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Preventing and redressing exploitation. Methods of anti-trafficking social work outreach in Northern Italy

Protezione sociale contro lo sfruttamento. Metodi dell'assistenza di prossimità nell'assistenza di prossimità nell'Italia settentrionale

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presents the strategies enacted by anti-trafficking outreach workers as jointly codified with the authors in the context of project FARM (www.project-farm.eu). The project aimed at identifying and addressing root causes of labour exploitation in agriculture in Northern Italy, by activating networks of local stakeholders in the generation of knowledge and preventive interventions. It addressed four topics: a. *emersion* of exploitation, b. *inclusion* of persons exploited or at risk, c. labour *intermediation* and d. *self-regulation* of enterprises. As part of the first topic, practitioners in social professions working in anti-trafficking organisations, identified four stages of outreach work for the *emersion* of persons exploited or at risk: a. *contact and engagement of persons potentially exploited*; b. *needs/resources analysis and service pact*; c. *bridging between beneficiaries and services*; d. *formal identification of severe exploitation and referral pathways*. With particular attention to multi-agency work and bridging services amidst a fragmented welfare system, this contribution frames the documented strategies among current reflections on outreach social work and underline its transformative potential in anti-trafficking efforts. Documenting intervention methodologies against trafficking in human beings, is a first step to enable an evaluation of their effectiveness, and to promote concerted efforts in this area.

ABSTRACT

Questo contributo presenta le strategie messe in atto dagli operatori di bassa soglia nel contesto anti-tratta, codificate dalle autrici in modo partecipativo con gli operatori stessi, nel contesto del progetto FARM (www.project-farm.eu). Il progetto mirava a identificare e affrontare le cause profonde dello sfruttamento lavorativo in agricoltura nel Nord Italia, attivando reti di stakeholder locali nella generazione di conoscenze e interventi preventivi. Il progetto affrontava quattro temi: a. emersione dello sfruttamento, b. inclusione delle persone sfruttate o a rischio, c. intermediazione del lavoro e d. autoregolamentazione delle imprese. Nell'ambito del primo tema, gli operatori sociali nelle organizzazioni anti-tratta in Veneto, Lombardia e Trentino-Alto Adige hanno individuato quattro fasi del lavoro di prossimità per l'emersione delle persone sfruttate o a rischio: a. contatto e coinvolgimento delle persone potenzialmente sfruttate; b. analisi dei bisogni/risorse e patto

KEYWORDS

Trafficking in human beings; outreach; migrants; Northern Italy

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Tratta di esseri umani; assistenza di prossimità; migranti; Italia settentrionale

di servizio; c. collegamento tra beneficiari e servizi territoriali; d. identificazione formale del grave sfruttamento e percorsi di *referral*. Con particolare attenzione al lavoro multi-agenzia e alla assistenza nell'accesso ai servizi in un sistema di welfare frammentato e difficile da navigare, questo contributo inquadra tali strategie nel contesto delle attuali riflessioni sull'*outreach* sociale, e ne sottolinea il potenziale trasformativo negli sforzi anti-tratta. Documentare le metodologie di intervento contro la tratta di esseri umani è un primo passo per consentire una valutazione della loro efficacia e per promuovere sforzi concertati in questo settore.

1. Introduction¹

Modern slavery and trafficking in human beings (THB) are 'umbrella terms' encompassing diversified manifestations: domestic servitude, forced labour, sexual exploitation, enforced criminality, among others (USSD, 2021). Trafficking in persons is a term adopted by legal instruments in most nations, and by the Palermo Protocol (UN, 2000) which is one of the most widely ratified instruments of the United Nations (RLS, 2021, p. 16). Trafficking in persons has been defined by the European Council (2005) in the Warsaw Convention, as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (CETS 197, 16.V.2005, Art. 4)

