

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

# Perceptions of Lampedusa as an Immigration Hub: Four Populations in One Small Island Place?

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This paper shows how perceptions of the Italian island of Lampedusa have been shaped by people's experiences with immigration and sometimes divergent perspectives among different population groups, stakeholders, and governance actors. With an eye toward policy applications, the paper argues that immigration has had complex effects on Lampedusa and that the island—as a place co-created by different groups—can play a role in changing perceptions of immigration to Italy and Europe more broadly.

## Introduction

This paper shows how perceptions of the Italian island of Lampedusa have been shaped by people's experiences with immigration and sometimes divergent perspectives among different population groups, stakeholders, and governance actors. With an eye toward policy applications, the paper argues that immigration has had complex effects on Lampedusa and that the island—as a place co-created by different groups—can play a role in changing perceptions of immigration to Italy and Europe more broadly.

This paper is grounded in the realities of Italian and European policy and practice, making use of the author's experiences as a civil servant. Civil service experience has the advantage of providing insight into the ways in which public policy is informed by, resists, and interacts with academic research (see also Bobbio et al., 2017).

The author also undertook a brief field visit to Lampedusa in 2017, which has enhanced his understanding of the wider research, which in turn draws upon Italian policy texts, press releases, and popular media literature concerning Lampedusa. This paper places emphasis on local and Italian sources, which otherwise often go undetected and unreported in anglophone studies of Lampedusa.

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## Background

According to the last official report by the Italian intelligence agency to the Italian Parliament (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2023, p. 36), more than 85% of illegal immigration to Italy comes by sea, with an overwhelming majority following routes from Tunisia and Libya to Sicily. For the average Italian, the epitome of illegal immigration is Lampedusa, a small island located less than 150 km from Africa and around 200 km from Sicily. During World War II, when the Western Allies landed in Sicily from North Africa in 1943, Lampedusa was, together with the small island of Pantelleria, the first stretch of Italian metropolitan territory to be occupied.

Lampedusa has a surface area of 20.2 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 6,000 (Istituto della enciclopedia italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani s.p.a., 2023b), mainly concentrated in the homonymous town. Lampedusa's economy is based on fishing and, above all, tourism (De Pasquale, 2020), with about 40,000 arrivals per month during the summer season stretching from June to August (ANSAméd, 2023).

The warmer part of the year also favours illegal immigration, here defined as migrants arriving in Italian territory without a visa, without prejudice to their potential entitlement to asylum. Illegal immigration is however a year-round phenomenon, with more than 105,000 people reaching the island by sea in 2022 (Redazione ANSA, 2023).

Despite decent connections with Italy, including ferries and a small airport (Lampedusa Travel, 2021), Lampedusa remains geographically isolated, which contributes to the development of a close-knit community, bound by a strong local culture (Archivio Storico Lampedusa, 2023; Il Diario di Lampedusa, 2022).

## One island, three populations

It is necessary to begin by noting that mass migration to Lampedusa is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back no more than a few decades (Indelicato & Dinolfo, 2021). It thus remains an emergent, rather than settled, element of Lampedusa's island identity and image, which is an essential attraction for tourists and visitors.

Cancellieri et al. (2020, p. 39) attribute to Lampedusa “three populations (residents, city users and especially migrants).” It is common for Lampedusa to be narrated as a place in which migrants are isolated within a secluded processing centre in order to safeguard the essential tourism industry and due to natural distrust from a conservative local population (Dino, 2006), even at the cost of violating international, EU and Italian legislation (Cucchiara, 2016). Gatta (2011, p. 360) evocatively states that migrants in Lampedusa are turned “from bodies to ghosts.” In this narrative, Lampedusa is the site of multiple spatially overlapping but largely non-interacting worlds.

