

ITALY



Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been providing healthcare to migrants in Italy since 1999. Stricter immigration policies implemented by the Italian government in 2009 have worsened the situation for migrants, increasing stigma and hampering their access to healthcare. After closing activities on Lampedusa following the sharp decrease of migrants landing by boat in 2009, MSF now responds primarily to the medical and humanitarian needs of seasonal migrant workers in Southern Italy. In 2010, an MSF mobile team will identify areas where there is a high concentration of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers living in poor conditions with limited access to healthcare, and provide emergency assistance. MSF continues to speak out about the plight of migrants in Italy, pushing authorities to guarantee better reception conditions and access to healthcare for all migrants and asylum seekers in Italy.

CONTEXT

Italy has long been a destination and transit country for migrants and asylum seekers, often escaping conflict, deprivation and widespread violation of human rights. The estimated number of undocumented migrants living in Italy in 2008 was nearly 651,000¹. Between 5 and 15 percent of these migrants are believed to land by boat on the Southern Italian coast; the majority arrive via regular entry points but overstay their visas. In response to mounting anti-immigration sentiment, the Italian government has implemented policies to crack down on irregular immigration, resulting in an increasingly hostile environment for undocumented migrants.

The new law, introduced in 2009, criminalises irregular entry and stay in Italy; worryingly, practical application of the law may oblige civil servants to report undocumented migrants to the police. The law also extends the maximum period of detention for undocumented migrants from two to six months. Criminalising policies increase stigmatisation, making migrants more vulnerable to

exploitation and often excluding them from access to healthcare.

A recent assessment done by MSF in more than 20 detention centres for migrants and reception centres for asylum seekers found overcrowding, poor living conditions and serious gaps in healthcare provision. Longer periods of detention are likely to contribute to deterioration in migrants' physical and mental health.

For those trying to reach Italy, the strengthening of border controls is leading to longer and more unsafe journeys. Migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to the southern shores of Italy are travelling by smaller boats, taking more risks. Since May 2009, after reinforcement of anti-immigration policies, boats carrying migrants and asylum seekers have been reportedly intercepted at sea and forced back to Libya. Besides being denied much-needed humanitarian assistance, they are also exposed once again to the violence and abuse endured while trying to reach Italy.

¹ DATA FROM "FONDAZIONE ISMU"

MSF IN ITALY

Medical assistance to migrants and asylum seekers arriving by boat on Lampedusa.

Between 2002 and 2009, MSF worked in Lampedusa, a common landing point for migrants and refugees. Migrants and refugees often arrived suffering from osteo-muscular problems, dehydration and burns resulting from exposure to sun and fuel. Many were traumatised by the journey. Pregnant women and children, who are particularly vulnerable, were also increasingly among migrants arriving by boat. In 2008, MSF provided medical care to more than 1,400 migrants and refugees in Lampedusa. Most came from sub-Saharan Africa, notably Somalia and Eritrea. During the journey, migrants and refugees were often subjected to abhorrent conditions and violence, including rape. New government policies introduced in May 2009 curbing the influx of migrants have meant that migration to Lampedusa by boat has ground to halt. As a result, MSF was forced to withdraw its team from the island, though it remains prepared to re-establish its presence should the situation change.

Access to healthcare for undocumented migrants.

Over the past seven years, MSF has set up 35 clinics providing healthcare and psychological care to undocumented migrants in six Italian regions, notably Sicily, Campania and Puglia. The clinics were integrated into the country's national health services and services were provided respecting migrants' anonymity. In 2009, four clinics were still run by MSF in Campania region, assisting more than 1,600 migrants. The clinics have been gradually handed over to local health authorities.

Assistance to migrant seasonal workers.

Since 2005, MSF has provided medical and humanitarian assistance to seasonal migrant workers in Sicily, Puglia, Calabria and Campania. In 2009, MSF teams provided more than 700 consultations and distributed hygiene kits and other essential items. The poor living and working conditions endured by migrant seasonal workers often result in regular osteo-muscular problems, gastroenteritis and dermatological conditions.

Pushing authorities to take responsibility.

MSF conducts advocacy work urging authorities to take responsibility for improving living and working conditions for migrants. In 2008, following MSF's requests, regional authorities in Puglia undertook emergency measures to improve living conditions and

provide adequate medical services for the 4000 migrants working in the region. As a result of a joint effort between MSF and other organisations, the Ministry of Interior issued a directive that any obligation of civil servants to report undocumented migrants, as implied in the recent legislation, does not apply to the health sector. To establish the practical impact of the legislation, MSF is conducting a survey in Campania region.



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“I come from Côte d’Ivoire. I have been in Italy for two months. I travelled to Sicily on a boat. It was a horrible journey. We were more than 15 people, there were people throwing up, they didn’t have food or water. The time I spent in Libya had been even worse. After crossing the desert, we were put in prison without being given any explanation. For six months I lived in a cell measuring 5 by 10 metres with twenty other people. There was no toilet and we could hardly ever go out. Food was insufficient and the police would often beat us up. Now I have come here to pick tomatoes. They pay us three to four Euro for a box. If all goes well I will earn 30 Euros per day here, but I don’t have work every day. I live in a shack and I sleep on a mattress on the floor. I didn’t think I would have such a bad life in Italy.”

20 YEAR OLD MIGRANT FROM CÔTE D’IVOIRE,
WORKING IN THE TOMATO PICKING FARMS IN PUGLIA.
INTERVIEW DONE IN SEPTEMBER 2009.

