

DIVERSE

Diversity Improvement as a Viable Enrichment Resource for Society and Economy



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Policy Brief Lombardy, Italy - English version

During the last 30 years Lombardy has been turning itself from a substantially mono-ethnic society into a very heterogeneous one, with about 180 origin countries represented within its resident population and an incidence of foreign workers that reached, right during the recession, about 20% of the total active population; within this group, about 80% come from a non-EU country. Thanks to the size of its territory and to the diversification of its economics, the region has demonstrated a strong and continuous attractive power and has witnessed the progressive dissemination of migrant workers in different sectors of activity and in different jobs. Also, at an individual level, several examples of upward mobility have been registered, which take shape as migratory seniority grows, and outline the paths to emulate. However, at a general level, the needs expressed by firms and families seem to unavoidably reroute foreign labor towards those segments which are already widely characterized by its presence and which, in some cases, satisfy the need to cover jobs deserted by Italian workers (such as it happens in the typical case of home-caregivers).

The result is that no progress has been able to actually change the general picture of TCNs labor market participation, that continues to be characterized by high horizontal and vertical segregation into specific sectors and jobs; discrimination (with regard to retributions, working conditions and career paths); and widespread over-qualification. Moreover, all these phenomena have been exacerbated during the current crisis, parallel with a progressive augmentation of unemployed migrants and more and more evidences of the risks of social dumping implied by

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migrants adaptability and by the continual growth of migrant labor offer. In general terms, if the massive inclusion of immigrant workforce has represented the main factor of transformation of the regional labor market –supplying a quite relevant contribution in occupational terms and also to the production of GDP and to the phenomena of job creation and entrepreneurial development–, this process also contributed to reinforce its level of segmentation and to the deterioration of the general quality of employment as a result of a “low profile” model of integration which has discouraged those investments (in the field, for instance, of training and of certification of skills) that could now be strategic for a reinsertion of those who lost their job and to sustain the economic recovery. Finally, discrimination affecting migrants produces costs and consequences in terms of loss of competitiveness and deficit of social cohesion.

Starting from this picture, the DIVERSE project has aimed at encouraging a change first of all of a cultural kind, in order to inaugurate a new and more mature season in the relation between immigration and the labor market, where the former will not be seen exclusively as an adaptable and cheap work reservoir, but will rather be finally considered a potential to be valued through:

- the promotion of their role as a driving force for the economic development and organizations’ performance;
- promoting a fuller and more equilibrate conception of migrants’ membership in the Italian and Lombardy society.

These aims are being pursued by means of three lines of activities, conceived as strategic levers:

- a) the recognition and assessment of formal, informal and non-formal knowledges, competence and skills of TCNs;
- b) the enhancement of the awareness, in enterprises and their surrounding social and institutional contexts, of benefits provided by Diversity Management practices specifically addressed to human resources with a migratory background;
- c) the support to migrants participation in voluntary non-profit organizations of the host society.

In this policy brief, addressed to all the stakeholders who must play a role in the common effort to achieve these strategic aims, we will outline a set of priorities, suggestions and practical steps emerging from the first phase of our project. Further indications will be provided at the final completion of the project, also drawing on feedbacks from stakeholders.

1. Bringing to surface TCNs skills and competences

In Italy, the system of recognition of qualifications obtained abroad is characterized by an extremely complex legislation, which involves a wide range of actors and agencies, depending on the purpose for which recognition is sought. Above all, the main critical element is represented by the weak awareness and preparation on the part of the personnel engaged in the various stages of the procedures entailed by the matter. TCNs residing in Italy, for their part, show a limited propensity to apply for recognition, because they are discouraged by the cost and length of the procedures, by the fact that the outcomes appear to them as uncertain, and by the belief that employment opportunities are scarcely accessible to immigrants who aspire to have a skilled job. With respect to the recognition of non-formal and informal knowledges, we report the improper delay with which the State has defined the national framework of qualifications, thus contributing to the heterogeneity of regional situations and of the rules and procedures in force in each of them.

