restrictive migration policies persist, exemplified by Matteo Salvini's 2018 Security Decree, which significantly curtailed legal protections and integration opportunities for migrants (ECRE, 2019).

This thesis attempts to address the question of primary interest: How does migration impact the economy of host countries, and what role do integration and inclusion policies play in maximizing these economic benefits? Focusing specifically on Italy between 2015 and 2023, this study examines the experiences of Sub-Saharan African migrants, exploring both their economic contributions and the barriers they encounter.

By combining macroeconomic data with first-hand information gathered through interviews, this research aims to provide a more complete image of the contribution of migration to the Italian

economy. It also calls for shifting from exclusionary policies to more inclusive, integration-based policies that can unlock the full economic potential of migrants (InfoMigrants, 2022).

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges negative stereotypes about migration and emphasizes the need for evidence-based policymaking that recognizes migrants not as burdens, but as vital contributors to economic growth and social resilience.

METHODOLOGY AND ROAD MAP

This thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating macroeconomic data with qualitative interviews to capture both structural trends, lived experiences and economic contributions of Sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy during the period from 2015 to 2023. Thematic bridges such as economic insecurity, aspirations, and trust in governance are used to analyze points of convergence and divergence between these data types. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how systemic economic patterns shape and are shaped by individual migrant experiences. The research design integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a whole picture of the complicated relationship among migration, policy situations, and economic impacts.

The thesis is Italy-focused as a case, given its pivotal position in the Mediterranean migration crisis and its news-worthy restrictive migration policy during the time of interest. Italy's population concerns, including its aging population and youth emigration, render it an appropriate site to research how migrants can be utilized to counter labour shortages and promote economic viability.

Research Hypothesis

Migrants' potential to contribute to the economic development of the host nation depends on how the push and pull forces of migration interact with how well economic integration and inclusion policies work. Where integration policy does not function or is inadequate, migrants are vulnerable to structural obstacles that constrain their economic contribution, though they can be a positive addition in the host economy.

Research Design

1. Case Study: Italy (2015–2023)

Italy provides a perfect case study for this study because it is a strategic point of entry of migrants along the Mediterranean and has both mass migration flows and highly politicized migration discourses. 2015-2023 has witnessed peak migration flows and major policy shift, such as the approval of the 2018 Decreto di Sicurezza [Security Decree].

2. Data Collection Methods

2.1 Qualitative Interviews with Migrants

I carried out semi-structured interviews with 10 Sub-Saharan African migrants who were already settled in Italy. The interviewees were chosen such that there was diversity regarding country of origin, duration of stay, and current economic activity. The interviews addressed:

The reasons why they migrated (push and pull factors). Their current economic activities such as jobs and entrepreneurship activities. Perceptions of Italian policy of integration and the areas of work, housing, education, and social services in which problems arise.

2.2 Economic Data Analysis

I have examined publicly released data by ISTAT, OECD, and InfoMigrants and other reliable sources to estimate the economic value of Sub-Saharan African migrants. The study includes:

Numbers in employment and by sector.

Entrepreneurial ventures and the growth of migrant-owned businesses.

Fiscal contribution as taxation revenues and social security contributions.

2.3 Policy Review

Between 2015 and 2023, there was a review of Italian migration and integration policies, with emphasis on:

- Shifts in political stand migration, notably in 2018 when Salvini came to power
- Access to labour schemes and vocational training.
- Social welfare services and housing assistance.
- This policy review places the experience of the migrants within the context of the general legal framework and brings forth how the state policies determine economic outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research builds on two central frameworks, the first is the push and pull factors of migration i.e., the motives of migrating to Italy from the Sub-Saharan region. And the second is the economic contributions which these migrants bring to Italy (if any) and the barriers which they face which also hinders them from making the economic contributions.

Many studies validate that migration, once followed by inclusionary policies, is a benefit to the host nation's economy. According to the OECD's International Migration Outlook 2018, migrants help bring long-term economic growth through filling skill gaps, inducing innovation, and rebalancing population proportions in aging countries like Italy. In accordance with the same report, the OECD explains that the budget impact of migrants tends to exceed the expense in the long run, particularly where integration is effective, the key term here remains the effectiveness of the integration policies. In this respect, the International Monetary Fund (2020) emphasizes that international migration will tend to increase GDP per capita in host countries as well as increase labour productivity. Such macroeconomic benefits are particularly significant where migrants enjoy access to formal jobs as well as to skills-matching schemes. This particular report from the IMF although built on facts, it still stirs up the political debate whereby some Italians tag migrants as job stealers, what this report fails to mention is also the fact that some of these migrants end up owning businesses and start-ups which in return aside from paying taxes, they also provide job opportunities for the host countries.