Research on THB is advancing despite facing significant obstacles, both in a more accurate measurement of the phenomenon (Zhang, 2022) as well as in accessing contextualised qualitative data, based on interviews with persons directly involved, which leads to better understand its core dynamics (Albanese et al., 2022). Survivor-informed measures and interventions can only arise from sound and contextualised research (Cfr. Gibbons, 2000). Gathering numbers is difficult, considering the overlaps in conceptualisation between 'umbrella terms' (e.g. forced labour, human trafficking, modern slavery), and their sub-categories (e.g. sexual exploitation, child trafficking, domestic servitude, etc.). Forced labour is defined by exploitative conditions with the addition of an element of *coercion* (e.g. threats, force, abuse of power), *fraud* (e.g. deception, false promises, deteriorating conditions, etc.) or *profiting from vulnerabilities* created by choice-restricting conditions (e.g. indigence, undocumented status, unemployment, etc.). Based on data from ILO, the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation (RLS, 2021) in the recent *Atlas of Enslavement* (2021, p. 11) reports 24.9 million persons in forced labour in 2016 worldwide, as well as 880,000 persons in Europe in 2012 working under coercion (30% in prostitution, the remaining 70% in other sectors). Only a small portion of them positively identified by law enforcement. It also shows that in Italian agriculture over 430,000 persons are involved in mafia structures (data by FLAI-CGIL) and that profits from the forced exploitation of migrant agricultural workers in mafia-like organisations amounts to 21 billion euros (data from Eurispes) (RLS, 2021, p. 51). In their wide research on labour exploitation in Italian agriculture, both the Placido Rizzotto Observatory and EURISPES have demonstrated that this phenomenon is not restricted to Southern peripheral areas, as was commonly perceived, but widespread in the national territory; it is not occasional criminal behaviour, but long-lasting and structurally embedded in this economic sector; it is not ethnically restricted to immigrants exploiting their compatriots, but also involves Italian nationals exploiting marginalised persons from any nationality (Omizzolo, 2020; OPR, 2020). Moreover, in the 2020 Report of the National

Anti-Trafficking Hotline, among the 5 regions with the highest number of emerging victims in 2020, four are located in Northern Italy.

Project FARM has provided a space for a transdisciplinary effort in rendering explicit the guiding principles and methods of anti-trafficking work. The project, co-financed by the European Union through the FAMI fund (2020–2022) and led by the Faculty of Juridical Sciences of Verona University, aims to address labour exploitation in 4 territories of Northern Italy focusing on prevention, by reinforcing multisector, multilevel and multiactor networks, which have contributed to identify and address the structural roots of this phenomenon (Zadra & Elsen, [forthcoming](#)).

The project was articulated in four topics, each led by a university in one of the projects' territories: (1) South Tyrol: *Emersion* of situations of labour exploitation or risk thereof; (2) Trentino: *Inclusion* of vulnerable persons, especially migrants, in systems of social protection; (3) Veneto: *Intermediation* between offer and demand of agricultural labour; (4) Lombardia: *Self-regulation* initiatives of enterprises and promotion of the *Quality Agricultural Labour Network*. This contribution focuses on the first topic. Emersion refers to the multiple possible pathways for the trafficked person to 'resurface', that is, exit exploitative situations and regain ownership over their life choices, including (but not limited to) publicly structured protective pathways.

This study offers a contribution to the codification of outreach methodologies by presenting the general strategies and the phases in which anti-trafficking programs in Northern Italy articulate their work. The contents were generated and iteratively analysed together with social professionals operating within the network of ATOs in the regions of Veneto and Lombardia, as well as the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano. In FARM, more than 40 anti-trafficking social practitioners from 9 different organisations were highly motivated to reflect on their methods and co-construct interventions. Bridging policy and service domains, they observed connections between different forms of exclusion, instead of addressing issues separately. We find such approach consistent with the *transformative social work* that aims to rethink social systems from the margins, with an approach to collective prosperity associated to social inclusion, human rights and ecological responsibility (Zadra & Elsen, [2021](#), p. 95; Elsen, [2019](#)).

After a methodological section, we will locate outreach social work among the different efforts to contrast THB, delineating the general approach enacted by social professionals in Northern Italy. Constituting the core of this work, section 4 will document the various phases of outreach work aimed to support the process of emersion by trafficked persons, as well as the various methodologies and instruments enacted during FARM. A conclusion will discuss some limitations encountered by these methodologies, as well as factors that speak to their effectiveness.

2. Methodology: transdisciplinary research

Researchers collected questionnaires from 9 partner ATOs (of which, one public local authority and 8 private NGOs relying on public funding), followed by semi-structured interviews. For more than a year, social researchers participated regularly in the coordination meetings of the ATOs network, where interventions were planned and evaluated. They participated in six joint field trips, shadowing outreach workers in a variety of activities in urban and rural areas of Pavia, Cremona, Padova, Bolzano and Rovereto, generating fieldnotes and reports.

Data collection and analysis were further advanced in the workshop 'Methodology of emersion work'. The participative workshop adapted the *World Café* methodology to the digital space available during lockdown. In its six four-hour events, practitioners were divided into groups to develop different chosen methodological aspects of emersion work, and later switched topics, to comment, complete and refine the work done by peers. It was a reflexive space in which outreach workers from a variety of organisations engaged in collective problematisation (Cfr. Moulart & Mehmood, [2020](#)), reflected on specialised language, identified the core strategies, methods, and instruments of their work, and consolidated a community of practice.

