

## CRESM: more than 40 years of local action in southern Italy

A social cooperative based in Sicily, CRESM (*Centro Ricerche Economiche e Sociali per il Meridione / Centre for Economic and Social Research in the South*) has been working for more than 40 years with vulnerable social groups (young people, small farmers, immigrants, prisoners, people with disabilities, etc.) in disadvantaged areas of southern Italy and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, combining rural and urban local development with social inclusion.

*Alessandro La Grassa, president of CRESM (24/11/2017)*



*First "March against the Mafia, for the development of western Sicily and for peace", organised in March 1967 by Danilo Dolci (centre in white) and Lorenzo Barbera. Among many personalities, Jerry Cooper on behalf of Martin Luther King (right of Dolci).*

CRESM was established in 1973 in Palermo by a group of social workers, development agents and researchers who previously worked with the well-known sociologist and social activist, [Danilo Dolci](#), in Palermo, and in other rural areas in western Sicily, notably the [Belice Valley](#).

The projects and activities implemented by CRESM aim to promote integrated and sustainable development and social inclusion. The social cooperative has a long experience in the participatory planning and management of local development plans in Sicily and Campania, in particular within the framework of the EU LEADER Programme.

CRESM started to work on immigration from North Africa in the early 1990s, initially in the city of Mazara del Vallo, which was then one of the most important fishing ports in the Mediterranean. This work was informed by social research on the conditions of workers, families and young people who had arrived from Tunisia sometimes two or three generations earlier.

CRESM promoted several projects<sup>1</sup> on social and school inclusion and professional training, as well as starting one of the first initiatives in Italy on the creation of enterprises by immigrants (some of which still exist), in a period when legislation and bureaucracy in Italy was still largely unprepared for this new phenomenon.

Over a period of about 10 years, some important results were achieved, both from a legislative and bureaucratic perspective<sup>2</sup>, as well as from an economic and social point of view, with an increasing and now visible role for immigrants in the fisheries sector, a new approach to school integration, and in 2003 the first City Councillor directly elected by the immigrants communities in Mazara del Vallo.

In recent years, this work with immigrants has continued in Palermo, helping prisoners in the city jails ([RISE project](#)) apply for alternatives to detention (such as work experience). The focus has subsequently broadened out to 19 immigrant communities in Palermo, creating new spaces – both physical and virtual – to enhance this cultural diversity. Based on this vision, CRESM promoted the '[Comunità Urbane Solidali](#)' project, which was funded by the Fondazione con il Sud and used abandoned public spaces and buildings to create spaces for new cultural practices<sup>3</sup>. In this way, it helped support social inclusion and promoted social and political representation for all communities throughout the creation of the 'Consulta degli Immigrati', which was finally adopted by the city administration in 2012 as 'Consulta delle Culture'. The project enabled the potential of immigrant communities to be promoted, gathering up migrant know-how and mapping around green building and green design in a '[Migrant Know-Hows Bank](#)'. This resource gives immigrants the opportunity to share and disseminate the skills they've acquired in their country of origin or elsewhere, and create jobs and cultural activities.

In the same period (2009-2011), CRESM promoted an innovative initiative in Sicily and Tunisia – [Action Verte](#) project, which was financed by [JMDI](#) and the EU – to help Tunisian immigrants in Sicily who want to go back to their country to invest there. The project obtained some interesting results and received much attention from international donor networks as a best practice, and it was very heavily influenced by the Arab Spring. CRESM maintains good relations with the Tunisian government and with many Tunisian social and economic organisations.

In late 2012, CRESM started (within the Palermo City Project for Asylum Seekers-SPRAR) using part of the 'Comunità Urbane Solidali' building to host eight international

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<sup>1</sup> In particular two projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF): **Horizon Odissea Basso Belice** (HD-1995-IT-036) and **Integra Ethnobusiness** (IC/1917/E2/IR).

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the Horizon project we promoted a modification of the Italian Naval Laws that previously obliged the ship owners to ensure that at least half of their crew was of Italian origin. In most cases, however, only the captain was Italian and the crew was made up of immigrants (illegal workers).

<sup>3</sup> Within the project we obtained an abandoned building, that we restored and devoted to the social and cultural activities of the migrant communities, including the establishment of a small theatre for cultural events.

asylum seekers. Here again an innovative approach was taken, opting for a reduced number of guests in order to really develop individualised projects for autonomy and integration in the city. It also included the usual support services, such as Italian language learning and assistance with carrying out the legal procedure for international asylum recognition.