Meanwhile on the other hand, these benefits do not come in the same way to every segment of the economy. Borjas (2016), for instance, describes the nuanced impact of low-skilled migration by stating that while the overall economic effects are moderately positive or zero-sum, wage depression can still occur for specific vulnerable segments in the host economy's workforce. His work is notable for stressing the importance of local labour market forces to bear in mind when making judgments about the economic impact of migration. In reality, many of the low-skilled jobs

that migrants take are not being “taken away” from Italian citizens, they are often the very jobs that Italians are unwilling to do, particularly in sectors like agriculture, which is a major component of the southern Italian economy. In regions such as Sicily, where many migrants first arrive, employment on orange or olive farms is often the most accessible option. These are roles that locals largely avoid. Therefore, the real competition isn’t between Italians and migrants, but among the migrants themselves. Most of these migrants are undocumented and therefore cannot legally work, this decreases their bargaining power (if they have any at all). Farmers are aware that if one migrant refuse to work for a very low wage, others driven by desperation and the need to send money home likely will. This creates a system in which employers exploit that vulnerability. The more urgent question should be: how can the government ensure that these migrants are protected from exploitation and are not forced to work under inhumane conditions?

In spite of this enormous and stable body of evidence regarding the economic benefits of migration, a significant gap remains in the literature when it comes to qualitative, migrant-centered studies, particularly in the Italian context. Much of what is available is based on national data and economic methods, leaving aside migrants' narratives and daily life experiences. Besides, studies usually centre their attention on generic migrant populations while not devoting sufficient consideration to subpopulations like Sub-Saharan Africans, which have their specific integration problems. By capturing the accounts of the migrants who migrated to Italy between 2015 and 2023, particularly those of Sub-Saharan Africans, this thesis fills these silences, giving a more grounded and humanized perspective on how migrants economically contribute and how they struggle to do so.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section of the thesis will be looking at relevant economic and migration theories, including push-pull migration theory, economic integration models, and policy analysis frameworks which helps to build a great understanding of the study.

Push and Pull Factors of Migration

Push factors (e.g., conflict, poverty, and climate change) and pull factors (e.g., job opportunities, political stability, and social networks) are critical in understanding why individuals migrate. These factors not only shape migration flows but also influence migrants' expectations and challenges upon arrival in host countries. For instance, Italy's geographic proximity and perception as a gateway to Europe have made it a major pull factor for migrants from Africa and the Middle East.

According to a data from Statista (Statista, 2024) 2016 ranked the highest number of arrivals with a total number of 181,436 migrants who arrived at the Italian seashores that year. Even when the world stood still in 2019 because of the covid 19 pandemic, Italy still had movements happening in their shores of the mediterranean sea, with 11,471 arrivals that year, recording the lowest number of arrivals since 2014. This particular year also had the lowest number of dead or missing people since 2014, according to UNHCR reports (UNHCR, n.d.), a total of 754 migrants were reported missing or dead, this number is low compared to what we have seen in the past years with each year recording an average of 1,600 dead or missing.

Regardless of how deadly this particular route to Europe seems to be, people still continue to make such huge sacrifices to embark towards “the journey of no return”, as we (Migrants) used to call it back then in Libya.

Italy being the primary location where migrants arrive is not just by chance, this depends on factors such as which country the migrants boat moved from, for example, if your boat is travelling from Morocco, then your main destination would be Spain, on the other hand, if your boat moved from

Libya, then your main destination would be Italy. This is mostly because of the proximity of these countries to each other, although they are separated by the Mediterranean Sea. Deciding which country, a migrant would want to stay as soon as they arrive at the seashores of Italy is not up to the migrant, unless you have a justifiable reason why you want to move to a different country, such as familial motives.

According to the Dublin regulation (UNHCR, n.d.) “A regulation establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national”. Countries like Italy, Greece, and Spain which are common entry points for migrants arriving by sea are often the ones required to handle the asylum applications, even if the migrants intend to travel further into Europe (e.g., to Germany or France). This creates a disproportionate burden on southern coastal states, as they are on the EU’s external frontier and receive a large share of irregular sea arrivals. Therefore, even though a country such as Italy is not adequately prepared to receive and handle this amount of migration, the Dublin regulation constrains them to still do so. Many anti-migration political debates have risen over the years, some politicians seeing this wave of migration and Italy’s unpreparedness as an anchor to grab the votes of the weary Italians. The Dublin system has been heavily criticized for being unfair to frontline countries and ineffective in practice. Some migrants avoid registering in coastal entry countries to try to reach their preferred destination violating the Dublin regulations but often driven by family ties, language, or job prospects. The thing is most of the people migrating from the Sub-Saharan African region are either English or French speakers, therefore integration would be easier for them if they head over to a country which they are familiar with the language. But the Dublin regulation makes this step even complicated for them. Because of this, many migrants decide to continue their migration journey illegally to other EU countries. For some migrants, it just looks like a never-ending loop of migration.

Most times, it is unclear to understand why some people decide to migrate, whereas, in other cases, this is clear. Why don't you stay back in your house? [Perché non rimanete a casa vostra?] this is the sort of questions which some Italians ask during the migration discourse. Some say, well your country is not in a war, so why do you choose to risk your life going through such journey just to come to Italy and sit around and do nothing.