After this intensive process, knowledge circulation was facilitated, and a program of reciprocal training was organised, in which each ATO presented one specialised intervention or methodology during coordination meetings. The knowledge circulation process implied the involvement of ATOs in stakeholder interviews, as well as reciprocal support during interventions. We have described elsewhere (Zadra et al., 2022) this multifaceted synergy between social practitioners and social researchers against exploitation. The emerging knowledge was gathered in a final report on anti-trafficking outreach methodology, as well as printed as synthetic guidelines for practitioners (www.project-farm.eu). It is also the empirical base of this contribution, which draws from written material, (e.g. interviews transcripts and questionnaires, as much as network meeting minutes, joint mission reports and ethnographic fieldnotes, among others) as well as unwritten material: first-hand experiences and dialogues (with outreach workers, exploited persons as well as a trafficker of agricultural workers).

Data analysis was initially performed through a thematic analysis of all types of gathered data, performed through a codification in MAXQDA, and subsequently informed by relevant literature. Resulting summaries of the main strategies and processes of anti-trafficking interventions were iteratively presented to ATOs in joint meetings and other settings for clarification, interpretation, and feedback. Thus, the more than 40 participants in this research were not considered only as expert sources or potential users of knowledge, but as active producers of such knowledge, engaged in iterative processes of data collection and data analysis. The process was, then, coherent with the transdisciplinary methodology of social innovation research (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008; Moulaert et al., 2017; Novy et al., 2013; Nowotny, 2003).

3. Efforts against THB: the value of outreach social work

Twenty years after the Palermo Protocol, when most countries have adopted some form of anti-trafficking laws and policies, the perspective is shifting from a punitive approach to a human rights approach, focused on structural change as suggested by experts (e.g. Giammarinaro, 2022; Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Recognising the importance of legal measures, the *Atlas of Enslavement* considers that even the best implemented of policies are not sufficient, as 'the reality in the world of work today contradicts the basic assumption that forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery are outliers and can, therefore, be eradicated through criminal justice measures' (RLS, 2021, p. 17). Zhang (2022, p. 4) observes that the law enforcement narrative 'has been replaced by a structural perspective that aims at systemic change of the social environment that engenders human trafficking activities'. Legal measures are necessary, but not enough to transform structural conditions on a wider scale. As Jim Ife observes: 'with a legal approach to human rights we have a rights regime that is negative – it focuses on the prevention or punishment of human rights violations, rather than what needs to be done to help people realise their rights' (Ife, 2016, p. 8). Mariagrazia Giammarinaro, former Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on Trafficking in Human Beings, observes that to prevent and combat severe exploitation, it is necessary to 'go beyond a law enforcement approach and promote social justice responses, based on a human rights approach and a gender perspective' and goes on proposing a rich list of innovative multisector measures (Giammarinaro, 2022, p. 10). Structural causes of exploitation need to be recognised and transformed, through multilevel, multisector and multi-actor networks (Zadra & Elsen, [forthcoming](#)) which can overcome a fragmented approach to this complex social problem.

Policy and governmental measures against THB are currently being systematically reported, since the landmark report of UNODC (2021). However, anti-trafficking initiatives are not restricted to public authority, and interventions from other actors in multiple sectors remain under-documented (Foot et al., 2015). This article contributes to highlight the bridging role of street-level social professionals from anti-trafficking organisations, and their key efforts to reach marginalised groups, exploited or at risk of exploitation, connecting them with service providers. By enacting

outreach social work, they generate forms of self-prevention and reciprocal support among marginalised persons, and foster innovation of services to lower their accessibility thresholds as well as contribute to identify exploited persons. Reflections on the transformative potential of outreach social work are gaining momentum in current literature (Grymonprez & Roose, 2022; Grymonprez et al., 2017; Szeintuch, 2015), and highlighting their contribution not only to the linkage between clients and services, but as a *practice of accessibility*, 'questioning assumptions and logics in the current welfare state' while enacting dynamics of social inclusion (Grymonprez et al., 2017, p. 462, 468).

Anti-trafficking organisations (ATOs) in Italy have developed social interventions in the last decades, predominantly around sexual exploitation. Since 2016, new legislation on labour exploitation (L.199/2016) has opened anti-trafficking protective pathways to persons exploited in a variety of industries, and ATOs have been adapting their methodology to areas such as agriculture, textile industries, tourism, construction, among others. Professionals in ATOs identify their general approach with a varied terminology: *outreach*, *street work*, *proximity assistance*, *low-threshold service*. Outreach work faces the ever-changing contexts and blurred boundaries of isolated persons and groups. This type of work requires a *structured flexibility*, which allows to create situated approaches. Andersson observed that 'outreach workers (...) tend to give prominence to flexible interventions and personal engagement', seeing themselves as prepared to think and act 'outside the box', because of the special needs of their target population (Andersson, 2013, p. 174). Currently among anti-trafficking workers in Northern Italy such flexibility is considered a given. However, the high turnover and increasing pressures to demonstrate effectiveness in the face of great diversification of ATO's practices has generated the need of structuring spaces of methodological reflexivity and exchange, e.g. on outreach efforts, context analysis strategies and evaluation criteria. It has brought practitioners to confront the ambivalence between recognising the need of methodological flexibility, and the need of codification and validation of effective methods (Cfr. Davy, 2015; Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019).