However, a careful review of the sources, including those most opposed to the status quo, such as by Dino (2006) and Gatta (2011), shows a more complex and nuanced relationship between migrants and the local

population. Despite the common narrative, Lampedusa emerges as a place in which there elements of solidarity and empathy between migrants and islanders are counterposed with elements of hostility and mistrust that are fostered by the competing demands of the tourism-based economy and the central government's bureaucratic management of migrant arrivals. Under the Italian Constitution, immigration policies are the exclusive domain of the central government. In a generally centralized state, the main institutional actors involved in the management of immigration are the Ministry of the Interior and, in the maritime context of Lampedusa, the Coast Guard, a branch of the Italian Navy reporting to the Ministry of Transportation. The local Municipality of Lampedusa and Linosa, while certainly recognized as an institutional stakeholder, is already burdened by the administration of two small islands and can do little to influence centralized policies.

International media coverage of local, island-level understandings and perceptions of immigration sometimes even presents explicitly optimistic outlooks, with D'Ignoti (2023) recently going so far as to describe Lampedusa as an island that “thrives by welcoming immigrants.” In a piece that seems to go against the tide, D'Ignoti (2023) cites the ‘Gateway to Europe’, a pro-immigration work by the famous Italian artist Mimmo Paladino, which faces the main seaport of Lampedusa, the ‘Itinerary of Peace’ promoted by the local municipality, and other similar installations as examples of an “urban landscape [...] shaped by immigration.” She continues by arguing that the immigration phenomenon has benefitted the island with international exposure and infrastructure built by the central government in order to facilitate management of the arrivals to the island, including “a maternity ward.”

In the end, however, D'Ignoti (2023) sticks to the traditional narrative of separation between migrants and the local population, with the latter being content with benefitting from government intervention and leaving any actual insight into the immigration phenomenon to a niche of “researchers, scholars, artists, photographers and activists” who turned the local “cemetery of migrant dinghies” into a “pilgrimage site,” while “the only place where migrants and locals seem to cross their paths on the island is in death.” Even the interviewed aid worker Emma Conti admits that “it may seem like a paradox, but if you come here and don't pay too much attention to the urban details and monuments scattered around the village and elsewhere, you may not even notice that thousands of migrants come here” (qtd. In D'Ignoti, 2023).

There are certain contacts between the local population and migrants, as is entirely unavoidable on such a small island, and these contacts are not invariably hostile. After all, as noted by Gatta (2011, pp. 354–356), Lampedusa residents share a strong bond with the sea and are thus prone to sympathizing with migrants who are technically shipwrecked. This connects with a powerful sense of place concerning Lampedusa as an island in dangerous seas. Furthermore, islanders can find common ground with

migrants on the basis of their own generally humble condition, as well as in the perceived isolation, discrimination and even racism directed at them from mainland Italy (Gatta, 2011, p. 363). Yet the ambivalence is obvious in Lampedusa's local political history: One former deputy mayor of Lampedusa went on to become a senator in the main Italian anti-immigration party (Giornale di Sicilia, 2020), while a mayor of Lampedusa was awarded the UNESCO Peace Prize for her inclusive policies (Istituto della enciclopedia italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani s.p.a., 2023)

No media source suggests any consistent contact between migrants and the substantial tourist population, with the Italian Touring Club reassuring potential visitors that in Lampedusa “you won't meet an immigrant, not even if you wanted” since “the former military base used to process them is virtually hidden in the fertile Imbriacole valley, in the East” (Mantarro, 2014). During the present author's own visit to Lampedusa in July 2017, at the peak of migration season, he was unable to spot a single migrant. More importantly though, the media sources seem to take for granted the incompatibility between tourism and illegal immigration. This is true even for those media sources that are more open to nuanced analysis.

### **One island, three populations, one narrative**

A review of the relevant sources confirms the dominant narrative of a marked (and willingly enforced) lack of contacts between the tourist and the migrant populations, while the relationship between migrants and the local population is more complex, ambivalent and nuanced. The largely episodic, informal and uncoded interactions between the small local population and the migrants, often interrupted by the enforcement of stricter rules by the authorities managing the processing centre, have not affected the dominant, nationwide Italian narrative of an island being invaded and living under a perpetual state of emergency.