Within this scenario, Lombardy stands out for the existence of some interesting experiences on three fronts: the offer of technical assistance to TCNs willing to apply for recognition of their qualifications in the field of nursing and health care (one of the most promising from the standpoint of employment opportunities, at least until the recent past); the recognition of informal knowledges through a model that allows to certify individual skills rather than entire professional profiles; and the spontaneous activation by entrepreneurial associations, which has generated interesting experiences in the area of certification of non-formal and informal knowledges, also in sectors – such as construction and care – that exhibit a significant incidence of TCNs.

Nevertheless, there are many critical factors and weaknesses characterizing the Lombard situation itself, which can be approached through a set of suggestions.

A first indication regards the **necessity of breaking the vicious circle that sees, on the one hand, employers that are insensitive towards the opportunity to enhance TCNs' educational capital and pool of expertise, and, on the other hand, TCNs that are reluctant to invest time and money in the procedures for skills recognition.**

This calls for:

- a capillary action of sensitization in the entrepreneurial class, so as to disavow stereotypes and prejudices about the “place” of immigrants in the labor market;
- a parallel campaign to raise awareness among TCNs potentially involved, by means of the engagement of their associative structures and major institutions dealing with them;
- the development of quantitative and qualitative research on the phenomenon at issue, in order to provide reliable information on the value of recognizing the TCNs' competences in the Italian labor market.

A second suggestion concerns **the need to facilitate the procedures for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, particularly with regard to the most promising professional sectors** in terms of employment opportunities, in order to encourage TCNs to undertake such paths.

To this end, it is crucial to pursue:

- the strengthening of knowledge and skills of the professional staff involved, with particular attention to personnel in public administrations (where the level of information is most lacking), through the implementation of specific training;
- the activation of service points promoted by the competent offices and third-sector organisations, in particular migrants associations, with the aim of providing guidance, precise information and support in bureaucratic procedures as well as in the preparation of supplementary examinations (e.g., through targeted language courses).

A third indication calls into question the regional system of certification of skills acquired in non-formal and informal context, aiming to bridge what is now a clear gap between its potential and its actual functioning. Firstly, this requires **the promotion of the social value of such a certification system, through sensitizing initiatives addressed to the social parties, in particular employers**, and finalized to create awareness about the meaning, objectives and potential benefits of certification for organizations.

For example, these actions could include:

- the organization, at a regional scale, of round-table discussions and focus groups, with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders;

- the creation of a network of qualified assessors working in organizations particularly appreciated in their professional field, and able to disseminate the culture of certification within their areas of competence;
- the development, by certifying bodies, of a database of certified skills related to workers seeking employment, to be made available to organizations involved in the evaluation process so that the latter could concretely experience the benefits stemming from the certification system.

In order to **improve the effectiveness of the regional system of certification**, other necessary steps are the following:

- to make the online platform for the validation procedures more user friendly;
- with specific regard to migrant users, to give greater emphasis to the relational dimension within the certification process, for example by including mentoring (by a tutor or linguistic-cultural mediator) who can cope with the difficulties related to possible language barriers.

A final indication concerns **the advisability of promoting greater integration between training and certification of skills already acquired**, so as to make it possible to offer tailored solutions enabling an acceleration of the training processes expected for the acquisition of formal certifications. This, undeniably, would also have an experimental valence, useful for an overall increase in the effectiveness of the system for all potential users, whether they are immigrants or natives.

2. Enhancing organizations' performance through Diversity Management strategies

Until now, a very scant attention has been devoted by Italian enterprises and non-profit organizations to the theme of the application of Diversity Management principles within organizations employing TCN workers. Moreover, the few (albeit, sometimes, very interesting) existing practices have received only a modest attention by academic scholars and business consultants. This reflects mainly the fact the recourse to TCN workforce in Italian organizations is substantially determined by the need of filling specific job vacancies in low-skilled professional and organizational positions. This “complementarity approach” to migrant work keeps on underlying organizational managers' attitudes and, even before that, their (at least, tacit) views about migrants' roles and contribution in the workplace. This typically takes place, in daily organizational life, through the – usually unintentional – adoption of perceptions and stereotypes about TCNs' prerogatives and attitudes.

