Aspecten van maatschappelijke opbouw

Some community development problems in Partinico
one of the centres founded by Danilo Dolci in W. Sicily

"The term Community Development has come into international usage to connote the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress."

UNITED NATIONS definition.

It seems that in Western Sicily a different interpretation of C. D. is needed than the above mentioned U. N. definition gives. Unfortunately there has been until now hardly any real big-scale support from the national or regional government to change Western Sicily. On the contrary, most people here, including those who traditionally vote for the party in power, have the impression that the government is only interested in a status quo and does not care as it should about providing work for all, though in the Constitution is laid down that everybody has a right to it.

So there exists an atmosphere of apathy and lack of belief in progress (described so well in Lampedusa’s "The Leopard") just as 100 years ago. This makes community development rather difficult.

When recently I was in Tunisia for the second time the difference between the spirit in that newly liberated country and that of the Sicilians struck me. The recently evoked national sentiment there gives people a dignity and a "cohérence sociologique" (Jacques Berque) which are favourable for development projects and plans, and the fact that the government takes the initiative encourages the rural population even more although the conditions are at the moment in general much worse than those in Sicily.

In Tunisia there is to some extent what S. K. Dey describes in "The Logic of Community Development": "He would see his entire environment change before his eyes. He would begin to believe in the possibilities of change and a better, freer life". Of all this there is to be found almost nothing in this part of Sicily. On the contrary: here I found often a lack of confidence in government interference and also in people’s own and their neighbour’s capacity to do things together. Many are so conscious of the factors related to this attitude, poverty, under employment, lack of education, corrupt government, maffia-control, that this situation seems hopelessly inescapable except through emigration or perhaps a revolution.

Because of all this it seemed to me that my approach to community development...
had to be the slow one of "active patience" (as I described it in a former paper), of winning the confidence of the people, specially those who might be the avantguardia, through personal friendship and through trying to make them undertake small projects which might strengthen their self-confidence and be an example for others. Naturally this approach had to be extremely flexible and unsystematic, like "participation" of cultural anthropologists in so-called primitive communities which the rural sociologist Henry Mendras, when he came to visit us, described as the best approach in rural areas in Western Sicily too.

My purpose was of course not especially to gain knowledge, but rather to give it, and to provoke change. In the big cluster of problems and people in Partinico (28,000 inhabitants), in which I felt rather lost in the beginning, I had to find the little ends of thread to draw at, to experiment with prudently.

While just talking and listening to the men in the main street, the bar and other centres where people habitually come together, I found as such a thread, as object of popular concern, the irrigation project and dam on the nearby river Iato from which practically the whole zone around Partinico would benefit. A big campaign for pressure on the government to start the construction of this dam came to life. Later there arose another civic action to get from the government protection for the farmers whose produce was ruined by the hail storm in 1959. In these civic actions some real animators of the population, potential local leaders, came to the foreground. With these rare birds other possible initiatives were discussed, focused mainly on the future irrigation: co-operatives to sell the future abundance of agricultural produce abroad, small co-operative conserving industries, etc. I did all this in close collaboration with Pasquale Malpede, our agrarian technician. But it was difficult to start anything concrete: "In Sicilia ci discuta sempre" (In Sicily they discuss always). Our trial to bring to life a "citizens' committee for the valorization of Partinico" to work out further details, did not succeed.

There were too many differences of opinion among those men and also distrust because of old family quarrels for instance, the famous "amoral familism" which Banfield found in Southern Italy.

Was still more patience needed? Only very concrete and relatively small undertakings proved workable especially if there was a good chance of some economic benefit. So the possibility I found to export local wine to a firm in Holland resulted in an agricultural producers' co-operative suddenly coming to life, so that the general scepticism about co-operatives in Partinico eventually got a blow. This could never have been reached by mere talk about the need for unity. Now this co-operative, called "Trinacria", has its own little wine storehouse, but soon hopes to be able to claim the larger one built by the regional government some years ago. They also dream of their own bottlery. At present bottling is done in Holland where the wine is sold under the name PARTINICO.

Later another co-operative named "Il Progresso" was formed, which among other things might produce various seeds and bulbs for export to Holland and England (the climate in Sicily is very good for such undertakings). It seems that selling abroad appeals much more to the farmers than the local market,
which is said to be under control of the maffia, and hardly ever gives them a fair deal. Also the fact that their products are appreciated in other countries helps them to gain more self esteem. So we try to make more of this kind of contacts. Soon a specialist from MIGROS, the famous consumers' co-operative in Switzerland founded by Duttweiler, will come to see what kinds of Partinican products (oranges, lemons, peaches, olives, tomatoes) it can use for sale in its supermarkets, and so support the co-operative movement here.

