

REVAMPING COMMUNITIES BY WELCOMING MIGRANTS: THE MADONIE CASE

By Joyce Akello

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The master's degree in "Migration, Rights, Integration" of the University of Palermo organised the "Madonie Workshop", a third mission activity with the contribution of the strategic budget of the Department of Law, and in line with objectives of the Prin Pnnr 2022, "One Too Many Monies. Alternative Digital Currencies and the future of Money". The activity was designed and organized by Professor Clelia Bartoli (master's degree coordinator), Ludovica Bargellini (PhD student in Human Rights), with the support of Morena Rizzo (Professor of Project Cycle Management). The group was also joined by Karen Venturini (University of San Marino) and Rachel Ellis (University of Granada).

The main aim of this workshop was to create a space for intercultural and intergenerational exchange to imagine synergistic solutions to common and diverse challenges. Participants of this workshop included local institutions, scholars, NGOs, inhabitants of the Madonie region, and international youth.

Around forty international students of the master in "Migration, Rights, Integration", moved to study in Palermo from different cities of Europe, Africa, Asia, North and South America, travelled to Petralia Sottana, an Italian municipality of about 2,000 inhabitants located in the Madonie mountains, not too far from Palermo (Sicily)



1. Some of Participants during the workshop

Upon arrival, the welcoming environment set the pace, a weekend away to the beautiful mountainous sceneries for social networking and sharing of new ideas. The morning of the first day was characterised with remarks from different stakeholders including Piero Polito, the mayor of the Municipality of Petralia Sottana. In his remarks, he commended the university for engaging students to share their ideas and pointed out the potential of the town once all resources are in place. Due to the reduction in the town's population, there is seemingly a lack of adequate labour force in different sectors because most people moved to the towns. Major sectors like hospitals do not have enough workers according to the towns administration. "We have

hospitals for example but without doctors”, said Piero Polito. Major departments of the hospital are not fully functional. Therefore, this initiative among other future programs is tailored towards seeking solutions for reviving key institutions and generally cultivating hospitable environment for new inhabitants, migrants among others.

Karen Venturini proposed ways to develop the local area through the solidarity economy. Giulia Gori, in charge for the humanitarian corridors program of the Evangelical Churches, explained how welcoming refugees has revitalized small, almost abandoned villages. Rafaela Pascoal presented her inquiry (commissioned by Sicilian Region) on Madonie setbacks and potentialities to design policy that directly address the needs of the inhabitants. This is because the locals are in better position to identify what challenges they are facing as opposed to using second hand information to inform decision making.

After having a frame and stimulations, in the afternoon, the participants engaged in focused group discussions in two working groups to brain-storm ideas. Discussions created platforms for dialogue and co-design among university, local institutions, and civil society on depopulation of inland areas, migrants’ inclusion and participation in the social fabric, environment protection, rural development, and mutual economies. Group activities were presented through creative methodologies such as, the theatre of the oppressed (by Alexadra D’Onofrio and Carlotta Ebbreo) and permaculture as an approach for cultivating community (Calogero and Bruna D’Alberti).



2. Ideas brainstormed by participants during the workshop

The working labs formed by participants, crafted proposals in several sectors with different perspectives. For example, the mobile App prototype, for housing connectedness and easy navigation as proposed and envisioned by one of the groups for a new Petralia Sotanna in 2032. The solutions to some of the challenges that had been identified in Petralia Sotanna came in handy from the ideas generated by different working groups. Some of the challenges included the fact that the Madonie areas lack people because majority of the inhabitants especially the young people moved to cities. Therefore, there is need to move people back to the villages through interventions.

The idea according to Giuseppe Dino, President of Petralia Sottana Council, is to culminate solutions through the discussions to create a lively community. “We want to create a lively community not enclosed like a lake

but open like a river where people arrive and maybe leave, and new ones arrive and create continuous flow of people”, he said. The possibility of creating a lively community in the Madonie mountains is a dream that can be realised through collaboration and collective efforts from the different stakeholders. The history of the area suggests high possibilities of achieving a vibrant community.

Giuseppe Dino pointed out that 100 years ago, Petralia was the only town to have a high school, not only in the Madonie, but in a broader surrounding area, hosting students and teachers from different parts. A community of new people that arrived was created. They came with new ideas, new languages, making Petralia an open community with progressive ideas open to the modern heritage. This rich history gives inhabitants of Petralia, and other institutions, the upper hand to become protagonists of positive change by learning from the past and replicating ideas in a modern and actual way.

This workshop, lab activities were designed to adopt the bottom-up approaches contrary to some projects that focus on only top-bottom leaving so many questions unanswered.

On the last day of the workshop, participants presented the results of the workshops to representatives of local institutions (several mayors, the Union of Municipalities of the Madonie; the Agency for Territorial Development; the Health Authority, etc.) and to the heads of the Sicilian Region's Migration Department (Michela Bongiorno and Saverino Richiusa). The expectation is that the ideas gathered will be implemented as proposals emerging from the participatory process.



3. Student groups presenting their ideas at the workshop

Important to note is that, despite the apparent challenges the Madonie is facing, the inhabitants have maintained a positive and proactive attitude. There is a sense of togetherness in small communities, who are welcoming to all people by giving them equal services as in the public hospital. The proposals made during the two-day Madonie workshop is one of the many strategies to revamp the regions key sectors and attract more people in the region.