Both the current right-wing Italian government and its critics have cited the case of Lampedusa to justify or attack governmental anti-immigration policies, such as the controversial agreements with Tunisia (Debarge, 2023) and the ambitious Mattei Plan (Agi, 2023). In the opposition ranks, the political leader of the post-ideological Five Star Movement and former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, after visiting the island, criticized the leftist Democratic Party (rather than the right-wing government in power) for advocating “indiscriminate” immigration (Redazione Adnkronos, 2023).

The Democratic Party itself, while usually classified as pro-immigration, took an unusual, much criticized hardline turn under the tenure of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti, who in 2017 promised “less immigrants and more security in Lampedusa” (Ministero dell'Interno, 2017). Enrico Letta, a more typical, pro-immigration Democratic Party prime minister in 2013-2014 deployed the Italian Navy to the Sicily Channel (Ministero della Difesa, 2018). The operation, codenamed Mare Nostrum, had humanitarian purposes, but it still added to the emergency aura surrounding the Channel and Lampedusa.

As a small, isolated island, Lampedusa is reliant on connections within a network of other places (often other islands) in the Mediterranean, such as Tunisia, Pantelleria, Malta and Sicily. However, Italy's relations with Tunisia and Malta have a clear anti-immigration tone, with Tunis signing controversial agreements with Rome and Brussels to stop immigration in its tracks (Fondazione Openpolis, 2023). Malta has meanwhile partly endorsed the Italian position (Ministero dell'Interno, 2022) and partly been accused of rejecting the incoming boats and thereby increasing the pressure on Lampedusa (Maestri, 2023). Pantelleria and Sicily have their own different, serious issues to tackle. Pantelleria is too small and remote to lend any significant support to Lampedusa, and Sicily is still classified by the European Union as a "less developed region" (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2023). Despite this, the Sicilian regional administration did adopt some measures to benefit Lampedusa, for example in the field of health (Regione Siciliana, 2023) and social housing (Regione Siciliana, 2019). However, the Sicily's dominant narrative also presents immigration as an emergency and a burden, with Governor Renato Schifani describing the island as "overwhelmed" by migrants (ANSA, 2023).

This uniform, flat narrative dissipates the rich complexity of understandings and experiences shaped by Lampedusa's populations sharing the same, reduced physical space. The narrative is a liability not only for Lampedusa but also for migrants and for Italy, a country in steady demographic decline that remains stubbornly hostile to immigration (Corbellini, 2018). Even the perception of immigration in Europe as a whole is shaped by this Lampedusa narrative, with the Italian island recently becoming the subject of an *ad hoc* 10-point assistance plan drafted by the European Commission "to reduce irregular migration and provide immediate EU assistance to the Italian authorities" (European Commission, 2023a).

### **Manoeuvring Lampedusa's 'three populations': a strategy and its limits**

One could legitimately wonder how any change in the perception and collective experience in Lampedusa could impact a nationwide narrative that is backed by powerful political interests and endlessly amplified by the national media, under the control of stakeholders that cannot in any way be influenced by the island. However, as pointed out by Kelman (2023, p. 2), in their ability to contain apparent dichotomies and in their uniqueness, islands can be at "the forefront of environmental and social changes." Even a government, a media apparatus and a population hostile to immigration would struggle to preserve Lampedusa as their epitome of an invasion and an emergency if the island took a clear path towards sustainability, prosperity and internal cohesion. That is, a way forward for Lampedusa is to nurture a narrative as a place that flourishes with and because of—not just despite—its influx of migrants.

Described in the media largely as a border outpost plagued by immigration, the reality of Lampedusa is much more complex, as a small island with three populations: the islanders/permanent residents, the tourist visitors, and

the migrants. Is it impossible to imagine a scenario in which the migrant population could benefit from the assistance of specialized NGO and state operators trained to facilitate some kind of integration into or engagement with the island's other populations? Since the beginning of June 2023, the Lampedusa processing centre has been managed by the Italian Red Cross (Croce Rossa Italiana, 2023b), a private entity independent from the government and committed to the “principles of international humanitarian law” (Croce Rossa Italiana, 2021, par. 1.2). Furthermore, various international and Italian NGOs operate in the camp (Comitato Italiano per l'UNICEF Fondazione ETS, n.d.). However, most migrants are transferred to the mainland within one week (Caiffa, 2023), making difficult to conceptualize anything other than fleeting interactions with islanders.