Building on previous initiatives, CRESM is starting another new challenge in Palermo. With the support of the Fondazione con il Sud, it is aiming to create a platform for the professional exchange of knowledge and practices among migrants and Italians. It will be a space for work, education, promotion and experimentation aimed at preserving, promoting and sharing traditional knowledge and skills, and thus build up the business skills of disadvantaged migrant groups. The project, called '[Nuove Officine alla Zisa](#)', will restore another abandoned building (a former 2 000 m<sup>2</sup> furniture factory) in the historical centre of Palermo. The building will host workshops, an organic/ethnic restaurant and a documentation centre on crafts for didactic purposes. It is currently awaiting final permits and a 10-year lease from the city administration. Unfortunately, in the meantime an arson attack damaged some parts of the building, thus presenting a new challenge. Nevertheless, the national television programme [Report-RAI](#), one of the most influential news programmes in Italy, has given the project favourable coverage.



CRESM is also promoting another initiative in Castelvetro (100 km from Palermo and 20 km from our headquarters in Gibellina) called '[Fattoria VitAttiva](#)' (Active Life Farm). Here, the local administration of Castelvetro has provided an abandoned orange grove confiscated from the mafia, which is now to be used for organic farming, with the help of disabled people and asylum seekers. It may also lead to the creation of cooperatives, consisting of immigrants, asylum seekers and Italians, for the management of other confiscated lands.

All these initiatives are possible, even in a very difficult social context such as that of Sicily,

because of the beliefs of the CRESM founder, Lorenzo Barbera, concerning freedom, civil disobedience, the bottom-up approach and social inclusion. It is moreover thanks to the extraordinary, multidisciplinary and multicultural team that is creating a stimulating and attractive work environment.

**More information:** <http://www.cresm.net/>



*Alessandro La Grassa & Lorenzo Barbera.*

## Interview with Lorenzo Barbera and Alessandro La Grassa<sup>4</sup>

*Jean-Luc Janot, AEIDL (10/11/2017)*

[Intervista originale in italiano](#)

***Lorenzo, you worked for a long time with Danilo Dolci, someone who is a little forgotten today. Can you compare his political action to any movements that are occurring today?***

**Lorenzo:** In 1952, Danilo Dolci arrived in Trappeto (in western Sicily, near Palermo), where his father had been head of the railway station, and he immediately met a child who died of hunger because his tongue was attached to the palate due to a lack of money and healthcare. Inspired by Gandhi, he protested against this scandalous situation by fasting for many days in the house of that child. I was a disciple of Danilo from 1956 to 1969. Danilo denounced the terrible conditions of misery by fasting – first in the poorer neighbourhood of Partinico and then in the poorer neighbourhoods of Palermo. He was therefore able to draw the attention of the media and, much less, that of the institutions which, in the 1950s and 1960s were deaf and insensitive to misery. Danilo's action received the esteem and support of many valuable people from the cultural and political world, in Italy and wider afield.

It is not easy to find a contemporary parallel to Danilo Dolci's action. He acted in the Gandhian tradition and was able to organise concrete actions and cultural events. He was able to create a dialogue both with peasants and intellectuals, and be a bridge between these worlds. He was an activist with a concrete organisational and media capacity. And all that he did was so far removed from the political parties, who were unable to classify him. His only party was peace and the poor. I certainly do not see anything like this today, at least in Europe. We should probably look to South America or India to find something similar.

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Barbera is the founder and honorary president of CRESM. Alessandro La Grassa is the president of CRESM.

### ***What particularly evocative memories do you have of him?***

**Lorenzo:** My commitment, which Danilo systematically encouraged, valued and shared from 1956 to 1969, is hardly comparable with his method and approach. In fact, I have always wanted people in difficulty to act as players of their own destiny, always with the convinced and enthusiastic support of Danilo. And I, in turn, have always had esteem for Danilo's action. But my action has led to the creation of citizens' groups and inter-municipal committees, ensuring that they, together with the population, were the protagonists of their present and future. We also adopted this method in special situations such as the earthquake in the Belice Valley (January 1968), from where, on 1 March 1968, 1 500 people moved to Rome and demonstrated on Piazza Montecitorio, for four days and four nights, until the approval of the law for the reconstruction and development of their region. The same thing happened in Irpinia, during the earthquake which struck Campania and Basilicata in 1980.