Analyzing the intent and methodology of outreach workers in this field, we recognise the complexity of their position as *street-level* or *frontline* workers (Lipsky, 2010; Nothdurfter, 2020), having to reinterpret policies and services to generate access to forms of social support that do not privilege *control over care*; instead, function from a social work model 'where service users feature as partners who can determine their needs and take an active part in changing their living conditions' (Lorenz, 2017, p. 26). Nothdurfter observes that welfare state research is increasingly considering what happens in its street-level frontlines, and generating new participative approaches, overcoming

the dichotomous view of citizens either as passive benefits recipients or as being obliged to be active. Instead, it would recognize them as subjects handling their welfare by being able to choose and live a life they value and by making their voice heard in relation to public services. (Nothdurfter, 2020, p. 6)

The position of frontline outreach workers as brokers of connections to resources for self-development contributes to foster an integrated approach to refugee's socio-economic development, by generating autonomy, self-organisation and cooperation (Cfr. Elsen & Lintner, 2018; Lintner & Elsen, 2020).

In FARm, practitioners developed knowledge and interventions on *emersion methodology*. The objective of professionals that engage for the *emersion* of severe exploitation is the identification, protection, and assistance of exploited persons, or persons at risk of exploitation. The Triennial Plan of the Ministry of Labour against labour exploitation explains that 'the unified program of *emersion* is implemented through projects at the territorial level aimed at granting adequate conditions of accommodation, food and health care and, thereafter, the continuation of assistance for social integration' (MLPS, 2020). Such work in Northern Italy is publicly funded, and in some cases publicly coordinated, however, it is for the most part enacted by NGOs, cooperatives or other third sector entities, through multidisciplinary teams. Practitioners consider their work to support persons

emerging from human trafficking as a form of social outreach. Workers in this field practice what Andersson (2013, pp. 175–177) has defined the three main tasks of outreach work: **contact making** towards a target group that is ‘hard to reach’; **initiating social change processes** to improve life conditions, either providing services directly or connecting people to accessible resources and services; and **establishing and maintaining social support**. Such aims were present in the narratives of anti-trafficking work collected by authors.

Regarding work structure, usually ATOs assign workers to teams with different objectives, often including (a) street units for outreach, (b) reception management to handle protected housing and (c) education and job placement. In FARm we documented mainly methodologies regarding the outreach teams, which were most impacted by the retargeting of ATOs from a focus on persons at risk of sexual exploitation to the inclusion of those at risk of labour exploitation. Differences among ATOs were at the background of methodological reflection: those related to regional contexts, to professional background and years of experience of workers, as well as differences among private or public positioning, and politically driven or religiously driven organisations. Amid such diversity, however, practitioners were able to identify shared general strategies:

- **Prioritising the agency of the exploited person:** Creating conditions which promote the agency and autonomy of the exploited person: ‘We can welcome, assist, protect, accompany, or inform exploited persons. But they are the ones who do the emerging’ (Practitioner, L1).
- **Referring to the organisation’s mandate to establish relational boundaries** which are a condition of quality and safety of interventions for workers and users.
- **Adapting interventions to emerging needs**, instead of selecting needs on the base of available services.
- **Develop interventions participatively**, involving users and survivors, as well as public services and other agencies.

4. The non-linear phases of anti-trafficking work

Distinctions between different phases of outreach social work towards potentially trafficked persons was considered important, to break down this work in smaller objectives. Guided by users, assistance in the field proceeds sometimes by overlapping, delaying, anticipating, or skipping phases. At times persons initiate a pathway in a certain place and time, and it gets interrupted, only to be reactivated in a different place and time. Practitioners recognised the following phases of their outreach work, conceiving them as porous, interconnected, and non-sequential, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

4.1. Contact and engagement

The objective of low-threshold contact is to reach persons in situations of risk, vulnerability, or exploitation, offering targeted interventions and engaging them in protracted contact, instrumental in activating resources and support, to improve life conditions.