The islanders' relationship with the immigration phenomenon is, as shown above, ambivalent. It would seem to be difficult to shift this in the direction of inclusion of migrants with the current international, European and Italian context.

Lampedusa's visiting tourist population is also unlikely to develop any meaningful relationship with the ever-changing migrant population, so much that there is a well-entrenched perception that tourism and immigration are mutually exclusive. The considerations by Kelman (2023) and Grydehøj (2020) on the insular potential for change, and the more positive notes by D'Ignoti (2023), Dino (2006), and Gatta (2011) nevertheless suggest that the tourism-immigration dichotomy could be broken if Lampedusa's role as a hub and gateway to Europe became a positive, appealing part of its insular identity and image. Once again, however, this would require establishing a meaningful relationship between the local and the immigrant population, which faces the challenges described above.

### **Lampedusa's 'fourth population': a key player?**

Cancellieri et al. (2020, p. 39) argues that Lampedusa has “three populations (residents, city users and especially migrants).” Our review of relevant sources suggests though there is also a fourth population in Lampedusa: the “researchers, scholars, artists, photographers and activists” mentioned by D'Ignoti (2023). Indeed, despite their “three populations approach,” Cancellieri et al. (2020, p. 41) further divide Lampedusa's “temporary populations” into “tourists, seasonal workers, immigrants and immigration workers.” Dino (2006, p. 136) focuses mainly on how islanders perceive migrants, yet NGOs and the press are mentioned as the forces that can counterbalance the otherwise apparently exclusive power of the central state over disembarked migrants. For Gatta (2011, pp. 363–364), Italian and local NGOs are at the forefront of attempts to export into Lampedusa the “cosmopolitan with a human face” model theorized by Miguel Mellino.

This fourth population could potentially be extended to the civil servants stationed in Lampedusa who have duties related to immigration, with Gatta (2012, p. 13) classifying the Italian police and military on one hand and NGOs on the other as institutional actors in the processing of migrants on the island.

This fourth group has the potential to facilitate interaction between migrants and islanders, which in the long run could finally lead to the positive integration of immigration into the island identity and image as perceived by visiting tourists, and thus to further contacts between tourists and migrants, finally erasing the immigration-tourism dichotomy. This group could also ease the integration of Lampedusa into international and regional networks, with both private professionals and civil servants likely to rotate between Lampedusa and other immigration-affected spots in Italy and elsewhere, thereby promoting the island's bottom-up integration into wider networks of human, cultural, and economic exchange. Working on this specific niche is the only realistic opportunity to diversify and specialize the economy in a small island like Lampedusa.

### **Leveraging Lampedusa's fourth population: from theory to policy design**

From my own civil service perspective, it is possible to envision Lampedusa's fourth population playing a crucial role in shaping immigration as a positive element of how the island is understood and perceived.

EU Institutions, in which I served for a brief period in 2020-2021, have established a consolidated practice on how to turn analyses into public policies. Despite being classified under the legislative process, such practice actually applies also to non-legislative initiatives, that is to say, public policies (European Commission, 2023c).

According to the Better Regulation Guidelines, policy drafting and design should be "informed by the best available evidence," meaning "multiple sources of data, information, and knowledge, including quantitative data such as statistics and measurements, qualitative data such as opinions, stakeholder input, conclusions of evaluations, as well as scientific and expert advice" (European Commission, 2021, p. 5). In the case of Lampedusa, a basic quantitative/hard indicator is lacking: the number of the fourth population. Since the island is an integral part of Italian and EU territory, there is no need to register with authorities in order to reach or enter Lampedusa, in contrast with the current situation in Venice, which is now recording visitors for very different reasons (Città di Venezia, 2023). Most non-resident people arriving to Lampedusa will indeed be registered due to their coming by plane or being guests at tourism facilities, but they are under no obligation to state the nature of their business. In any case, the related data are not public and are protected by EU and Italian privacy legislation.