According to a data from the UNHCR, around 1,017,035 migrants have made their way from the mediterranean sea to the Italian seashores. On the other hand, it is also estimated that around 31,562 are reported dead or missing. Now it is important to understand that even though these dead and missing numbers might seem outrageous, we must bear in mind that these numbers are likely to be underestimated, as many incidents go unreported, and numerous bodies are never recovered. How many of these arrivals to Italy are from the Sub-Saharan Africa and what is their contribution, these are the questions which the next paragraph delves into.

Figure 1 shows the combined number of sea migrants who entered Italy from the various Sub-Saharan nations in Africa from 2015-2023. This is an analysis according to official figures of the top 20 nationalities of sea migrants' arrivals in Italy for those years but with a specific focus on countries located in Sub-Saharan Africa. The original data was in German and had top 20 countries arriving through the sea to Italy. So, I had to clean the data to focus on the Sub-Saharan countries. Therefore, the countries we see on the bar graph does not represent all the Sub-Saharan African countries that have arrived in Italy through the sea, rather the graph focuses on the data of the Sub-Saharan countries with the highest number of sea arrival between 2015-2023 in Italy. For added clarity and convenience of access, all the country names have been translated into English, and the bars in the bar graph have been given a uniform dark blue color to highlight the relative volume of arrival by country.

Figure 1

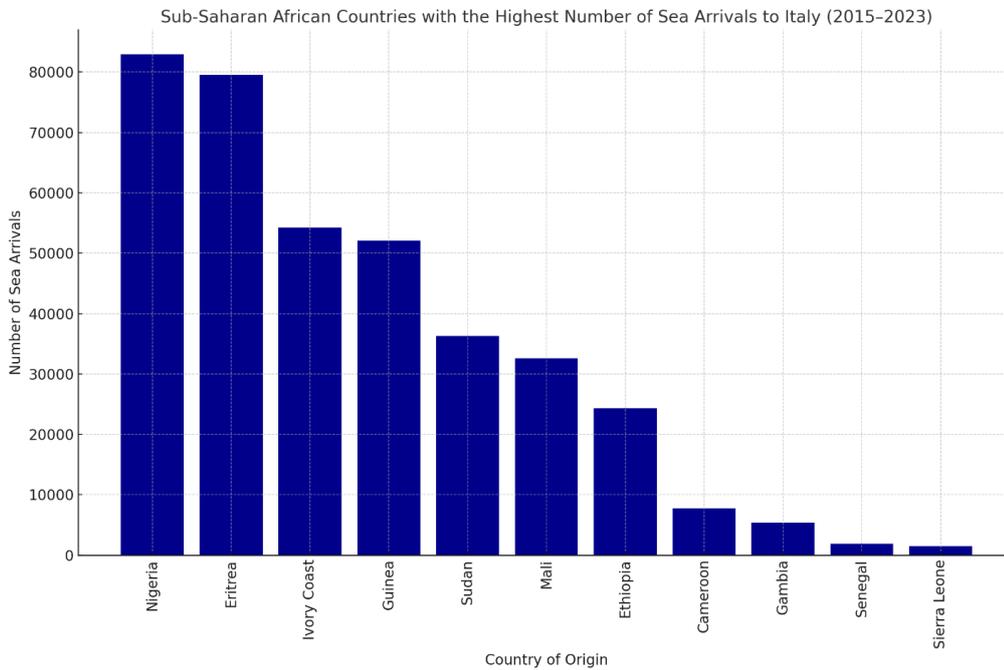


Figure 1 Highest Number of Sub-Saharan Countries Arrivals to Italy (2015-2023)

Among the countries listed, the largest senders of sea arrivals are Eritrea, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria. The four countries combined sent the majority of Sub-Saharan migrants to Italy, demonstrating persistent migratory streams from West Africa. Other countries like Ethiopia, Mali, and Sudan also had large numbers, regularly being among the leading Sub-Saharan nationalities in the database.

Economic Insecurity as a Push Factor

One of the main topics that was relevant during my interview was the topic of economic insecurity being a strong motive for some Sub-Saharan migrants to leave their countries to embark on the perilous journey. According to Sainey, who is a Gambian migrant who came to Italy in the wake of a long and perilous journey, put down his main reason as being because of economic motives and the possibility to provide for his poor family. "When I get paid, the first thing I do is send money to my family because they really need it. Providing for my family is my dream," he explained. Despite

having been exploited in the labour market and having gone through multiple moves from one refugee camp to another, Sainey finally gained a steady employment in a factory in the city of Bologna and even attempted to start his own little business prior to the COVID-19 pandemic dashing his dreams.

