



## Urban regeneration processes as opportunity for human emancipation – the Capacity project in Messina

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*Fondo Saccà is a small neighbourhood located in the Northeast of Messina (Italy).*

*One of its main features are the barrack settlements – initially established to solve housing emergencies after the heavy earth quake in 1908 which wiped out nearly the whole city of Messina and 80 000 of its inhabitants. In Fondo Saccà these barracks are still in place and home for approximately 60 families. Unemployment is high and the level of education is rather low. An estimated 75% of all inhabitants never had the occasion to leave their neighbourhood. A number of them make ends meet through illegal work.*

If you want to achieve something in Fondo Saccà – earn some money, have access to better housing (social housing), ... - you achieve it best by doing somebody “a favour”. Voting for a specific person in local elections, for instance. Approximately 10% of all inhabitants in Fondo Saccà are part of mafia-like networks of organised crime. With promises of “privileges”, on one hand, but also threats and violence, on the other, they know how to keep a number of their neighbours in dependency.

However, since April 2017 something seems to change ... Together with two other

neighbourhoods, Fondo Saccà has become a priority area of the project “Capacity”. This project was launched by the city of Messina in partnership with a number of social private partners, mainly social and solidarity economy, in the framework of a national programme promoting the regeneration and development of metropolitan cities.

Main objective of Capacity is to give inhabitants of Fondo Saccà, in particular those living in the barrack settlements, the opportunity to become (again) protagonists of their own life. Simply eliminating the barracks and providing

their occupants with more decent housing is an important step, but would not be enough.

Referring to Amartya Sen's capability approach, the project develops a set of interconnected actions which aim to create alternatives in the principal areas of human functioning: housing, work, social relations and knowledge. It also integrates elements linked to security and environment. The second, crucial pillar of the initiative is the continuous accompaniment by social workers and social mediators in order to provide families/persons with all information they need to make choices and to feel supported in situations they might never have known before.

With regard to *housing* Capacity provides those families that are currently living in the barracks with three options:

They might want to follow the traditional method and wait for a house or apartment that is allocated to them by the municipality. This house/apartment then remains public property.

A second option is to take part in the construction of houses. Members of a family that take part in the construction process will receive a salary for this. Once the construction phase has been finished, the respective family will have the right to live in the new house (which remains, however, public property).

A third possibility which families may choose, and this is the most innovative element in the Capacity initiative: Families receive a one-off payment called 'Personal Capability Capital' ('Capitale Personale di Capacitazione'). They will use this payment to acquire a house of their choice. The amount allocated to the family takes into account a percentage of the value of the house, on one hand, and the economic value of renovation works carried out by the family in their new home, on the other (in total approximately 75%). If needed, families then

have the possibility to cover the remaining 25% with a loan from an ethical finance operator.

In the field of employment Capacity partners designed a number of activities aiming to bring persons back to the (legal) labour market. Persons following illegal economic activities, for instance, will be encouraged to legalise these activities with the support of specific microfinance instruments. A social impact fund, in turn, will provide more important investment in the local circular economy which has the potential to create employment also for inhabitants of Fondo Saccà.

Project activities in the field of "knowledge" focus very much on children, starting with the newborn. With a number of initiatives promoting the cognitive and social development of children project promoters hope to equip new generations in a way to make them active citizens and independent from the old paradigms that dominated thinking and doing of people in areas such as Fondo Saccà. At the same time, the project will launch the Euro-Mediterranean School for a human and responsible economy (S.E.M.E.). This international school will promote a mainstreaming of approaches such as the one used in Capacity, with the objective to fertilise public policies and practices of local economy at territorial level in Messina and in the whole Mediterranean basin.

Yet, many inhabitants of Fondo Saccà would not be able to liberate themselves fully from their current living conditions if they would remain in their current social networks - hence the fundamental importance, once again, of social workers and social mediators. Through bilateral meetings, but also through the organisation of a number of cultural events and public meetings in the neighbourhood they help inhabitants to get in touch with other citizens and institutions, to set up initiatives together, to create relationships that are not

based on a “favour – privilege” logic, but on trust.

Salvatore Rizzo, social worker and president of Consorzio Sol.E, a project partner, coordinates the team of social workers and mediators in Capacity. He explains: “We found ourselves in front of a double challenge: The need to reestablish confidence between persons (horizontal confidence), on one hand, and confidence between persons and institutions (vertical confidence), on the other.”

When the Capacity partnership consortium organised the first public meeting to present the initiative to the local population the atmosphere was rather conflict-laden and the social workers were met with a lot of distrust. “People did not believe in change”, states Rizzo.

Sebastiano Pino, deputy mayor in charge of housing policies was not surprised: “The history of urban regeneration in Messina has always been linked to a specific way of making politics. In this past, politicians did not solve problems or satisfied needs of the population – they rather shifted these needs and problems to another area or level, they even made problems become much bigger.”



*Antonina Santisi with Sebastiano Pino*

During the first public meeting in Fondo Saccà project promoters, among them a number of social cooperatives working in the field of

social mediation, found themselves in front of what seemed to be a real community which stuck together, where persons had similar points of views, doubts and criticism – a community that seemed to be closed.

Once, however, social mediators and their colleagues had met individual families on a bilateral basis many persons became more accessible and interested in the project – and they often showed a completely different attitude towards their neighbours.

Mariarita Giordano, social mediator, comments: “What we experienced in the first public meeting was not linked to a real community spirit. Such a spirit does not exist in this neighbourhood, it is simply not real. It is forced living together. During the meeting people showed a shared attitude – mistrust – towards their common enemy: institutions. But now these persons are given the possibility to be autonomous and we state that nearly everybody would like to leave the neighbourhood.”

