

# Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU ‘hotspots’ developments

Update on Augusta and Catania as “non-operational hotspot sites”

Activities carried out from July to November 2017.  
Data until April 2018.



## Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU ‘hotspots’ developments

The *hotspot approach* has been introduced by the European Agenda on Migration in 2015 as a model of operational support for frontline Member States facing migratory pressure (Italy and Greece) in order to swiftly identify, inform, register and fingerprint incoming migrants at points of arrival and prevent irregular movements.

Disembarkation primarily takes place in seven cities in Sicily, Pozzallo, Trapani, Catania, Augusta, Siracusa, Messina and Palermo, while EU Agencies together with NGOs manage to cover non-hotspot areas with mobile teams.

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs),<sup>1</sup> conceived as a guide for the implementation of hotspot activities, also apply to places of landing other than the established hotspots (Lampedusa, Pozzallo, Trapani, Taranto and Messina).

In January 2016, the European Commission and the Italian Government signed an agreement for the implementation of a “*mobile hotspot team*”, responding to the need to carry out identification and registration procedures also in those disembarkation areas not equipped with facilities to accommodate arriving third country nationals.<sup>2</sup> This situation is quite common, with disembarkations happening in different places depending on sea conditions, port traffic and reception centre capacity. To date, the Italian ports receiving most arrivals are Augusta (Siracusa Province) and Catania,<sup>3</sup> both of which have no established hotspots. The organization of registration, identification and assistance to these non-hotspot areas can differ from one place to another.

This paper provides an overview of good practices and challenges faced in the *hotspot approach* in these two disembarkation areas with no established hotspots, taking into account the operational support provided by national authorities, EU agencies and international actors such as IOM, UNHCR, Save the Children, Red Cross, Emergency and other relevant NGOs.

---

1 Drafted by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration and Department of Public Security; available at [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/hotspots\\_sops\\_-\\_english\\_version.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/hotspots_sops_-_english_version.pdf)

2 See Oxfam “Hotspot: Right denied”, Briefing Paper, May 2016, page 9, available at [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp-hotspots-migrants-italy-220616-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-hotspots-migrants-italy-220616-en.pdf)

3 For the period 1/1/17 to 31/12/17 the number of people disembarked in August was 16,858 and in Catania: 15,680  
[http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_29-11-2017.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_29-11-2017.pdf)

### Augusta (Siracusa Province)<sup>4</sup>

Although the port of Augusta is large and well suited for disembarkation, disagreements have emerged over the last year between the Port Authority, political parties and the Ministry of Interior<sup>5</sup> regarding the completion of the Hotspot site. Currently the opening of the Augusta Hotspot is still uncertain, although planned. The Prefecture has installed a tent-facility near the port, where migrants are temporarily accommodated when disembarkations are frequent or involving large numbers of people, and where transfer to the hubs/reception centres takes time. The tent-facility, which is close to the docks, comprises of two large tents with a capacity of 100 people and some smaller ones. Identification and registration is carried out immediately outside this facility, in several containers. This makes Augusta a hybrid between a port and an operational hotspot.

The significant decrease of arrivals in late 2017 and the opening of more reception centres means that adults and unaccompanied minors arriving now stay in the tent facility for a shorter period of time.<sup>6</sup> For a small group of people, the procedure may take no longer than two days and they are transferred swiftly to the reception centres.<sup>7</sup> Social workers deployed by the municipality are present at the time of arrival to support referrals of UAMs with special needs and transfer to reception centres.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the hotspot areas, a short stay in the tent-facilities allows UNHCR and NGOs like EMERGENCY to have more time to assess migrants’ vulnerabilities and special needs. Vulnerability referrals are addressed to the Immigration Office, whereas referrals of victims of trafficking are made to IOM and relevant authorities who transfer them to ad hoc reception centres.<sup>9</sup> Red Cross provides psychosocial support to shipwreck survivors at the port and in the tents-facility.<sup>10</sup> The NGO EMERGENCY<sup>11</sup> provides psychosocial support in separated tents to ensure privacy and a welcoming environment upon disembarkation. The psychosocial support unit, consisting of a psychologist-psychotherapist and cultural mediator, conducts follow-up visits to reception centres to meet people who need a second interview and ensure follow up.<sup>12</sup>