To back this up would also be an economic data from Macrotrends which puts together the list of unemployment in the Sub-Saharan African countries, according to this data, in 2023 the youth unemployment rate was 8.9%, slightly below the pre-pandemic level of 9.5% in 2019. The unemployment rate in this region is way above the 5% unemployment level, which generally signals a stable and growing economy, these numbers and the interviews solidify economic insecurity as a contributor to the push factor of migration from Sub-Sahara.

Migration flows respond to wider regional trends driven by a complex set of economic hardships, political breakdowns, violence, and in some instances, the intervention of transnational networks of smuggling agents, whereby the smugglers would feed you fairy tale lies about Europe and the journey to Europe, a journey that they themselves have never succeeded on. While the countries involved in most instances are not technically considered zones of war, this does not mean that they are free from war. Indeed, the overwhelming majority are suffering from what I call "Unspoken Wars", these are crises that are catastrophic but unacknowledged on the global level. These unspoken wars take the form of extreme poverty, political oppression, ethnic or religious conflict, the impact of global warming, and the lack of opportunities for personal growth. Although not formally recognized as war, these conditions can be equally lethal and destabilizing. Together, they create strong push factors that drive many to embark on what is referred to as "the journey of no return".

These reasons why people decide to migrate are also the same reasons why things get complicated for them when they get to Italy, because they are not recognized as a refugee, who is fleeing from war, the system in Italy tries to understand their story for leaving their country of origin and why

they couldn't go to other neighboring countries. If you arrive from a country which is recognized as a country at war, then the asylum process becomes easier. This is the reason why many migrants from the Sub-Saharan African countries would have to spend years going from court to court just to prove that their life is at risk and they should be guaranteed a stay in the country for safety reasons.

Macro Trends vs. Migrant Narratives on Economic Insecurity

The matrix below shows a clear link between macroeconomic statistics and migrant story, specifically in the area of economic insecurity. The high NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) levels and youth unemployment rates across Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2024) are replicated in the interviewees' reality, as most of them mentioned the absence of substantive jobs as a major motivator for migration. Conversely, the aspiration theme is different, most migrants migrated for greater social standing and opportunities. As put forward by some, "Even with a job, it's not the life I imagined. I wanted more" (P06), revealing how economic indicators often overlook aspirational migration drivers.

Trust in governance shows strong alignment; persistent corruption (Transparency International, 2023) signals disappointment among migrants. "Leaders don't care about us; nothing ever changes", one interviewee said, correlating failure in governance directly with their migration decision, it is a sort of the "unspoken wars". Lastly, although conflict statistics indicate increased stability in countries such as Senegal (ACLEDDATA, 2024), migrants described ongoing insecurity from social instability and violence. "It's not always about war; there's no safety even without fighting" (P05). This ties in with the influence of "unspoken wars" on migration choices even in the absence of formal conflict.

Theme	Macro-Level Data Insight	Migrant Narratives (Qualitative Insights)	Alignment/Divergence
Economic Insecurity	Sub-Saharan Africa youth unemployment at 8.9% in 2023; NEET rate at 21.9% (ILO, 2024)	"There was no work for me back home, I needed to provide for my family." – P03	Alignment (Strong)

Theme	Macro-Level Data Insight	Migrant Narratives (Qualitative Insights)	Alignment/Divergence
Aspirations	Nigeria's GDP remained stable in 2022-2023, yet migration intentions remained high (World Bank, 2023)	"Even with a job, it's not the life I imagined. I wanted more." – P06	Divergence (Aspirational Migration)
Governance Trust	High corruption index in Mali and Nigeria (Transparency International, 2023)	"Leaders don't care about us; nothing ever changes." – P04	Alignment (Strong)
Security Concerns	Official conflict data shows reduced violence in Senegal (ACLEDDATA, 2023)	"It's not always about war, there's no safety even without fighting." – P05	Divergence (Perceived Insecurity)

Figure 2 Macro Trends vs. Migrant Narratives on Economic Insecurity

Italy as a Pull Factor

On the other hand, although not officially recognized by Italy as a pull factor, many migrants embark on this journey because of the beauty and opportunities which they see on the TV's, sounds funny right? But it is not funny, for many migrants, arriving to Italy, one would have access to many opportunities, like going to school, living a good life and being able to pursue these dreams, in fact, one of the people I interviewed did not escape from his country because of any conflict, but rather because of the hunger to study, he decided to risk his life to come to Italy. Arriving in Italy he started studying, now a graduate in commercial economics at the Sapienza University and has also landed a job after graduating. These indirect pull factors, although not orchestrated by Italy in a way to bring undocumented migrants to their country, many Sub-Saharan Africans cannot afford the visa and flight ticket, therefore they head for the second and the deadliest option "the journey of no return".

Economic Contributions and Barriers

This section of the thesis focuses on the economic contribution that migrants make to their host country and the reasons that prevent them from realizing their full potential. As it has been explained in the preceding section on push and pull factors leading to migration, most migrants embark on perilous journeys out of their countries of origin with hope of creating a better future for themselves in Italy, however, this better life is not promised. For others, there are systemic barriers

that restrict access to opportunities, delaying or entirely preventing their integration into society's economic framework. For others, Italy is a country of individual growth and economic participation, where not only do they acquire their means of livelihood, but they also contribute immensely to the country's economy.