### ***What motivated the creation of CRESM in 1973?***

**Lorenzo:** CRESM was born after practitioners from different regions of southern Italy came to Partanna to visit rural and urban youth groups to cooperate on local development actions. Our two-monthly '*Meridione Città e Campagna*' (1974 - 1980) was launched at the same time. Since then, we have continued to work on the field both in Sicily and in Campania, although some of those groups have become politicised, often adhering to the so-called 'revolutionary left'. After the earthquake in Irpinia, when we were busy in setting up cooperatives for reconstruction and development, a European Commission's official came to Lioni, our headquarters in Campania, and asked me to take part in a seminar in Brussels. The LEADER programme was born out of this seminar, which brought together EU officials and local development experts from different Member States. Since then, I have devoted a great deal of my time to training and advising local development agents in all EU countries.

### ***You led a LEADER Local Action Group (LAG) in the Corleone<sup>5</sup> area, which is (or was?) a fiefdom of the mafia. What types of projects has the LAG supported in this very particular area?***

**Lorenzo:** First of all, I would say that in Corleone, as in most of Sicily, many people are now openly committed to eradicating the mafia from their communities. Corleone has been doing so for several decades and it has also strongly influenced the city of Palermo and the Sicilian and Italian political systems. Since the death of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who understood the mafia system well and started to dismantle it, much progress has been made. Today, the leaders of the Sicilian mafia, with a few exceptions, are all in prison. The Italian state has resolutely committed itself to the fight against the Sicilian mafia, not only by imposing prison sentences but also and above all by confiscating the property of the mafia and its accomplices. Citizens are no longer afraid to denounce racketeers and entrepreneurs, and are rebelling against racketeering, thanks in particular to the work of anti-racket citizen-led associations. CRESM has also been doing its part: for more than 15 years, we have been promoting initiatives for the social conversion of assets confiscated from the mafia and we have also directly taken over part of these assets, as in the case of our organic farm near Castelvetro. In Corleone and in the other municipalities of the 'Terre del Sosio' LEADER area, we have supported numerous rural development initiatives. From 1993 to 1996, nothing was done to develop the natural and cultural assets of this region, which has a magnificent landscape that was

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<sup>5</sup> The local mafia clan, the [Corleonesi](#), led the mafia in the 1980s and 1990s, and were the most violent and ruthless mafia clan ever to take control of the organisation ([Wikipedia](#)).

unknown at the time, even among the people of Palermo. We therefore supported the local population to realise this potential at a time when rural tourism was not yet fashionable. Today, a large part of this area has been declared a natural park and the Monti Sicani Natural Park remains one of the most fascinating and intact areas of Sicily.

***Why did you become interested in the situation of migrants in the early 1990s?***

**Alessandro:** In the 1990s, several CRESM colleagues lived in Mazara del Vallo [population: 50 000]. It is a port city which, at the time, was home not only to the largest fishing fleet in the Mediterranean, but also to an important and well-established Tunisian community, that was especially active in the maritime sector. These colleagues, including several Tunisians, examined the social situation of this community, which seemed little different from the native population. They discovered this paradox: in Mazara del Vallo, the Tunisian and Italian communities coexisted peacefully, but only because they ignored each other and lived in separate neighbourhoods. The Tunisians also had a parallel school system, funded by the Tunisian government, which allowed them to send their children to a secular Tunisian school until the age of 13. This only widened the cultural gap, and it was the young people who suffered the most. We have therefore launched a series of initiatives to promote the mutual recognition of both communities, starting at school.

Our initiatives received a wide response, even at national level as they were among the first of their kind in Italy. We first succeeded in persuading Tunisian parents to enrol their children in an Italian school, and then we campaigned for the inclusion of Arabic language and culture courses in the school curriculum. This was not easy, especially because of the political pressure from the Tunisian consulate in Palermo, which used the Tunisian school to exercise a form of social control over the Tunisian community. But a rift has opened up and the community – especially the mothers – now feels freer to choose. We have also been involved in the creation of the first migrant-owned companies in Italy. To do so, we had to fight against an administration that did not yet have control over relations with citizens of third countries. It finally went well and some of the companies created at that time, 1998, still exist today.

Since then, we have not stopped dealing with immigration, because we believe that immigrants are a valuable resource, as were the Italians who chose to emigrate to other countries. Today, we work mainly in Palermo with the different immigrant communities and also with asylum seekers.