- 
- 4 Number of third country nationals disembarked in the last months :July: 617 ; August: 858 ; September: 731; October: 128. Data Provided by Emergency representative, November 2017 Migrants disembarked from 01.01.18 to 03.04.18 : 773. See [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_03-04-2018.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_03-04-2018.pdf)
  - 5 <http://documenti.camera.it/apps/nuovosito/Documenti/DocumentiParlamentari/parser.asp?idLegislatura=17&categoria=022bis&tipologiaDoc=documento&numero=008&doc=intero>
  - 6 Previously, in case of large scale and frequent arrivals, their stay could last even 10 days
  - 7 Interview with UNHCR Field Officer-Coordinator Eastern Sicily and Legal Associate under the Project “Access”, in Catania, 9-10 November 2017
  - 8 Interview with Save the Children Coordinator of operating units under the Project “Children come first” and Field Officer Eastern Sicily, in Catania 9 November 2017
  - 9 Interview with UNHCR Legal Associate and with EMERGENCY representative for “Progetto Sbarchi, 10 November 2017. ; UNHCR team in Augusta consists of one Legal Associate and one Mediator speaking Trigrinya, Arab, Amharic, French and English.
  - 10 Interview with Red Cross Field Officer for Augusta, 20 November 2017. Red Cross mobile team at the dock consists of volunteers among which nurses, RC sisters, cultural mediators supporting ASP (local health service) physician.
  - 11 EMERGENCY team, consisting of doctors, nurses, cultural mediators and psychotherapists, is available 24/7, providing basic health care, social health care and psychological support during landing
  - 12 Interview with EMERGENCY representative for “Progetto Sbarchi”, 10 November 2017

## Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU ‘hotspots’ developments

On the other hand, Augusta’s *mobile team* is still facing challenges with regard to the correct implementation of the procedure and provision of full assistance to the newly arrived. First of all, from an operational point of view, as disembarkations happen in different locations, this affects the overall organization of the mobile team and NGOs, with different distances to cover to the tent-facility.

In case of a large number of arrivals these may stay on the vessel for a number of hours waiting to disembark. Only 50 people at a time are allowed to step off the vessel. Hygienic kits and meals are provided on board, but overall conditions remain unhealthy.<sup>13</sup> Once disembarked, and when they reach 70 they are escorted by the police to the tent-facility to start identification. Identification is carried out in the containers outside the tent-facility at about 100-400 metres from the dock. Thus, the waiting time before identification may be quite long, often without any shelter to protect in hot or rainy weather.

Upon arrival migrants are interviewed by a team of two Frontex experts, a cultural mediator and a police officer coordinating the group. Questions mainly focus on personal data and the reasons why the person has left his own country. The answers are recorded by the police officer in the “foglio notizie” form. If the person is adequately informed, s/he can declare his/her intention to seek international protection. As mentioned in several reports, the misuse of the “foglio notizie” to filter asylum seekers from ‘economic’ migrants may distort access to the procedure. Such a form has no legal value in determining the status.

The ‘foglio notizie’ form is not handed out to the person but filled in by the police officers, who ask questions, translate and explain the form, including in particular the section on “reasons to leave your country”. This information however remains poor and inadequate. In addition, providing information for the pre-identification phase is sometimes hindered by timing reasons. In these cases, international organisations only hand out leaflets upon arrival without any further explanation. The tent-facility can accommodate people for a maximum of two nights but that remains inadequate. Running water and showers are outside the tents. There are sanitary services such as chemical toilets, but they are often insufficient.<sup>14</sup> During the winter season, spending the night in such conditions further impacts on the migrants’ psychological and physical condition. At the same time, the tent equipment inside the temporary facility has improved. The Prefecture installed a fan for air circulation for the summer season, and introduced anti-panic doors.<sup>15</sup> The tent-facility is not a suitable place for vulnerable individuals such as UAMs. It is often difficult to separate adults from minors when arrivals are large scale and frequent.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the procedure for identification of minors upon landing is not uniform across the territory, although some progress has been noted following the introduction of the new Law 47/2017.<sup>17</sup>