There is nevertheless sufficient data to shed light on the governance level of policies aimed at strengthening the action of Lampedusa's fourth population and its interactions with and influence over the other three main population groups (island residents, visiting tourists and migrants).

The possible levels of governance action are: EU, national, regional, municipal and grassroots. The EU, national and regional/Sicilian institutions are, for the time being, more or less firmly committed to the dominant narrative of immigration as an emergency. The European Union, for political reasons, has been drifting more and more towards a conservative stance on this issue, with the already controversial 'Dublin Regulation' recently amended to further restrict immigrant rights (Barbero, 2023; Binetti Armstrong, 2020). The Italian national government is firmly in the hands of a right-wing coalition, and even when entrusted to leftist or post-ideological parties has maintained anti-immigration or 'immigration as an emergency' policies. Sicily also has a right-wing government with an 'immigration as an emergency' rhetoric. Although the municipality of Lampedusa, which is roughly coincident with the island itself, has mirrored more closely the ambivalence of the local population towards immigration, the strong centralization of the Italian government system and the budget constraints of such a small and isolated municipality limit the island government's possibilities for exerting political influence.

What remains is the grassroots/civil society level, not so much for its ability to influence the institutional levels of government (something that appears unrealistic in the current political climate) but in its potential to adopt horizontal policies, generally labelled as 'self-regulation' (CIVICUS, 2014; One World Trust, 2024).

In addition to being exempt from the political biases and constraints operating at the institutional levels, self-regulation is particularly suited for strengthening and incentivizing the activity of NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in acting as a liaison and catalyst between Lampedusa's fourth population and the three other populations. It can even be said that, in this particular matter, there is a level playing field between self-regulation and the classic public policies advanced by institutional actors. Indeed, on account of its peculiarly spontaneous characteristics, NGO and CSO activity cannot be imposed using hard law tools such as obligations and sanctions. It is instead enticed through moral or monetary incentives, awareness campaigns, etc.

Significantly, the European Commission lists as tools of its NGO policy "dialogue and cooperation" and support "through EU funding programmes and different policy initiatives" (European Commission, 2023b). In the case of EU Institutions, the use of these soft policy tools could be justified by the EU's limited competences and the subsidiarity principle.

The situation is no different at the member state level, with Italy itself serving as a suitable benchmark. The country has a vibrant and growing NGO and CSO sector, known as the 'third sector' (Fara, 2022). Italy's third

sector has recently undergone an organic reform with the enactment of the first Code of the Third Sector (Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2023). After meticulously regulating the internal organization and statutes of NGOs/CSOs and their public register, the Code dedicates its Title VIII to the “Promotion and support to Third Sector entities,” offering them an advisory National Council (art. 58-60), self-managed Service Centres at the local level (art. 61-66), and a special Fund (art. 72-76). The real lifeline for registered third sector entities will be their ability to enter into agreements with public entities “to perform for third parties activities or social services of general interest at more favourable conditions than those practiced in the market,” without the need for public procurement procedures (art. 56).

The Code system reflects the usual Italian love for red tape, but it is overwhelmingly based on incentives, not obligations or sanctions. NGOs and CSOs, despite being offered a wide array of options to become registered (as volunteer organizations, social promotion associations, charitable entities, social enterprises, association networks, mutual aid societies) without even the usual notarial scrutiny, can still elect not to do so and remain eligible for public funding. Nothing in the Code limits public support to registered entities only.

Horizontal self-regulation is therefore the most suitable policy tool for mobilizing NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and CSOs (civil society organizations), with the possible contribution of public contractors or civil servants as catalysts for interaction and integration between Lampedusa’s immigrant, residential and temporary/tourist populations, with the long-term aim of reshaping perceptions of the island on the island, in Italy, and in the EU.