Among the factors facilitating DM practices we find: socially-oriented organizational cultures, stemming from various sources such as traditional paternalistic philanthropy or “political” organizational missions; a propensity to build partnerships and to be involved in networks with other territorial actors which are also located beyond the boundaries of the organization's business environment; informal processes linked to participative leadership styles and collaborative organizational climates which favor openness to innovation and exchanges.

On the other hand, among the factors hindering DM practices we find: pressures to costs reduction, further exacerbated by the current crisis; an underdeveloped use of more formalized and systematic tools for planning and implementing DM actions; the traditional absence, within the Italian context, of a “culture of evaluation” with respect to implemented programs and initiatives.

In face of this scenario, the first recommendation concerns the need to change the perception of TCNS as adaptable low cost workforce, by means of **an increased awareness of the organizational advantages implied by a new perspective conceiving diversity as a resource**. This must be achieved:

- at organizational level, by specific training initiatives devoted, firstly, to awareness raising and, secondly, to the development of the cross-cultural competences which are needed to manage a heterogeneous human capital;
- with respect to different organization's stakeholders, by targeting them with awareness-raising initiatives; this implies the involvement of specific experts in the field and, in the case of small enterprises, the constitution of networks and partnerships allowing to share costs and benefits.

A second suggestion concerns the opportunity of **bringing to light the tacit dimensions of organizational cultures and practices already revolving around the values of inclusivity and diversity valorisation**.

This must be achieved:

- by reinforcing these "spontaneous" organizational mechanisms through more explicit and targeted interventions, starting from the promotion of organizational opportunities and events aimed to facilitate mutual knowledge and adjustment among culturally diverse workers (e.g.: multi-ethnic teams, training and socialization initiatives centered on employees' personal and professional self-presentation);
- by pursuing DM as both a particular area of engagement within an organizational CSR strategy and a transversal "umbrella" encompassing and fertilizing various social innovation practices (such as employee welfare, which, amongst other things, should include a constant attention to TCNS' "basic" needs, particularly in the case of newcomers).

A third recommendation deals with the need to **provide managers with explicit data and guidelines for targeted actions in the DM domain**.

This must be achieved:

- by enhancing formalization processes in work organizations (i.e., by written and widely-circulating rules, charters and codes), which, in general, are of paramount importance for bringing to light implicit potentialities entailed by diversity and stabilizing, within the organization, a recognized repertoire of experiences not strictly dependent on some individuals' knowledge and commitment;
- by strengthening organizational measuring/assessment processes, which are pivotal for generating virtuous impacts not only in the follow-up phase (for the monitoring of investments and the planning of improvements) but also in the upstream stages of an engagement in DM, especially for what regards the initial legitimation of DM practices among relevant internal and external stakeholders and therefore the involvement of the latter;
- by improving organizational communication, both internally and externally, about implemented DM practices and their effects;
- at a more general level, by means of institutional initiatives aimed at promoting a "collective" culture about the role of explicit forms of assessment and communication of DM practices (e.g.: by emphasizing the relevance of this kind of indicators within formal standards of CSR accounting and reporting used at both the national and local level).

Finally, what clearly emerges is the need of **improving the visibility of the diversity issue**.

This must be achieved:

- by encouraging and promoting academic and applied research on DM practices, also by increasing the relationships, and improving the quality of collaboration, among different types of research centers (e.g.: academic teams, institutions and associations' research departments) whose activities revolve around topics related to migrants' labor and social integration;
- by identifying specific incentives that may be relied on for involving different stakeholders (e.g.: enterprises with their competitive concerns, public bodies with their policy goals for social development and cohesion) in long-run and focused initiatives aimed at developing and sharing knowledge about ongoing experiences, problems typically coped with and possible good practices in this field.