---

13 Interview with EMERGENCY representative for “Progetto Sbarchi”, 10 November 2017

14 Interview with Red Cross Field Officer for Augusta, 20 November 2017

15 Interview with EMERGENCY representative for “Progetto Sbarchi”, 10 November 2017

16 Interview with Save the Children Coordinator of operating units under the Project “Children come first” and Field Officer Eastern Sicily, in Catania 9 November 2017

17 See Save The Children, “Children Come First - dossier IV” (July- September 2017), pp. 16-18, available at [https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017_0.pdf)

### Catania<sup>18</sup>

Together with Palermo, the port of Catania has been considered a potential hotspot site due to the significant number of arrivals registered last year. However, following local reactions, the proposal was abandoned.<sup>19</sup> Considering the scale of arrivals registration, identification, first assistance and reception procedures are delivered in a short period of time. Up to 700 people go through these procedures in a day and transfers take place within maximum 18 hours.<sup>20</sup> Among the good practices registered in Catania is the fact that the Prefecture and the Central Port Authority recently signed an MoU to manage the arrivals, designating a particular dock to this purpose. The latter is equipped with pavilions for identification and others for reception and healthcare assistance run by the Red Cross. Previously, due to Catania’s wide sized port, disembarkation took place in different locations inside the harbour, making the work of the hotspot mobile team and NGOs more difficult, as they had to transfer the pavilions equipment to a different place every time.<sup>21</sup>

In Catania UAMs stay at the harbour up to 16 hours, and are then transferred to *ad hoc* reception centres by the end of the identification phase. Save The Children provides assistance to the police in identification or separation of families.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other non-hotspot areas, representatives of the Minors Office of the Police Headquarters are present at the port and facilitate collaboration with the Province’s social services, in order to identify available places in reception centres and transfer them swiftly from the dock. With regards to the implementation of the new law (Law n.47/17) - which foresees that the minors’ age assessment is be carried out in the first reception centre instead of the hotspot-this is still in transition. In particular, the setting up of multidisciplinary teams consisting of one mediator, one psychologist, one social worker is not implemented in the same way across the territory.<sup>23</sup> The Hospital “Policlinico- V. Emanuele” (CT) has set up a multidisciplinary team for minors’ age assessment.<sup>24</sup> The Prosecutor at the Juvenile Court of Catania has considered X-ray examination – used in several regions of Italy – as unsuitable.<sup>25</sup>

- 
- 18 Data related to numbers of third country nationals disembarked in the last months: July: 2.386 ; August: 949 ; September: 1.748; October: 897. Data provided by Vice Prefect of Catania, Catania 9 November 2017 Migrants disembarked from 01.01.18 to 03.04.18: 925. See [http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_03-04-2018.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_03-04-2018.pdf)
- 19 <http://documenti.camera.it/apps/nuovovisito/Documenti/DocumentiParlamentari/parser.asp?idLegislatura=17&categoria=022bis&tipologiaDoc=documento&numero=008&doc=intero#04>
- 20 Interview with Vice Prefect of Catania, Catania 9 November 2017
- 21 Ibidem
- 22 Through the Save the Children network (present at different locations across Sicily) and in cooperation with the Immigration Office, the officers try to trace families using the information provided in the pre-identification form – “foglio notizie” – at disembarkation.
- 23 Interview with Save the Children Coordinator of operating units under the Project “Children come first” and Field Officer Eastern Sicily, in Catania 9 November 2017; See Save The Children, “Children Come First - dossier IV” (July- September 2017), pp. 16, available at [https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017_0.pdf)
- 24 According to Law n. 47/17 age is assessed by the Public Security Authority through registry office certificates and, if necessary, using the cooperation of the diplomatic-consular authorities. If there are still doubts about the stated age, the Public Prosecutor’s Office at the Juvenile Court can resort to socio-medical examinations, after informing the person in a language s/he can understand with the help of a cultural mediator. See Save The Children, “Children Come First - dossier IV” (July- September 2017), pp. 18, available at [https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/children-come-first-dossier-iv-luglio-settembre-2017_0.pdf)
- 25 D.lgs. 142/15, art. 19-bis

## Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU ‘hotspots’ developments

The Red Cross was the first NGO to implement a Restoring family Links (RFL) project in Catania. The Red Cross collects information about the migrants’ families and vulnerable people, and seeks to bring together members of the same family staying on the same vessel to proceed with the identification of all components at once. They coordinate with the Prefecture when transferring migrants to reception centres, to prevent families being separated.