Self-regulation could take the form of working groups, codes of conduct or certification schemes. Codes of conduct with sanctions and a compliance mechanism would be ideal, since they could include rules and guidelines to counter the stigma of NGOs and CSOs operating in the immigration sector, which are routinely accused of favouring illegal immigration. Significantly, a code of conduct has been imposed by the current Italian right-wing government onto NGOs operating rescue ships near Lampedusa (Vitale, 2023). A future code should direct NGO and CSO activity to the interaction of the ever-changing migrant population with the islander and visiting tourist populations in Lampedusa, in addition to rescue and humanitarian assistance.

Pending the systematic collection of hard data, inputs regarding the code drafting and design could be inferred from specific case studies, such as those in the following section.

## Case studies

### Legambiente

Officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of the Environment, Legambiente claims to be the largest environmental organization in Italy, with 1,000 local groups, 20 regional committees and 115,000 members (Legambiente ONLUS, 2023a).

The Sicilian branch of Legambiente operates in Lampedusa as the managing organization, on behalf of the Sicilian Region, of the local nature reserve. The reserve covers 367 hectares, including iconic sites such as the Spiaggia dei Conigli, which puts Legambiente in a unique position to cement itself as an integral co-constructor of the island's identity, interacting with both locals and tourists.

One might think that the field of immigration is outside the remit of this organization and that Legambiente could even be hostile to immigration since the arrival of battered and rusting boats has the potential to disastrously damage the delicate environment of Lampedusa. In fact, Legambiente did file a complaint to the Italian District Attorney's Office, the Ministry of the Environment, and the European Commission for the apparent inability of the Italian Customs to remove boats and wrecks from the island's coasts (AgrigentoNotizie, 2019).

Legambiente is nevertheless among the only NGOs cited by both Dino (2006, p. 129) and Gatta (2011, p. 364) as contributing to interaction between migrants and islanders. Together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Legambiente has recently coauthored a report on climate migration (Centro Astalli per l'assistenza agli immigrati ODV Jesuit Refugee Service/Italia, 2021). The President of its Sicilian branch explicitly challenged the dominant emergency-based narrative on the island situation (Legambiente Sicilia, 2011). The NGO is furthermore identified by Di Matteo (2016) as a promoter of socially sustainable tourism on Lampedusa.

The Legambiente case suggests that, despite the importance of the know-how of specialized NGOs focused on immigration and human rights, interdisciplinarity should also be taken into consideration in promoting NGO and CSO activity in Lampedusa. Organizations that do not specialize in immigration have the potential to avoid pro-immigration stigma and thereby more easily cooperate with public authorities and become rooted in the local territory and community.

Perhaps even more importantly, this case shows that tourism industry dominance should not be considered an inevitable obstacle to humane management of immigration. Indeed, a well-placed organization in a tourism-dependent territory like Lampedusa can acquire a strong influence or even degree of control of key tourism resources and facilities, such as the island's nature reserve. Di Matteo (2016, pp. 156–158, 164–167) undertakes a detailed study of Legambiente's immigration-related activity in Lampedusa,

which contributed to volunteer tourism initiatives, festivals and commemorations. Although the activities described by Di Matteo are not yet targeted at the general visiting public and represent initial efforts at changing the ways in which immigration is conceptualized, they demonstrate that immigration and tourism need not be mutually incompatible, as it is almost universally assumed.

### **Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church's stance on immigration is very complex, due to a doctrine stratified over the course of centuries (Sanfilippo, 2018); a delicate relationship with Italian institutions; public hostility to immigration; and difficulties linking up Church organization, ideology, and practice (Ambrosini, 2019). At the same time, there is little doubt that, at least under the pontificate of Pope Francis, the Holy See has taken a clear pro-immigration stance, with the reigning Pope choosing Lampedusa for his first pastoral visit outside Rome in 2013 (Ambrosini, 2023).