According to the European Commission. (2016). *Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals* restrictions for example, restricted access to formal employment, education, and public services can hinder the potential of migrants to contribute to the host economy to a great extent. But skills acquisition, legality, and inclusive policies enhance the potential of migrants to fill gaps in the labour market, enable demographic stability among aging populations (which is not a myth to Italy), and even raise innovation.

According to a data from the “*Initiative e Studi Sulla multiethnicità*” (ISMU 2024), which is an organisation that conducts study on the multiethnicity and diversity in Italy. Italy attracts poorly educated migration: half of migrants born abroad have a low level of formal education and only 12% have a degree. This fact could also be backed by the interview which I conducted, out of the 10 people interviewed from the Sub-Saharan African region, only 2 people decided to migrate to Italy because they want to study, which means also that they are coming with studying background or degrees. Also, upon arriving to Italy, one of my interviewees decided to study, and today he is a PHD student in a University in Palermo, making it 3 out of 10 interviewees with a study background. On the other hand, the lack of recognition of qualifications acquired abroad weighs heavily on these migrants, according to the same data from ISMU (2024) less than 3% of migrants have a foreign qualification recognized in Italy, which means that they have to reschool again, not to learn the language, but to reacquire the degrees which they obtained from their home countries which are not officially recognized in Italy. This here is also a huge step-back for a migrant with an unrecognized degree. One of my interviewees had to study for a Bachelor’s degree again although he had already gotten one back in Senegal, when I asked him “how do you feel about that, is it

worth it?” he replied “Yes, it is worth it”. Today he holds a Masters in Commercial Economics and is already working for a firm in Rome and also paying his taxes.

Italy is no stranger to the economic benefits associated with migration. However, the type of migration the country most frequently experiences is driven by push factors such as conflict, poverty, and instability rather than by a pull factor. As a result, the Italian economy is often unprepared to absorb large numbers of migrants with diverse backgrounds and needs. Adding to this issue is Italy’s own demographic challenge: a significant portion of its youth population, particularly those aged 15 to 39, continues to emigrate to other European countries in search of better economic and career opportunities (ISTAT, 2023). This ongoing brain drain exacerbates the country’s shrinking workforce and accelerates its population decline, both of which threaten long-term economic stability.

In this context, migration could serve not as a burden but as a remedy. By investing in migrant integration through legal employment pathways, vocational training, and education, Italy has the opportunity to fill labour shortages, especially in sectors abandoned by native workers. This is not to say that migrants should replace Italians, but rather that jobs rejected by many Italians for example auxiliary jobs, waiters, farmers etc. are often embraced by migrants who see them as life changing opportunities. For many, these roles represent a step up from the conditions they fled, and their willingness to work in underappreciated sectors can be a strategic advantage for the Italian economy. While concerns about labour market competition are understandable, the broader economic reality is that unfilled positions slow growth. In fact, migrants stepping into these roles may help sustain Italy’s economic engine even for Italians living abroad by contributing to a more balanced and functional domestic economy. For example, these migrants pay taxes when they have legitimate jobs, and these contributions they make are reinvested back to the Italian public sectors, such as hospitals, schools, roads, etc. These are basic life amenities which migrants help to maintain

by actively participating and contributing back to the economy. Also, Italians living abroad enjoy these amenities occasionally whenever they come back home to Italy.

Policy Review

Let us look a little bit more into the sentiments of Italians on migrants and how this contributed to a backslide in the Italian political willingness to accommodate migrants. According to a survey conducted in June 2018 on the public opinion poll by YouGov which indicated that there existed a wide difference between the perception by Italians on the issue of migrants as economic contributors. From the poll, 51% of the participants in the survey regard migrants as detrimental to Italy's economy. By contrast, a mere 18% of respondents perceive migrants as an economic plus. Even though 26% of the participants in the poll regard migrants as neither an asset nor a detriment, 5% remain in doubt. These results reflect a dominant sceptical attitude towards migration among the Italian public and can be used as a political message and guiding principles for policy design.

In fact, the poll reflects broader public sentiment that was evident during Italy's 2018 general elections. Matteo Salvini's right-wing party, La Lega [The League], capitalized on rising anti-migrant attitudes and secured significant electoral gains, positioning Salvini as a central political figure. His campaign, which prominently featured anti-migration rhetoric, translated into policy once in office. In the months that followed, many migrants in Italy faced increased hostility, stricter migration controls, and heightened legal and social uncertainty as the new government enacted a series of hardline measures. But this also meant that these migrants could not contribute efficiently to the host economy.