The transfer might take several hours (15 hours) and consequently the risk of separation is high.<sup>26</sup> The Red Cross has also signed an agreement with the Garibaldi hospital in Catania for TBC diagnosis at the port and direct transfer to the hospital using a high-biocontainment stretcher.<sup>27</sup> The EASO team in Catania works in collaboration with NGOs and local authorities to speed-up procedures, providing mediators and information to potential applicants on the asylum procedure, early identification of vulnerable persons, including unaccompanied minors, and referrals to the authorities for dedicated procedures and transfer to reception centres.<sup>28</sup>

As in Augusta, there are a number of challenges in Catania relating to procedures and assistance after disembarkation. For instance, when the number of minors on board is unknown, referrals to the Prefecture for accommodation and transfer may be delayed and UAMs may be waiting at the dock for long periods of time.<sup>29</sup> The “foglio notizie”, filled in with the support of the police is also not handed out to the person during the pre-identification phase in Catania, as in Augusta. The translation and explanations provided by police officers during this phase remain poor and inadequate. Further, police officers still tend to consider some persons as ‘economic migrants’ on the basis of nationality or using the “foglio notizie”. In such cases, UNHCR interventions to correct the registration in the form may not be sufficient. This police practice was observed primarily in relation to Tunisians and Moroccans.<sup>30</sup> Despite improvements, reception centres are still insufficient both in the province of Catania and generally in Sicily. In this respect and unlike the hotspots area, less time is available to assess vulnerabilities, since in Catania disembarkation procedures and transfers are completed in the same day. Concerning identification of vulnerabilities different approaches are followed in each disembarkation area<sup>31</sup> and the EASO tool for identification is not uniformly applied by international organisations.<sup>32</sup>

---

26 The RFL is based on the activities of volunteers and Red Cross mediators. Today RFL services are provided by the national and international network, promoted by the International Federation of ICRC active in all points of arrival at sea/land. Interview with Red Cross Catania Representative RFL, 10 November 2017

27 Interview with Red Cross Field Officer for Catania, Catania 10 november 2017

28 EASO representative of Catania mobile team, EASO 7th Consultative Forum, Brussels 17 November 2017  
See also EASO operating Plan for Italy 2018 <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Italy-OP-2018.pdf>

29 Interview with Vice Prefect of Catania, Catania 9 November 2017

30 Interview with UNHCR Field Officer-Coordinator Eastern Sicily and UNHCR legal associate, Catania 9 November 2017

31 UNHCR representative intervention during the 7th EASO Consultative Forum, Brussels 17 November 2017

32 Interview with UNHCR Field Officer-Coordinator Eastern Sicily and UNHCR Legal Associate, Catania 9 November 2017

### Key findings:

- Art. 10-ter of the Immigration Act (D.L. 286/1998), as inserted by L. 46/17 provides that foreigners apprehended for irregular crossing of the internal or external border or arrived in Italy after rescue at sea are directed to appropriate “crisis points” and first reception centres. There is no specific and detailed policy regarding the nature and functions of these “crisis points”, that can be in areas with established and non-established hotspot. In this regard, the provisions relating to first reception still remain unclear. In these “crisis points” third country nationals will be identified and receive information related to the asylum procedure and the possibility of asking for Assisted Voluntary Return. The new Article 10-ter extends the obligation to carry out fingerprinting and registration also for individuals identified in the territory irrespective of the time of irregular entry.

This persistent lack of a comprehensive legal framework regarding the hotspots impacts on non-hotspot areas, such as Augusta and Catania. In particular it affects fundamental guarantees for third country nationals, i.e first assistance as priority, proportionate use of force in case of persisting refusal to be fingerprinted, monitoring of information provision, right to express the intention to seek asylum etc.