Even if they have conducted extensive observation in the field prior to contact actions, practitioners prepare for the unpredictability of the process and its results. The ‘inner disposition’ of outreach social workers in approaching potential targets in their own space was described in terms of making themselves available, with no specific expectations:

In street work, we operatives are guests. We approach their home, their workplace, their temple. We are visitors, and they don’t know who we are, they did not come looking for us, they haven’t asked us anything. We give our number out, but maybe they will never call. (Practitioner, L2)

In FARm, practitioners enacted several contact strategies: (1) mobile low-threshold units, (2) drop-in points, (3) multiagency interventions and (4) intermediated connection.

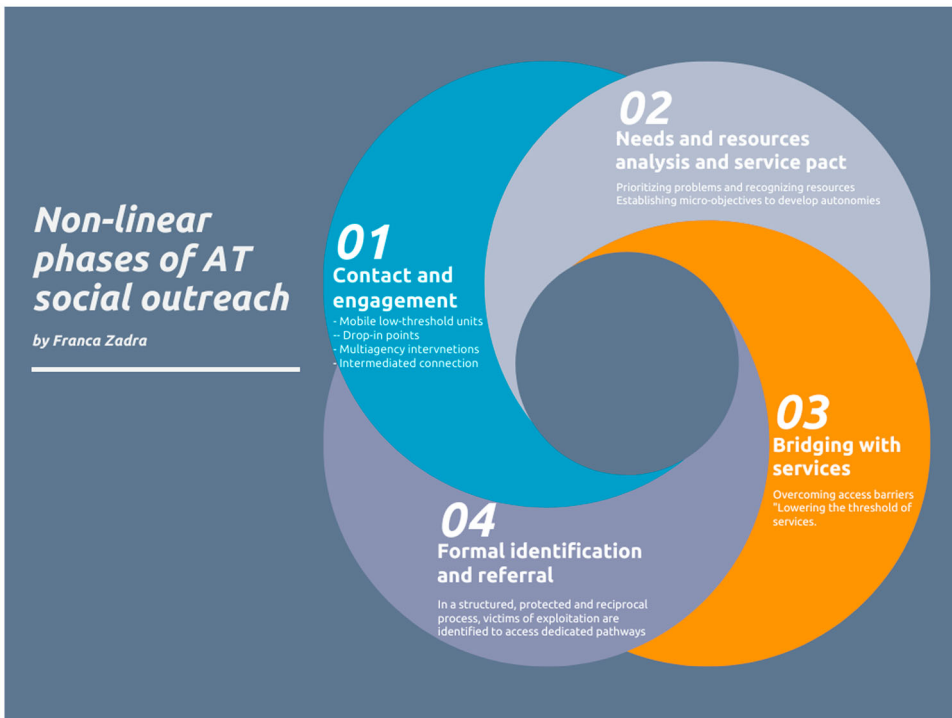


Figure 1. During iterative rounds of feedback, practitioners consistently rejected linear graphic representations of outreach phases, in favour of round or cyclical representations (Figure created by F. Zadra using www.canva.com).

4.1.1. Mobile low-threshold units

Practitioners identify access points, monitor them and schedule outings in small groups, in favourable schedules. Such access points are often public places, areas of spontaneous aggregation of target populations. In the case of seasonal agricultural workers, outings targeted transportation hubs towards intensive agricultural areas, vegetable markets, places of worship, bars in the vicinity of fields or housing facilities or reception centres, among others.

Social practitioners observed the worsening conditions of contact at the street level during the Covid 19 lockdown phase:

But then Covid, for the homeless, was tragic. To 'stay home' is tricky, if you don't have a home. All the small services they usually find in the street were closed, and they were even delegitimised in occupying public spaces. (Practitioner, V2)

Practitioners during outings usually coordinated the message to deliver to the persons they approached, and brought *engagement devices*, like small objects to distribute (such as sanitary kits for Covid-19, sweets, food packages, etc.) or flyers, stating the organisation's mission, contact information, and available forms of assistance. Safety measures and plans were also previously agreed upon. Connections with community leaders and contacts in the area were used when they could grant greater access, keeping in mind that being associated with predominant figures in the contact phase could be a double-edged sword, not always evoking trust.

4.1.2. Drop-in points

Practitioners in FARm had the chance of setting up in several cities drop-in points, that is, protected, accessible and informal offices where street workers could be reached to receive information, various forms of direct assistance (e.g. writing a CV, signing up for courses, navigating public administration

pathways, etc.) orientation to services or just active listening around a cup of tea. The priority is accessibility, over structure.

These are follow-up sites to contact activity. In some cases, these settings belong to the organisation itself, sometimes they entail scheduled presence in another service's location, such as a labour union or a hospital. They can host a single social worker, or a whole multi-disciplinary team. They can provide one specific service, or they can be an info point or a multifunctional hub, with on-call intercultural mediators. There was also a spacious service van which doubled as 'mobile info-point' by being parked certain days in certain spots, close to reception centres in several cities of the Trentino region (Practitioner, T1).