Beside the individual visits of the social mediators in families, also a number of (cultural) events organised by members of the project consortium – mainly social cooperatives, the Community Foundation Messina and local associations – helped to change the attitude of the inhabitants of Fondo Saccà. A street party for children, for example, attracted a number of young mothers who finally engaged in deep conversations about possibilities to transform their neighbourhood. Many of them immediately understood the opportunities Capacity could offer them, their children and their families in general. These young women have now become main driving forces when it comes to mobilising families and making them become part of the project.

Monica Musolino, a researcher from Messina University, who accompanies the social mediation process, sums up what are in her

opinion main pillars in this process of (re-)building trust: “The project, with its *immediate action* (providing housing and other support within a very short time), coupled with the continuous presence and accompaniment of the social workers created trust and made people become open to other ‘opportunities’ than those provided to them by these domination-subordination relationship. The latter happened with a surprising speed – even though the process still remains not a simple one. Conflicts and relations of domination/subordination still continue to exist.”



*Mariarita Giordano with Monica Musolino*

Capacity applies a comprehensive approach to ‘urban regeneration’. It does this also thanks to the vision and motivation of several deputy mayors of the city, their willingness to make different policy departments work together and to mobilise different budget headings and programmes.

Antonina Santisi, Deputy Mayor for Social policies, Relations with citizens and Equal Opportunities played a central role in bringing different policy departments together: “We need politicians and civil servants that are able to read the needs of persons in all their complexity. Persons that do recognize the right of each person to define himself/herself his/her project of life. Reading a housing need only as something requiring the material existence of an apartment or house is a fairly restricted point of view. Housing needs are

often linked to other challenges a person or family has to deal with. Challenges that might be linked to social exclusion, a lack of education, unemployment ... Politicians need to change the way they reflect on needs of the population. I think I succeeded in making my colleagues from other policy fields perceive a problem in all its complexity. You start with the perspective of a human being – not with the technical point of view of an urban planner, an engineer... Now my colleagues started talking about the capability approach as if they had really studied the method. For me this was the most wonderful moment in this initiative...”

However, to make Capacity a success, Santisi and her colleagues, as well as their social private project partners, also need the support of their public administration. Santisi does not hide the challenges the politicians are confronted with in this regard: “All innovative projects create resistance. This is natural. We have to accompany civil servants in order to make them cooperate. Often, civil servants use legislation in a rather defensive way, as something which sets limits. They need to get out of their passive role and become more creative.” This is why the deputy mayor and her colleagues try to involve civil servants as much as they can in the project, taking them with them on the spot, to local and regional meetings etc. Not in every case, but in a few, they already succeeded to make even leading civil servants take up the challenge and become protagonists of the action.

Capacity partners wish to demonstrate that transformation, real change is possible also in the most complex context. A visible symbol for this change are the prototypes of houses that are currently being built in Fondo Saccà as a test for the co-construction process, but also for the application of innovative practices of bio-architecture and sustainable engineering. Giuseppina Sindoni, the architect in charge of coordinating the construction process,

developed concept and design together with her colleagues and with the support of well-known universities and scientific networks such as the Massachusetts Institute for Technology and the Politecnica di Milano. Sindoni works for a social cooperative, which she co-founded. In her view “urban regeneration projects have to become opportunities for persons.”



*Gaetano Giunta*

Gaetano Giunta, president of the Community Foundation Messina, hopes that the social, economic, cultural and environmental practices and concepts such as they are currently tested by Capacity in Fondo Saccà and other barrack settlements will convince and soon be mainstreamed into all local regeneration processes.

Only some months after the project was officially launched, the structure of four houses in Fondo Saccà is already visible (fundament, walls...) and future occupants will soon be asked to contribute to the construction process. Moreover, under the third option provided by Capacity – the Personal Capability Budget – three families have already signed the pre-sales contract for their own house. “People in Fondo Saccà talk a lot about the

initiative, they are very enthusiastic. We just hope that everything which is planned – such as the acquisition *of* and move *to* our new house – will really happen. And that it will happen soon”, says Maria. Together with her husband she took the opportunity and signed a pre-sale contract.

Time is crucial in Capacity – it will determine the success of the initiative and the future of the approach in Messina.

Soon – in spring 2018 – local elections will be held. What will happen in case the city government changes?

Sebastiano Pino, deputy mayor in charge of housing policies, remains optimistic, but points also to the real urgency of the situation: “We still have time to convince persons that the direction we took with Capacity is the right direction. For this to be achieved, it is important to act. Already the fact to have just some people moving from the barracks into their own houses/apartments will help us to make people change their mind. But we need this type of concrete action and change. In Fondo Saccà, Fondo Fucile and elsewhere people saw too many politicians making promises that were never fulfilled.”

Also Salvatore Rizzo stresses the need for immediate action: “We managed to rebuild trust. But this trust can be easily destroyed.” Recently, he and his colleagues have been contacted by inhabitants of Fondo Saccà and other barrack settlements such as Fondo Fucile, because some “neighbours” and other persons are approaching people on the street. They are trying to generate doubts *about* and distrust *in* the Capacity initiative, to spread fake information on the ranking for social housing and, once again, to sell promises against votes for the upcoming local election...

Antonina Santisi, Sebastiano Pino, Gaetano Giunta and their colleagues are still waiting for

the transfer of that part of national funding that will allow the three families having signed pre-sale contracts to finalise their house purchase. It seems to be an administrative matter only, but something which may take time.

Time, however, is decisive in Fondo Saccà – the atmosphere of hope and transformation brought about by Capacity might change rapidly...

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