Ecclesiastically the islands of Lampedusa and Linosa are organized in a parish dedicated to Saint Gerland of Agrigento (Arcidiocesi di Agrigento, 2022), and the parish has cooperated with the Sicilian branches of the church in providing assistance to migrants (Piana, 2023). No updated data were found on the activities in Lampedusa of the two most active organizations of the Italian church in this field, Caritas Italiana and Fondazione Migrantes, which formerly shared an operational headquarters on the island (Redattore Sociale, 2014). A lack of updates also affects the data on the activities of entities which are not technically part of the Catholic Church but are strongly related to it, such as the Order of Malta and Misericordias. Both the Order of Malta and the Misericordias were formerly strongly active in Lampedusa (Confederazione Nazionale delle Misericordie d'Italia, 2015; Sovrano Militare Ordine Ospedaliero di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta, 2013).

In general, the activity of the Catholic Church in Lampedusa appears aligned with the practice of state authorities in focusing mainly on immediate assistance and on the quick transfer of migrants to the Sicilian mainland (Piana, 2023). While such aid is undoubtedly necessary, the lack of clear documented attempts to integrate the migrant phenomenon into the island territory and identity can perhaps explain why both the Lampedusa parish and the Sicilian church appear to be sticking to the dominant emergency-based narrative (Piana, 2023; Pizzimenti, 2023) which was repudiated by Legambiente. At the same time, the pro-immigration stance adopted by the Holy See at the national level was met with some hostility even by Catholics (Ambrosini, 2019, p. 14), in a context of a general decline in the Church's cultural and political influence in Italy.

This appears to confirm the importance of the grassroot level and of a bottom-up approach to reshape the dominant narrative of immigration, but – more importantly in the context of this paper – of an interdisciplinary approach not focused exclusively on aid and assistance to root NGO and

CSO activities into the island territory and establish a community which is neither strictly local neither merely touristic, and thus able to mediate between the local, immigrant and touristic populations.

### **Voluntourism in Lampedusa**

As both a summer holiday destination and a widely known immigration hotspot, Lampedusa has proven to be an ideal destination for voluntourism, especially since immigrant arrivals tend to peak in the summer, when the weather conditions at sea are most suitable. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that volunteer holidays and summer camps have been organized in Lampedusa by NGOs such as the Italian Red Cross, Legambiente, and Misericordias (Confederazione Nazionale delle Misericordie d'Italia, 2015; Croce Rossa Italiana, 2023a; Legambiente ONLUS, 2023b). Legambiente recruits volunteers in order to manage the vast nature reserve in Lampedusa, though as seen above, it is deeply involved in the immigration issue. Also Amnesty International runs a summer camp which it classifies as an 'activism camp', not involved in "direct humanitarian assistance to immigrants" (Amnesty International – Sezione Italiana OdV, 2024).

Voluntourism has been subject to criticism for bringing few benefits and possibly even disrupting local communities (Learning Network, 2022; Rosenberg, 2018), and perpetuating neo-colonial mindsets and dynamics (Almela, 2020, pp. 22–27). However, it is worth noting that most of these factors of criticism would not exist or would be greatly tempered in the context of Lampedusa even if NGOs and CSOs could indeed be accused of favouring and facilitating illegal immigration, given that NGOs routinely conduct rescue operations at sea. Unfortunately, there are no data on what would be the most interesting aspect of voluntourism for this paper, that is, its ability to interact and mingle with ordinary tourism. For example, this aspect is not even considered in the APEC Voluntourism Best Practices (APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018), despite the strong voluntouristic and touristic vocation of the APEC countries. Indeed, the said Best Practices show a more general need to strengthen and deepen the studies on voluntourism (see APEC Tourism Working Group, 2018, p. 54, on quantitative and qualitative evaluation approaches). Such interaction would probably be facilitated on a small island such as Lampedusa, and it should be encouraged and carefully monitored.

### **Migration Observatory**

Activated in 2014, the Migration Observatory is operated by the NGO Mediterranean Hope. Due to its "awareness of the geopolitical and symbolic significance of the island for a phenomenon such as migration which has global scope," the Observatory "collects data and stories, analyses and communicates" the reality of immigration in Lampedusa, in addition to providing humanitarian aid to migrants (Federazione delle chiese evangeliche in Italia, 2023).

