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INSigHT - *Building Capacity to Deal with Human Trafficking and Transit Routes in Nigeria, Italy, Sweden*

Begging: between “freedom of choice” and exploitation. Research notes.

Gianfranco Bonesso

SSIIM UNESCO Chair, Università IUAV, Venice (Italy)

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Begging

It is defined as a series of activities in which an individual asks a stranger for money, motivating the request with reference to his/her state of poverty or with the need for charitable donations for sanitary or religious reasons (ILO, 2004)

- Contract-type of activities *versus* symbolic/non-contract-type of activities
- Forced begging

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Research – what?

- The phenomenon of begging in Italy, with particular attention to the shapes it takes place in the territory of Venice, and with specific focus on the shapes and forms of begging practiced by Nigerians.
- Research in continuity with two previous research projects undertaken in Italy: “*Stop for beg*”, “*Third sector against pushed begging*” (2013-2015)
- «Applied» research: in-depth analysis on Nigerians and update on the state of the art, in view of future project planning.

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Research - how?

Semi-structured interviews:

- Antitrafficking operators dealing with begging (15),
- Law enforcement in the Veneto Region (5),
- (and informal conversations with) prosecutors and antitrafficking experts (3),
- Municipal social services in Venice (1),
- (and informal conversations with) antitrafficking of the N.A.Ve project (5),
- (and informal conversations with) men of Nigerian origins (4),
- other stakeholders (5)

Participant Observation: in the Venetian context (142 hours, Mar. - Sept. 2020)

Archival research: in particular on criminal proceedings associated with begging and trafficking, non-systematic press review, relevant reports

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Research – main questions

- What are the characteristics of the phenomenon of begging in Italy and Venice in particular?
- How has it evolved across the country, in quantitative and qualitative terms (profiles, groups involved, etc.)?
- Are there any specificities in the forms of begging among Nigerians, in terms of modes, organisation, places – with respect to other groups?
- Which type of intervention have outreach units put in place to address the phenomenon, with what methodology and criticisms?
- **What (if any) co-relations have been observed between begging, trafficking, smuggling, exploitation and Nigerian organised crime?**

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Projects and their experience

The majority of projects on begging, developed by outreach units, started in 2016 and 2018, after the National Antitrafficking Plan was launched and the first comprehensive antitrafficking projects financed by the National Government.

Different approaches by projects:

- a) **Pilot projects** (with ethnographic observation)
- b) **building on consolidated experiences and methodologies** in outreach work with people who are potential victims of trafficking and sexual or labour exploitation, by adapting them to this «new» target.

Common elements: critical issues in outreach work with beggars and difficulty in addressing/responding to need hence need to find new approaches.

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Profiles

- Mainly men of average age 18-35 anni (with exception of men from Bulgaria and Romania aged 50-60);
- mainly Nigerian citizenship, followed by Romanian and Bulgarian (and Roma people);
- other African origins (Senegal, Gambia, Morocco, Mali, Ghana, Niger), but also Bangladesh and Pakistan, specially after 2014.

Dynamics and evolution:

- strong increase in 2011/ 2018, peaks in 2015: different profiles in arrivals in 2011 and 2014;
- increase after “pacchetto sicurezza” in 2018 (with introduction of urban safety ordinances);
- interaction/dynamic of substitution among national groups;
- prevalence of stationary and non-contractual form;
- places and specialisation (urban centres in front of «strategic» shops”;
- supermarket, markets, traffic lights, churches, parkings, transit places, railway stations).

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Begging practices by Nigerians

- Multidimensional and complex phenomenon that can hardly be understood with rigid interpretative categories.
- It can be best represented only by integrating social, judiciary, ethnographic representations: in this sense the multi-agency approach is crucial.

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Nigerians: profiles

- Men (18-30 years old), but also women
- Arrived in Italy since 1-3 years
- Hosted in reception facilities (or expelled from it after 2018)
- Mostly with a regular residence permit, but with increasing legal precariousness after 2018
- Main origin: Edo State, but also other states in the South-East and West.
- Women: possible double form of exploitation: begging during the day, prostitution during the night.