With Salvini in power, this year brought about a lot of uncertainty and fear for many of the migrants in Italy, both those with a recognised migration status, because the new Salvini's anti-migration law became a threat to the migrant's community. The 2018 Italian Decreto Sicurezza [Security Decree], led by then-Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, was a radical shift in the country's migration policy. Issued in the midst of rising public anxiety regarding migration monitored by opinion surveys

which I mentioned above, which reported that more than half of Italians saw migrants as an economic danger (Statista, 2018). The decree aimed to limit the presence and rights of asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

Without a doubt, the most problematic article of the Security Decree was eliminating the status of "humanitarian protection." This particular section of the decree affected the Sub-Saharan African migrant's hugely, because most of them are not fleeing from recognised war zone countries. Many of the Sub-Saharan African migrants are not recognised the refugee status as refugees are considered as people who are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom, but at least, the Sub-Saharan African migrants were often granted the humanitarian protection. Prior to the reform, this legal category (humanitarian protection) allowed Italy to grant residence permits to migrants facing serious personal hardship not covered by refugee or subsidiary protection frameworks. By removing this status, the government effectively blocked thousands of people from legal residence, pushing more into illegal migrant status who then becomes more vulnerable and had a risk of social exclusion and exploitation (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2019).

The decree also lengthened the maximum detention time in repatriation camps to 180 days from 90, presenting the action as a way of enhancing deportation efficiency. But human rights groups cautioned that the action would lead to overcrowding and deteriorating conditions, rather than necessarily enhancing the number of successful deportations (Euronews, 2018). This also meant that the number of the Sub-Saharan African migrants in these deportation camps increased, because migrants kept on arriving in Italy without knowing that their faith is bound to a detention camp, these migrants were not aware that their dream of coming to Europe would later become their nightmare where they might potentially be spending the next 90 to 180days locked up in these camps. On the other hand, the Italian government continued spending money to maintain the logistics and maintenance of these camps. It is fair to say that Salvini's rise to power was not based

on economic motives, therefore his government was not concerned in seeing the economic benefits of these locked-up migrants, he rather focused on the fear and security aspect of migration, this was what led him to propose this bill in exactly 3 months after he was elected. To put it into perspective, Salvini came into power as a Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior on June 1, 2018, in a coalition government with the Five Star Movement [Movimento Cinque Stelle]. By September 24, 2018, his decree was approved and was converted into law by the parliament by December 2018.

More urgently, the decree shortened migrants' exposure to integration services like language training, job training, and counselling. These services previously contributed importantly to alleviating migrants' ability to be economically and socially active. Reduction led to new obstacles for economic integration, especially among asylum seekers who remained inactive in reception centres or in illegal labour markets (ECRE, 2019). Without legal employment, most were driven into low-paid exploitative labour if they were lucky enough to find employment at all, reinforcing their more profound marginalization.

The wider socio-economic consequence of this decree is also significant. In depriving migrants of a chance to make contributions through sweat and learning of competencies, the decree likely violated Italy's economic potential over the long run. It is even more ironic in a nation such as Italy that is plagued with demographic shrinkage, labour deficits in low-skilled areas, and an emigration of youths (ISTAT, 2023). Rather than tackling such structural issues through multi-stakeholder migration policy, the decree threatened to make them worse by discouraging an industry that would have filled desperate vacancies. Salvini's Security Decree prioritized short-term political gains and security optics over sustainable economic planning. While it resonated with the public's anxieties, it ultimately weakened the infrastructure for integration, pushed more migrants into illegality, and missed an opportunity to harness migration as a driver of economic renewal.

Despite increasingly restrictive migration policies such as Salvini's 2018 Security Decree, migrants in Italy continue to make significant and measurable contributions to the national economy.

Contrary to dominant political narratives that frame migrants as a fiscal burden, recent data suggest that their presence yields a net economic gain for the country. Migrants do not simply reside in Italy, they participate as taxpayers, workers, entrepreneurs, and consumers.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF MIGRANTS IN ITALY

Migrants alone in 2020 contributed €5.3 billion in income taxes (IRPEF), in addition to €4.3 billion in value-added tax (VAT), €1.4 billion in municipal property taxes (TASI), and waste disposal tax (TARI). These are not just mere payments; they are the progressive integration of migrants into the Italian tax system. Migrants paid €2.2 billion in fuel and tobacco excise duties, and €145 million in residence permit and citizenship application administration fees. They also paid €15.6 billion in social security contributions, a salvation to Italy's underfinanced pension fund (InfoMigrants, 2022). Combined, these totalled €30.2 billion in revenues from migrants against €28.9 billion of public expenditure resulting from migration. This leaves a net gain budget balance of some €1.3 billion, meaning that, in economic terms, migrants pay well more than they receive back into Italian society (InfoMigrants, 2022).

In addition to their role as wage earners and contributors to the tax base, migrants are becoming more and more entrepreneurs. There were more than 600,000 migrant businesses registered in Italy in 2022 and represented about 10% of the entire business activity in the country. They ranged from restaurants and convenience stores to cleaning services and construction companies. Much more significantly is the fact that between 2020 despite the economic havoc wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic (InfoMigrants, 2022), they increased by 1.8%.