4.1.3. Multiagency interventions

Multiagency interventions are coordinated and concerted among different local institutions, which have the mandate of countering labour exploitation, such as labour inspectorates, law enforcement agencies, workplace health inspectors, judicial authorities, among others. The process aims to deepen the knowledge of the issue of trafficking in human beings in specific contexts, gathering the knowledge of professionals in different fields, and refine interventions to reach more effectively those affected. However, this is easier said than done. Paola Degani has reflected on such multi-agency work and explains that power imbalances between actors may compromise results. In fact, multi-agency 'projects of greater success are those which are equally relevant for the parties involved, on topics on which there is an equal need to grow, so that the advantage acquired by one subject automatically expands on the entire network', otherwise 'multi-agency networking struggles to move forward and the idea of working at eye-level disappears' (Degani & De Stefani, 2020, p. 48).

Multiagency work differs from other forms of collaboration, as it entails concerted interventions in which different agencies simultaneously enter a field of severe exploitation, each with its own mandate and priorities, in synergic cooperation. Trust and reciprocal knowledge between institutions is built progressively, generally through bottom-up processes. According to experienced coordinators, it begins with a connection focused on a particular project or initiative, that allows the different agencies to get to know each other, and establish an equal partnership, aimed at jointly addressing complex situations in which each brings its own contribution, and build solutions. Multi-agency work is progressively developed, for instance, by joint and reciprocal training, which facilitates connection and establishes the practice of mutual learning, while respecting the different mandates. The stipulation of partnership agreements makes it possible to consolidate the institutional relationship and makes the practice of multi-agency work less dependent on individual dispositions. Concerted interventions usually start with a case identified by social outreach units, by the labour inspectorate or by law enforcement, and involve partner institutions in a variety of actions.

A particular feature of multi-agency work regarding labour exploitation is the presence of *group emersions*. When an enterprise is suspected of labour exploitation, usually starting from isolated complaints, during the investigation is not uncommon for workers to receive threats or other coercive measures from employers for the purpose of silencing them. When workers talk, it is usually a collective decision, and suddenly numerous employees are offered protective pathways. Such situations require a rapid, safe, and careful management of relations and housing: albeit the group may offer strength, exploiters may introduce agents to monitor and disrupt the process. Practitioners narrated several cases illustrating the issue, such as the following:

It was an emersion involving dozens of people, of whom 14 filed complaints of exploitation. We divided them into groups and collaborated closely during interviews with intercultural mediators, trade unions and law enforcement. They had been robbed of their documents, had been threatened, had received beatings. We took care of their basic needs, such as food and clothing, and we were offering them training courses. The difficulty was, first of all, to find safe housing for all of them, because the organisation of the exploiters knew the flats where they lived. It is difficult to assert their rights when we don't have enough beds to offer. A critical issue is then to

file a criminal case, which is important in the process of applying for residence permits, and also for the protection of people, because it takes a long time before employers and exploiters are stopped, and in the meantime, witnesses may suffer consequences. (Coordinator, V2)

The complexity of multiagency work appears in this narrative, where synergy has been created between social aspects (food and clothing, training courses), labour aspects (interviews with trade unions on labour rights) as well as law enforcement aspects (building and filing a criminal case). Multiagency work built through years of collaboration has bridged what in other territories remain very separate milieus.

4.1.4. *Intermediated connection*

There is a variety of channels other than direct contact, by which a person seeking assistance can connect with outreach workers. Outreach workers mentioned, from lesser to greater formality: (a) *word of mouth*: fully informal mediation, usually from other users that have benefited from interventions; (b) *facilitation*: informal mediation from professionals in a service network, who put the person in touch with outreach workers, for instance, by facilitating a meeting or a phone call; (c) *pre-identification*: when services have tangible elements to suspect exploitation, and use standardised information gateways between organisations which have been set up to share information on specific subjects in writing; (d) *referral*: it is a fully formalised request to evaluate a person's situation in regards to trafficking in human beings, aimed at activating a social protection pathway.