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Prevailing modes

- a) **Non-contractual and stationary** (flexibility, with changes to partially contractual mode: for example by helping people carry luggage, in Venice)
- a) **In parkings and in front of supermarkets**, where sometimes there is also an exchange of services (identification of free car parks, help with trolley)
- a) **Mode “with banner”**: young men, positioned in various parts of the city, with banners saying «I want to integrate», «I do not want to beg», etc., organised in groups also to buy dustpan and broom

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Other characteristics

- Non-harrassing form of begging
- **Good relationships** with shop owners and residents
- **Same** people in the same places
- **Set times**, with shifts
- **Commuting** (for example from other provinces of the Veneto Region, or outside it, towards the centre of Venice)
- **Proxemics and body language**: they generally stand up and do not assume attitudes aimed at pitying. Normally well-dressed
- **Communication** essential
- Use of **symbols**: not always present (tatoos, colours of dresses: belonging to a *Cult?*)

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Pending recurring questions

- Trafficking? Exploitation? Self-organisation? Free access and exit from the activity?
- Different representations in different territories on the phenomenon: free versus controlled activity
- Precise organisation (for example precise occupation of places and shifts)
- Absence of conflicts for the use of places
- Payment or not of a «joint» (for the place)
- Differentiation/specialisation linked to national origin and type of place
- Similar modes across Italy
- Very rare reported cases of police reports and exploitation
- On-going investigations on Cults and criminal organisations, «spy offences», but little evidence of begging associated with trafficking
- Evidence of «travel debt» to be paid also by men

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Why begging if it is not very profitable

- Alternative to illegal economies and/or criminal ones (on which Cults are focused)
- Is there any space for «free choice»? People considered as «not very good for drug dealing» could «freely decide» to dedicate to begging.
- Immediate response, and relatively easy to do, to subsistence needs.
- Integration with other forms of legal and non-legal activities of the complex Nigerian diaspora.
- Need to repay the «travel debt».
- Connections and Collegamenti e/o overlaps with trafficking, smuggling and exploitation and «free choice».

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Stories that are not told...

- a) Rituals and oaths among men?
- b) *Cult* belonging requires full fidelity and «para-family bonds» (*bro'*, «*blood brother*»)
- c) Capillary presence and control of *Cult*: risks for individuals and their families
- d) the *Cult* offers a sort of «welfare»
- e) No self-perception of victim and/or mix of roles (victim or agent or control)
- f) Lack of trust in outreach operators
- g) Lack of understanding of why it is important to «tell one's own story»: example to enter into an antitrafficking project could slow down the process to repay the «travel debt»
- h) Gender representations (“if he is a true man, he should not report to the police”)



Based on these elements, the antitrafficking projects should re-consider what they should offer and how.

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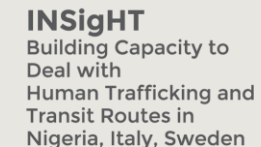
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What's next in the research?

- a) Improve knowledge by integrating representations provided by various actors through multi-agency collaboration, training, updating, involving various actors and territories),
- b) Do not look at phenomena in a separate way but rather study them in connection to each other (examples: prostitution, labour exploitation, begging, other forms of illegal and criminal economies),
- c) Contribute to further reflections on the interlink of male and female roles within trafficking,
- d) Continue studying begging as an exercise that forces to re-position the boundary/the border between personal initiative, exploitation, entrance to and exit from the organisation, cohabitation with different forms of activities,
- e) Explore further the topic of *Cult*, their direct or indirect role in trafficking and on the control of the territory, included the forms of begging.

Generally speaking, studying and observing begging means opening a «window» on trafficking!

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Grazie per l'attenzione/
Thank you for your attention!

Gianfranco Bonesso

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