A good example of migrant entrepreneurialism in action can be found around Rome's Termini Station, an informal hub wherein a number of Sub-Saharan African migrants, particularly Nigerian, have set up small ventures. The space is not only used as a space for business but also as a type of grassroots incubator space. In these cases, experienced migrant entrepreneurs typically take young newcomers on as apprentices and teach them skills and knowledge they can utilize to run their shops someday. After a few years of mentorship and practical experiences, most apprentices then go on to open up their own shops, which are often in other areas of the city or region, to avoid competitions between them and their mentors. This system, borrowed from the ancient West

African tradition familiar to Nigerians as the "Igbo apprenticeship system," is a powerful system of economic and social self-organisation. Migrants have managed to bring this system to Italy and apply it as a system of empowerment, skills acquisition, and economic autonomy. It is regrettable that this model of migrant-led entrepreneurship has received little to no attention in academic literature. One of the key contributions of this thesis is to bring this innovative business model, developed by Sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy, into scholarly focus, highlighting its significance as a pathway for economic integration and community development.

This entrepreneurial drive not only produces jobs and stimulates the local economies, especially in areas suffering from population decline, but also shows a deeper will of migrants to settle and invest in their host countries. Their dual role as economic providers both to the formal labour market and to the small business market challenges the concept of migrants as economically dependent and instead reposition them as key contributors in Italy's future economy. As the nation continues to endure labour shortages, an aging population, and its youth emigrating, the very long-term sustainability of its economy may very well rest on whether or not it leverages the potential of its migrant communities.

Entrepreneurial Ambitions of Migrants

Entrepreneurial ambition was a recurring theme across the interviews. Zan, a Malian migrant dreams to start a bakery sometime in future having worked tirelessly hard to gain qualifications of an accomplished baker in a bakery in the province of Catania in Sicily. Likewise, Mali's Diawara has already established a number of community-based businesses in Sicily, including giocherenda, a cooperative that applies cultural activities to attain social integration and employment between migrants and Italians. "We aim to offer chances to individuals, even if they do not possess official certifications. If you are gifted, we provide the chance," he said, highlighting the potential of grassroots entrepreneurship in both social and economic issues. According to Diawara, the co-founder of Giocherenda, the organization employs individuals from diverse backgrounds, including

both migrants and Italians. This example demonstrates how entrepreneurial initiatives led by Sub-Saharan African migrants not only support migrant communities but also contribute directly to local employment. Currently, Giocherenda employs up to 13 people, with approximately 14% of its workforce being Italian nationals, while the remaining employees are migrants from various countries (Giocherenda, n.d.).

Structural Exclusions

While they made contributions, most interviewees pointed out to discrimination and structural exclusion they experience. Housing discrimination was one of the shared issues, as Samuel the Nigerian migrants mentioned: "Some landlords won't rent to migrants even if they have secure jobs and money." Having the rights to housing is not just a right, but it is also important as a part of economic contribution. We can see this as a sort of social exclusion but also, it should be a crime against the economic development of a country, which is one of the reasons why a government intervention is necessary. While this situation hurts many migrants, Alpha the Somali migrants choose to approach the situation with a sense of resilience. Reflecting on his experience, he said "David, I have seen a lot of things from my journey going from Somalia to crossing the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean sea to arriving to Italy, but one thing I clearly understand from this journey is that money has no colour, the landlords who won't rent houses to people because they are migrants, these are not business oriented people".

Yet, despite these obstacles, their stories are not marked by despair but by perseverance. As Mamady a Senegalese migrant had well expressed it, "Migrants don't just work; many start businesses, hire locals, and contribute culturally and socially. The state should promote and support these efforts rather than resist them.". These interviews reveal that beyond simplistic reductive economic arguments about migration, there exists a vibrant, eager community determined to contribute their talents to the economy and society of Italy. Identifying and developing their potential is not merely a moral necessity but also an economic pragmatic policy for Italy's future.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate how migration impacts the Italian economy and to what extent integration and inclusion policies influence these effects. Based on quantitative data analysis and direct interviews with Sub-Saharan African migrants, this thesis has underscored a reality that is multifaceted, one where migrants continue to positively contribute to the Italian economy even after they have been subjected to systemic barriers and social exclusion.

Migrants in Italy are also industrious in many different economic sectors. As affirmed by government statistics, migrants contributed more than €5.3 billion in tax on their income and contributed more than €15.6 billion to social security in 2020 alone (InfoMigrants, 2022). The tax payments directly contribute to Italy's aging population and underfinanced pension fund. Moreover, more than 600,000 migrant-owned businesses now exist throughout Italy, making up almost 10% of Italy's entire business activity.