4.2. *Needs and resources analysis: formulating a service pact*

The person in a situation of vulnerability who is supported by a social professional progressively acquires a greater awareness of their needs and resources. A common practice is *mirroring* the narrative of the beneficiary, to support a greater awareness:

We are acting as mirrors: we slowly give back to the person those sides of the self they showed us that maybe are out of focus, or that we were able to make more evident, and so they become more aware. (Practitioner, A1)

The process is conducted by the user, the only who can adequately interpret their needs, face the experience of the need and its causes (Ife, 2009), as well as identify the appropriate kind of satisfiers (Max-Neef, 2010). Practitioners contribute by holding a safe space and by bringing knowledge on the issue of exploitation and on the offer of local services. A coordinator underlined that when they are ready, the persons themselves determine which needs to prioritise, and which available resources, internal or external, to activate:

Persons are not only bearers of needs; they are not powerless (...) persons bring to us the aspects on which they think we can bring resources. But this is not the totality of their needs: only the part they want to bring to the surface with us, and it is not granted that their needs start from what we are already able to offer. (Coordinator, V1)

Once objectives have been identified, both the beneficiary and the outreach worker agree on a service pact. It consists of small steps towards the prioritised objectives and a suitable time frame, as well as terms of engagement if necessary. Aims of the pact should be articulated in micro-objectives, so that the pathway graduality is respected, and expectations are managed, on both parts. The needs and resources analysis and the service pact are not definitive, but constantly revisited, in sight of changing circumstances. The reciprocity and proportionality of engagement in the service pact, tends to soften the inevitable asymmetries of care relations.

4.3. *Bridging users with local services*

Bridging in this context refers to the mediation that outreach workers enact to generate a greater accessibility of services. Beneficiaries of this type of intervention are persons in vulnerable situations,

at risk of being exploited, or severely exploited persons, subject to experiencing a variety of barriers (socio-economic, linguistic-cultural, organisational, etc.) in accessing services, public or private, which could offer responses to their needs. Moreover, required services may vary greatly: health and social care services, educational pathways, labour union services, legal advice, support during judicial proceedings or asylum proceedings, maternity support, among others. Not all services are acquainted with specific situations of trafficked persons, nor they envision the kinds of factors that might generate barriers or evoke traumatic experiences. Enhancing service accessibility entails recognising that barriers are generated in the *interaction* between services and their public, rather than locating shortcomings in service users (Zadra, 2021). The aims of bridging work are, on one part, allowing exploited persons to access the services they need, and on the other, allowing services to reach more effectively non-users or excluded users.

Outreach workers described the necessary *graduality* of bridging. When there are significant barriers for a marginalised person to access services, they may physically accompany the beneficiary, to 'introduce the service to the person and the person to the service' (Practitioner, V3). According to user needs, they progressively wind down mediation, offering support before and after appointments, and then repositioning themselves as mere providers of information. Figure 2 showcases such graduality: the aim of bridging activities is to progressively *decrease* the level of assistance to individual beneficiaries, by building their capability for autonomous access, and to *increase* the level of collaboration with services. With a newly contacted service, outreach workers exchange information with service workers, both parties clarifying their mandates, service protocols and operational logic. At the initial stage, outreach workers provide services with insights on the issue of trafficking in persons, identification criteria, and referral pathways. When the interaction progresses, facilitated access pathways may be concerted, starting a process of lowering service thresholds. If collaborative synergies take on, a joint mobilisation is generated towards specific marginalised groups, and concerted preventive projects can be enacted. At the advanced stage, collaborative relations may be formalised in a partnership agreement, creating a structural framework for knowledge sharing and joint interventions that would survive individual careers and relations.

4.4. Evaluation and referral

Practitioners define referral processes as

<i>growing intensity</i>	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
<i>with the beneficiary</i>	<p>Informing on services: Beneficiaries are informed on services available, requisites and mode of access, location, opening hours, transport, etc.</p>	<p>Navigational assistance: Support is offered before and after service access, regarding booking appointments, gathering documents, managing expectations, etc.</p>	<p>Supported access: When necessary, professionals go together with the beneficiary, to introduce the service to the person and the person to the service.</p>
<i>with the service</i>	<p>Information sharing: Professionals meet with service staffs, both sharing information on mandates, objectives, resources and operational logics.</p>	<p>Facilitated access: Stable access channels are negotiated (e.g. a point-person) and collaborations are enacted to lower service thresholds.</p>	<p>Joint prevention projects: When a synergy is reached, joint projects are carried out, for prevention initiatives towards persons at risk. Structuring a formal partnership agreement.</p>

Figure 2. Graduality of bridging efforts of outreach social workers between persons in vulnerable situations and structured services (Figure created by F. Zadra).

a mechanism for the identification and connection of a person with specific needs to a specialised service that has the capability to address it. It requires the informed consent of the person being referred, and often entails a joint or circular work on a single case, in which different institutions hand over information which may be relevant for next steps. (Workshop, March 2021)

The referral process is ‘useful to clarify institutions’ roles, and efficiently manage time and resources’ (Coordinator, V1). This approach has an overall consistency with the definition offered by UNHCR of referral as

a mechanism of coordination and identification, possibly standardized, of the person and its specific needs to authorities or competent services, that is, to subjects that may better address the identified needs, in the respect of confidentiality of information and consent of the persons involved. (UNHCR, 2021, p. 56)

Social professionals highlighted the role of exploited persons in self-identification once they have been properly informed on criteria and procedures (Cfr. Ife, 2009) and mentioned factors that may influence access to the emersion program: a. indicators of potential exploitation; b. timeline of the narrated events in the present, and not related to distant past events; c. strong motivation of the person to exit the present condition and operate a change; d. other elements, such as circumstances of immediate danger, availability of information on other persons involved, among others.