The Observatory is noteworthy for its mission of combining its work in the field with scientific observation and documentation, as well as for its *modus operandi* of “building relationships with different local bodies in the area” and “supporting solidarity practices promoted by civil society.” In particular, it has a close relationship with the Forum Lampedusa Solidale, a loose organization of island residents which shares with the Observatory a scientific, rather than operational approach (Daina, 2016).

Similarly to the summer camps operated by the Italian branch of Amnesty International, initiatives of this kind, able to collect, elaborate and disseminate scientific analysis data, are particularly important for extending Lampedusa’s fourth population beyond humanitarian operators and well-meaning people, and also for building a sound basis to monitor, incrementally improve, and systematize attempts to interact with other population components, a fundamental step in any policy design approach.

### Conclusions

Lampedusa can only truly be understood with reference to and on the basis of the experiences of the population groups that are active there. This paper has added NGOs and civil society to the usual list of Lampedusa’s populations (residents, tourists, and migrants) (Cancellieri et al., 2020, p. 39). These different populations have combined to co-create and imagine Lampedusa as a place.

Lampedusa as an island and as a tourism and immigration hub offers a unique opportunity for reshaping the perception of immigration in Italy and in Europe. Narratives of Lampedusa are strongly linked to immigration, which has a negative impact on how various groups see the island as a place. Nevertheless, experiences with and relationships surrounding immigration that occur on the island have the capacity to alter broader understandings of immigration as a phenomenon.

A possible way to achieve this would be to leverage the non-residential, non-touristic and non-immigration component among Lampedusa’s populations as ‘human crossroads’ and a catalyst for interaction between the three main populations of the island (residents, tourists, and migrants).

A concrete policy tool could be horizontal self-regulation by NGOs and CSOs involved in the life of the ‘fourth population’ on the island. Pending the collection of hard data and based on the case studies available, the self-regulation instruments should involve NGOs and CSOs not specialized in immigration and humanitarian assistance, and encourage an interdisciplinary approach even by NGOs and CSOs which are specialized in the said fields. The interdisciplinary approach should involve voluntourism and the collection of hard data for analysis and for the incremental refining of cooperation and policies. Finally, the self-regulation instrument should be as “hard” as possible, providing for sanctions and compliance mechanisms, in order to fight the stigma of NGOs and CSOs operating in Lampedusa and in the Sicily Channel as ‘quasi-pirate organizations’. The self-regulation

instrument would counter this prejudice by establishing a clear and strict legal framework, based on a practice already adopted by the Italian Government Authorities.

At the same time, the usual limits of public policies operate and are indeed amplified by the highly emotive, almost existential debate on immigration, while the co-existence of different populations in a small area increases the complexity and unpredictability of their interactions, and thus the possibility that the public policies proposed above do not bear the intended consequences, or even have diametrically opposite effects.

For example, despite the emphasis on the role of Lampedusa's 'fourth population', the local islander population will nevertheless be critical for shaping the island's attitude to immigration, with sources clearly showing a marked ambiguity on the approach to immigration, oscillating between the instinctual solidarity of a sea people with the shipwrecked, a common history of marginalization, the defence of vested economic interests, and a desire to preserve one's small territory and its traditional identity. Even with the implementation of the very same policies, different events, contexts, personal interactions and psychological dynamics could lead Lampedusa to becoming a conservative stronghold, rather than the stepping stone to a new European perception of immigration. On the other hand, well-intentioned policies could produce an oversimplified, saccharine pro-immigration stance at the European level, with migrants being encouraged to cross the Sicily Channel absent any substantial path to integration waiting for them.

In the end, only an empirical-scientific approach, based on successive trials and corrections to be planned and implemented with no pro-immigration or anti-immigration prejudice, could in the end produce results which are beneficial for Lampedusa, Italy, the Mediterranean and Europe.

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