Above these numbers, qualitative interviews add the flesh on these contributions. Migrants such as Diawara not only contribute to the host country labour market but also offload their money spending it back into host country economies in consumption, paying taxes, and conducting businesses. These results support the current economic paradigms that migration, once individuals are complemented with successful integration policy, turns out to be an economic asset and not a liability.

Despite their contributions, migrants face substantial obstacles that limit their full economic potential. Restrictive policies such as Salvini's 2018 Security Decree created legal and institutional barriers by abolishing humanitarian protection and reducing access to integration services (ECRE, 2019). These policies pushed many migrants into irregular status or informal employment, reducing their ability to contribute formally to the economy.

Interviews indicated that discrimination in housing remained a serious problem. Migrants like Alpha explained how landlords refuse them the right to rent houses solely on the basis of their status as migrants, a reality that renders many of them reliant on overcrowded informal housing. Such exclusions not only limit social mobility but also have broader economic implications by keeping a significant part of the workforce out of mainstream activity.

One of the biggest obstacles to conducting this study was that there is limited research specifically based on Sub-Saharan African migrants. General migration statistics exist, but they are primarily not separated by migrant group, thus hiding the special experiences and economic contributions of Sub-Saharan Africans in Italy. From this lack of data, it is hard to determine their total contribution to the Italian economy.

This lack of targeted research risks rendering the economic role of Sub-Saharan African migrants invisible in both academic literature and policy-making discussions. As this thesis has shown via interview evidence, their contribution, whether labour-based, entrepreneurial or civic, is considerable and must be recognized in greater measure. In the future, research would need to have a priority for deconstructing migration data such that the Sub-Saharan African migrants' economic, social, and cultural contributions will be properly grasped and appreciated.

If Italy implemented more enlightened policies e.g., restore humanitarian protections, expand access to vocational training, and systematically counteract discrimination in housing it could unlock the potential of its migrant workforce. Not just would it ease the labour shortage in the sector, but long-term economic performance and social integration would also be enhanced.

Migration remains among the most politically contentious and urgent matters for Italy. This thesis has proved that, even if migrant policies are restrictive and migrants frowned upon by society, migrants, and most importantly Sub-Saharan migrants, play a critical role in being part of contributing to the sustainment of the Italian economy. Their contributions extend far beyond the

often narrow and politicized debates that focus primarily on the perceived costs of migration.

Through social participation, entrepreneurship, and economic contribution, migrants keep important sectors of the economy alive and help finance Italy's welfare systems under which is under strain.

Italy now faces a critical choice, its demographic crisis, characterized by an aging population and the emigration of its youth, creates economic vulnerabilities that migration could help address. If it shifts from exclusion policies to inclusion policies, and if it observes and takes advantage of its migrant communities' potential, Italy can create a more dynamic and solid economy.

This study also aims at keeping the migrant voices in the limelight in narratives of integration and economic growth. The stories of Samuel, Sainey, Hannah, Mamady, Diawara, Bright, Chamwill, Chisom, Zan and Alpha connect Sub-Saharan migrants' resilience, hope, and desire to be able to contribute positively to their host community when given the opportunity.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Section 1: Migration Journey and Motivations

1. Can you share your reasons for migrating to Italy?
2. What challenges did you face during your journey?

Section 2: Economic Integration and Employment

3. What was your employment situation when you arrived in Italy?
4. Have you been able to find consistent employment? If so, in which sectors?
5. Have you participated in any vocational training or education programs in Italy?

Section 3: Economic Contributions and Financial Stability

6. Are you able to support yourself and your family through your work in Italy?
7. Do you send remittances to your family back home?
8. Have you engaged in any entrepreneurial activities in Italy?

Section 4: Experiences with Integration Policies

9. Have you accessed any government or NGO programs that support migrant integration?
10. How effective have these programs been in helping you integrate economically and socially?

Section 5: Perceptions of Public Attitudes and Policies

11. How do you perceive the attitude of Italians toward migrants?
12. Have you experienced discrimination or support from local communities?

Section 6: Future Aspirations

13. What are your personal and professional aspirations for the future in Italy?

Appendix B: Interview Participant Profiles

Participant Code	Country of Origin	Year of Arrival	Employment Status	Sector	Entrepreneurship
P01	Nigeria	2015	Employed (Full-Time)	Agriculture	Yes
P02	Senegal	2017	Employed (Full-Time)	Commercial Economist	Yes
P03	Somalia	2018	Employed (Full-Time)	Factory	No
P04	Gambia	2016	Employed (Full-Time)	Services	No
P05	Mali	2019	Employed (Full-Time)	Food Business	Yes
P06	Nigeria	2017	BA Student	University	Yes
P07	Cameroon	2016	PHD Student & Part-Time Employment	University	No
P08	Eritrea	2017	Self-Employed	Food Service Industry	Yes
P09	Ivory Coast	2020	Student	Fashion	No
P10	Sudan	2018	Employed (Full-Time)	Delivery Services	No

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