When a referral to the emersion program has been triggered, a **formal evaluation process** begins. It aims to confirm the indicators of severe exploitation in the present context of the person, and the motivation to initiate a pathway to exit from such situation. It has been described as **variable**, in its times and outcomes; as **formalised**, as it has specific steps, and is handled in a structured context (informed consent, official location, documentation of meetings, etc.); as **consequential**, because the resulting report may be instrumental in determining institutional responses, such as granting access to a residence permit or accessing housing; as **participative**, as the trained professional and the person identify together the issues and the appropriate solutions; as **protected**, because safety measures are activated from the start, including a strict confidentiality agreement.

5. Conclusion: towards personal autonomy and fair structural conditions

The outreach social work that has been described in the context of THB is highly complex work, going up against consolidated systemic processes. It has been highlighted in the literature how stereotypical perceptions and narratives on trafficked victims may narrow supporting interventions from social professionals (Cunha et al., 2021). Participants were reflexive on their potential biases, and aware of challenges to their work: insufficient residential provision, limited numbers of identified exploited persons, immigration status interfering with accessibility of support measures, among others. Redressing efforts call for an integrated holistic approach, rather than an issues-based approach, which may result in service fragmentation. In supporting trafficked persons, Warria calls for ‘a multinational, multi-agency, long-term sustained response, with multi-focus on prevention, prosecution, and protection (including rehabilitation) is required’ (Warria, 2018, p. 720). Similar intent was expressed among research partners in ATOs working to generate such concerted responses, from a multi-agency approach. Without idealising their work, practitioners recognised that against the magnitude of the issue, capabilities are still structurally insufficient, and widely disproportionate: professionals only reach a small part of trafficked persons, and even then, they are not capable of fully redressing the depth of the damage that has been done (Cfr. Ramaj, 2021). The limited and discontinuous resources available to ATOs factor in, but the work encounters also context-related challenges, such as a precarious reception system that oftentimes reinforce migrant vulnerabilities (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021), the fragmentation among and within services, as well as fragile and discontinuous connection among different agencies combating forms of exploitation.

The aim of the social outreach methods described in this contribution is to support the (re)construction of autonomies of subjects that have been trafficked, exploited, or brought to a position of

vulnerability, as well as contributing to understand and transform conditions that may allow or facilitate exploitation, through their street-level interventions. Using flexible and contextualised methodologies, such as those described, outreach social work may facilitate autonomy development and integration processes in the lives of marginalised and exploited persons. At the same time, it generates prevention, by innovating services and improving accessibility of social protections. It can foster knowledge circulation, collaboration, and concerted interventions, generating synergies between organisations, to combat trafficking in persons and support its victims. On this base, structural conditions can be changed, and processes of institutional innovation can be started.

Social professionals participating in this research have experimented such an approach, promoting a transformative impact on structural factors that enable labour exploitation. It is particularly impactful in the multi-agency approach developed by the Veneto regional anti-trafficking program, whose exceptional results have gained international attention. Being part of a public authority, this program has the positional advantages that tend to be scarcer in private NGOs: resource stability, policy influence capacity, long-term strategies, as well as strong inter-institutional networks.

Partnership with ATOs has given us access to their collective expertise, which we have conceptualised together with them into a flexible structure of intervention methods. ATOs were interested in such action to enhance the reflexivity of the community of practice, as a knowledge circulation tool towards new workers and other institutional partners collaborating in multi-agency interventions. This contribution does not argue that all practitioners enact these strategies homogeneously or that their methodology is flawless: there is a growing requirement to evaluate the effectiveness of specific intervention models towards the identification and support of trafficked persons in different sectors. However, a previous step in the research agenda is to identify and document such models in their context of application.

Note

1. Abbreviations used in this work: ATOs are 'anti-trafficking organizations'; THB is 'trafficking in human beings', which is considered synonym of 'trafficking in persons' and 'human trafficking'; NGOs are 'non-governmental organizations', FAMI is 'Fondo Asilo e Migrazione' (Asylum and Migration Fund), a program co-financed by the Italian Government and the European Union, which funded FARM.

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