***Is it difficult to mobilise the authorities and civil society on this issue?***

**Alessandro:** Politicians generally do not want to risk offending their electorate by waging avant-garde cultural battles. For them, it is preferable and natural to follow and practice 'common sense'. Very few civil servants have a vision and the know how to bet on the future. Our challenge in this sense is always to 'open a rift', to show that you can think differently by showing examples of success stories. Secondly, we rely on the citizen-led dynamic that supports and seeks to integrate minorities. Of course, we don't always succeed in the hoped-for way, but we also know that social work can make it possible to forge unsuspected links in time and space. Contrary to the past, we now have much less confidence in the general political framework, and particularly in the left, because it is clear that we are going through a period of strong cultural setback on the part of politicians, who are no longer able to decipher the contemporary complexity, and are therefore less able than ever to guide it. In this sense, it is much more fruitful to turn to the 'alternative world' of the third sector, which is currently much more capable of generating innovative approaches and practices in many fields. As far as the ordinary people are concerned, it is certainly not easy to work on integration with the images of attacks or episodes of

violence that the media love to show. But in our experience, once the media dust has settled down, people appreciate our approach. Their fear is mainly the arrival of all these men and boys without families who look frightening. This is understandable, but we also know that these fears are more imaginary than real, and that cases of crime and violence are very marginal. Another problem is that of immigrant families with children, but in this case integration is much easier, especially through school. From this point of view, the Sicilian hospitality culture has much to teach to other people in Europe.

***The migrant crisis in which Italy is at the forefront seems to have also opened up a new market for the mafia. A number of scandals have recently highlighted this possibility. Are authorities taking the real measure of the problem? And how do you, as a civil society organisation, participate in the fight against this scourge?***

**Alessandro:** Mafia criminals, by their very nature, seek to exploit their ability to network illegal practices (drugs, weapons, prostitution, illegal immigration, gambling) and find the necessary 'political' coverage. Without this union, we can't talk about a mafia but only about crime. But reducing the issue of migrants to a mere market for the mafia is a misleading way of tackling the problem. It also risks condoning the unwillingness of other European countries to take their share of the migrants arriving in Italy. The mafia is adapting to new economic flows. In the case of the migrant, these flows concern the management of large refugee reception centres. This is where the mafia comes in because the management of these large centres involves multiple local balances – economic, social and political. In this context, it is easy for the mafia to present themselves as the 'guarantors' of the system and to demand a share of the profits in return. The solution to this problem would be very simple: it would be sufficient to avoid these concentrations of refugees in a few places and to switch to another reception model. We have provided an example of how we would like the system to work. In Palermo, CRESM has been running one of the smallest reception centres in Italy for four years: the 'Comunità Urbane Solidali' hosts only eight people. This centre is a concrete demonstration that the 'small is beautiful' system is sustainable, that it facilitates integration and that it is not at all attractive for the mafia or corruption. But Italy might not have needed to create these large centres if the other EU countries had initially shared the hosting effort.

***There are a number of local initiatives in Italy that seek to welcome and integrate migrants in desertification-affected villages. Can migrant resettlement be one of the solutions to the deep-seated problems facing rural areas, especially in the Mezzogiorno?***

**Alessandro:** For various reasons, we believe that these examples will remain marginal and, for the most part, be dependent on the goodwill and strategy of local authorities. First, because such a formula requires careful and courageous planning – which we do not see coming on the horizon – but above all because, as migration statistics show, most immigrants prefer to live in big cities rather than in small rural villages, which is perfectly understandable.

***More generally, local development and citizen-led action are considered by some people as the only space for dissent that global capitalism deigns to leave to civil society. How do you feel about that?***

**Alessandro:** There is an African proverb that says that the only way to eat an elephant is by little bites. And, no matter how small, the bites of local development and civil action are, they are now noticeable. But I would not be at all so sure that this room for manoeuvre will be available in the future. On the contrary, I constantly see attempts to reduce it at both local and European level.

From this point of view, the EU result-based evaluation of policies could be a serious threat to the LEADER programme itself. We are well aware that the timing of the initiatives we are promoting is not in line with the bureaucratic deadlines imposed by the EU.

***Has the situation in the areas where you operate improved? How do you evaluate all these years of local action?***

**Lorenzo:** In almost all the places where we have worked, for example with the LEADER groups in Sicily and Campania, the initiatives continue with new people: they start with us and then continue on their own, as they should. For us, this is an important parameter to evaluate the effectiveness of our work. We are often the first to raise certain issues, and we know that it will take a long time to get results. Our strength has always been to be an 'open laboratory' which has always welcomed contributions from people of goodwill and experts. We have constantly sought to promote the full autonomy of the people and of the local contexts in which we have operated. After 50 years, it is now recognised in Sicily, and for us it's really a very good result!