- Registration and identification procedures often overtake first assistance and humanitarian needs. Usually people spend hours waiting at the dock to eat and wash before identification. Such a procedure is aimed at keeping migrants’ hands clean at the time of the fingerprinting.
- In case of large scale arrivals staying in the tent-facility – in Augusta or in the hotspot facility – may be useful in terms of providing follow-up legal information to third country nationals. Migrants are stressed and psychologically exhausted upon arrival and the opportunity to rest one or two nights can help them absorb the information. On the contrary, the immediate transfer to reception centres after identification prevents full understanding of the procedures followed. In this respect migrants staying in informal shelters in Rome where they gather after the hotspots or reception centres looking for legal aid and assistance, confirmed that they do not remember anything about the information session carried out immediately upon arrival.<sup>33</sup>
- Although identification and immediate assistance is provided in a reasonable timeframe, migrants have to travel for another 18 hours to reach the designated reception centre. This might lead to dispersal in the territory, stress and impact on their psycho-physical conditions. Increasing the number of hotspot facilities would be helpful if that is implemented properly as the place to receive assistance, information and carry out registration and let migrants rest in safe conditions before being transferred in another reception centres.
- The fact that a copy of the foglio notizie” is filled in by the police officers but not handed out to the person concerned at the time of the identification is not a significant improvement compared to past practice. Moreover insufficient information can impact on the intention to seek asylum, which, if not stated or stated wrongly, may lead to deferred rejection or expulsion. For those speaking less common languages or illiterate, leaflets and preliminary information is often not delivered properly.
- The procedure for the minors’ age assessment, although standardized according to new Law 47/17, it is not fully implemented across the territory. This means that guarantees offered to unaccompanied minors may vary according to the place of arrival

---

33 Interview with asylum seekers living in Baobab informal setting where CIR provides legal information and support, Rome December 2017

## Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU ‘hotspots’ developments

- Return decisions are sometimes issued based on nationality or on the information provided by third country nationals during the pre-identification phase, due to wrong information recorded in the “foglio notizie.” Return decisions rest with the Italian authorities, who should normally assess the information on a case by case basis, including for nationalities covered by readmission agreements. Considering the risk of deferred rejections based on nationality, there is an urgent need to monitor the authorities’ assessment, including by international organisations such as UNHCR, IOM and Save the Children - who are present at the docks and who can provide suggestions with regards to the migrants’ individual condition and guide them in the asylum procedure.
- Assessment of non-visible vulnerabilities might be difficult when disembarkation procedures are meant to be finalised within 18 hours. This normally requires a proper setting and time available, in order to carry out individual interviews and ensure adequate referrals for each step of the procedure up to the reception centre
- The SOPs, as an operational tool for proper identification, registration, information provision to arriving migrants, can support the uniform and harmonised implementation of the *hotspot approach* across the country. The hotspot approach is implemented as a comprehensive framework for multi-stakeholder cooperation of what could be called “humanitarian border management”<sup>34</sup> even in places where a hotspot facility is not formally established.

Accordingly, the main difference between a hotspot and non-hotspot site relates to material equipment and accommodation facilities. The hotspot facility – if adequately structured with all services foreseen in the SOPs – can adequately respond to both registration and assistance needs. However, the need to provide humanitarian assistance should be the first priority over the need to register and identify. Setting up more hotspot facilities could potentially address the needs and well-being of migrants through proper reception conditions, vulnerability assessment and referrals as well as adequate time to receive and understand information, which is crucial in order to be able to access the asylum procedure. If this information is not fully absorbed, then accessing asylum remains an opportunity rather than a fully-fledged right.

\* *CIR conducted a field visit to Catania to interview the mentioned stakeholders in the framework of the project ‘Strengthening NGO involvement and capacities around EU hotspots developments’ 2016-2017, implemented by the Dutch Council for Refugees, the Greek Council for Refugees, the Italian Council for Refugees, ECRE and Proasyl.*

Claudia Sforza  
Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati (CIR)

---

34 IOM representative, during the 7th EASO Consultative Forum, Brussels 17 November 2017