3. Promoting civic engagement and volunteering among non-EU citizens

Neither local authorities nor civil society actors seem to be fully aware of the role that their formal engagement in volunteering can play in supporting the process of TCNs integration, as well as – obviously – in contributing to the performance of volunteer organizations themselves and, consequently, to the social, civil and cultural development at the local level. At the legislative level, the provision of an entry visa to Italy for reasons of volunteering and a reward system for the renewal of a residence permit assigning specific weight to volunteering activities are important innovations, if only at a symbolic level. Whatever reflection on this issue, however, is hindered by the lack of data and studies on TCNs' participation in mainstream associations; according to experts and privileged witnesses, this presence would seem to be rather modest, due to the lack of specific recruitment campaigns but also to the widespread perception of TCNs as users and beneficiaries of voluntary organizations, rather than as a pool of competences and experiences to be valorized for the improvement of organizational performance itself. Only in rare cases, indigenous organizations have launched ad hoc projects for the involvement and valorization of TCNs, but these examples show how engagement in volunteering can be crucial for immigrants empowerment, integration, and the social perception of TCNs. The picture is different with regard to “ethnic” associations: they are numerous and fairly attractive, albeit characterized by some well-known weaknesses in financial and organizational terms and seldom preferred to indigenous ones in the allocation of competences and funding from the public bodies.

A first indication regards **the need to promote, resolutely, a cultural change referred to the models of reception and support addressed to foreign people**, which are still prevalent in a large part of both civil society and the institutional domain. What seems to be urgent, here, is the formation of a new mindset that leads to view immigrants not only as people in difficulty and requiring an emergency response and/or an essentially economic help, but rather as new actors in a plural society who are able, if they are accompanied, to activate potentialities and resources, thereby contributing to a common growth.

Within this frame, **what appears to be pivotal is civil society and institutions' capacity to read, acknowledge and bring to surface – determinedly – the untapped potential of immigrants.**

This can be facilitated:

- by a revitalization of volunteering as a space of promotion and personal activation of TCNs, and, at the same time, of integration and construction of social cohesion. We wish for the development of tailored training initiatives addressed to volunteers and those figures playing key roles in third-sector organizations, so as to accomplish the shift – which can no longer

be postponed – from a purely assistencial approach to another one based on capacitation (that is, empowerment);

- by processes of sensitization addressed to the volunteering and third-sector world and focused on the benefits, for these organizations themselves and the local communities, stemming from the inclusion of volunteers of foreign origin, so as to overcome a set of resistances that are still widespread;
- by the extension of this new perspective – i.e., from assistance to capacitation – to funding bodies (foundations, philanthropic organizations, etc.) and institutions, so as to direct social planning, right from the preparation of calls and other financing devices, towards promotional goals.

A second suggestion concerns **the need for the development of resources – in terms of space, time, processes and tools – in order to facilitate, accompany and monitor the emergence and growth of skills which TCNs, are the bearers of.**

Here, it is necessary to activate at least three levels of intervention:

- at the cultural level: it is vital to concur to develop and disseminate a more articulated vision of the migratory phenomenon, leading to accept, consciously and critically, the challenges that stem from it; all this in an open and constructive perspective with regard to the positive outcomes than migration can bring to the Country, starting from the practical contribution provided by immigrant individuals and families;
- at the process level: it is necessary to modelize and disseminate the approach experimented with the project DIVERSE, by preparing volunteer and professional profiles able to accompany individuals, organizations and local communities towards an actual integration of TCNs, through the activation of concrete paths which have to generate value for many parties, and to be visible to the community, in innovative fields (e.g.: school, culture, sports);
- at the method level: what appears to be essential is the development of tools – which must be as shared as possible – for the assessment of TCNs' competences, so as to systematically collect information on the phenomenon, through a constant monitoring of the integration paths and by stabilizing processes aimed at the measurement and the evaluation of outcomes.

A third indication regards **the need to strengthen the connections between the world of volunteering, educational institutions, institutional services for job placement and the business world, especially when accompanied people are in a condition of employment precariousness.** The space of volunteering has always been an opportunity to bring out, recognize and consolidate competences not yet emerged or recognized. This can be crucial in finding a job.

Therefore, the following actions are suggested:

- the launching of stable and formalized forms of collaboration between the volunteering world and institutional services devoted to job placement, on the basis of shared planning efforts involving the services, the third sector and the migrant;
- the definition of common protocols for the certification of competences and the exchange of information between voluntary organizations, educational institutions, and institutional services;
- the creation of “on-trust guarantee tools” (fiduciary grants), to be produced in the volunteering ambit and to be used at the professional level;
- the promotion of tools (school credits, awards, public recognitions) incentivating and rewarding active citizenship for the volunteering of young foreigners.

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