One of the members of "Il Progresso" will start a rabbit production scheme as proposed recently by our veterinary collaborator Frank Manolson, in order to convince the other members to go also into this business, which seems to be profitable, and might improve also the average local diet.

Anyway, in the discussions in the "piazza" and the main street the co-operative is, like the irrigation project, becoming an ever more normal subject of conversation and not a thing just to be laughed at. This is also thanks to good government support in this field (for example: contribution for the cost of a truck is even 80%), although it still takes too much time before official recognition comes from the bureaucratic machinery. Material stimulants seem to have an important value as a catalyst. So, since a big Roman construction firm finally signed the contract to execute the dam and the irrigation project on the river Iato, even a good number of the farmers whose land will be expropriated have formed a "consorzio", a kind of co-operative, which will stand up for proper valuation and payment of that land. Those farmers had for years been obstructing this whole project out of the belief (firmly based on former experiences) that their right would not be respected. Our efforts to convince them to unite for their interests, had had no results before. Now there are more than 100 members and still more are joining, so that they are strong enough to let representatives negotiate with the authorities.

The sad history of the failure of co-operative efforts because of frauds and other consequences of what the Sicilians call their bad character, so may slowly come to an end. Progress, however, is still very uncertain as can be concluded from the fact that not only many unemployed young men of the town keep asking us to find them a job in Switzerland or Holland or any other "really civilized" country, but even some of the before mentioned animators, the best elements in the co-operative movement here. They also deep in their hearts prefer living somewhere quietly and without the eternal struggle, incertitude, jealousy and distrust with which they have to cope here. Naturally the first difficulties within the wine co-operative, inherent to this environment, have already arisen; like selling secretly on own account. You often hold your breath when you see how even the president or vice-president are doing things which are contradictory to their beautiful speeches about their "new growing family" in our meetings. The temptation to interfere directly and take things in hand yourself is often great in such circumstances, but it seemed to me the best policy to let people get strength from their own trials and errors. Some stimulation and careful suggestion should be enough. Almost like Lao Tse: "Do nothing, and all is done", or better: "We felt that any intervention which was not asked for because of a felt need, but
rather offered if not actually imposed, would not be processive, to borrow Alfred Sauvy's expression, and would not involve the community” *

Another of those felt needs soon proved to be an agricultural technical assistance office for Partinico. After this issue had arisen in the weekly meetings about agricultural problems which we have in our centre, a young newly elected municipal councillor started to form a committee to promote it. This committee asked Danilo Dolci if he could give our agricultural technician Pasquale Malpede (who had collaborated on Danilo's last book about Sicilian conditions, "Spreco" and had already been working for the population), a proper office with some equipment for wine and soil testing. Beforehand many farmers had never used the services of our technician out of political prejudices or other forms of distrust towards Danilo Dolci and his organisation, but the members of this committee believed and wanted to help to make true, that this attitude would disappear if there would be a more or less independent office in the centre of the town, where many farmers use to spend their free time without interference of other offices related to our organisation. This seemed to be so strongly wanted that what had been impossible for a more general purpose, like the study of the valorization of Partinico, now came to life: a functioning committee of the more progressive farmers. Political differences and family quarrels seemed to be less important in the prospect of a good technical assistance office. 9 of the 15 members of the committee were members of one of the two new co-operatives and of the other 6 persons 4 had collaborated in one of the civic campaigns. So the committee might be called the avantguardia of the Partinican farmers. Of course inside ourselves we still had many doubts, for instance about the young politician who presided over the group. He was not a farmer himself, but the long tradition of farmers following the more literate, who speak up for them, could not be broken suddenly. A local young bourgeois who really tries to organise something concrete is already a favorable exception in Sicily, where "ci discuta sempre" and worthwhile to go ahead with even if he may be driven by personal ambition and be sometimes tactless. Everybody must learn here and the fact that the most courageous farmers were behind him seemed to me a guarantee for the sincerity of this initiative. A still better guarantee was the fact that in an open discussion with the co-ordinator, Danilo Dolci, the group committed itself to find the money for the rent of this new office from the population. Danilo very rightly insisted on this in order to stimulate self-activity and to give people a chance to feel at home in their own house if they wished so. A year's rent for such a place in the centre of the town mounted up to 200,000 lire, and to get this amount from the farmers in Partinico is quite a test for a committee that it is really functioning. All this seems to be an important milestone on the road to a more developed community, and worth all the possible material support asked for.**)

*) Florita Botts in “Pilot Project for Abruzzi”.

**) “Community development seeks to work primarily through the enlistment and organisation of self-help and cooperative effort on the part of the residents of the community, but usually with technical assistance from governmental or voluntary organisations”. Arthur Dunham, “The Outlook for Community Development”.
Besides the significant material contribution the committee had consented to give it was heartening that the wine-expert of the newly built local government wine storehouse, who was also a committee member, promised to be in his free time available without pay for advice in the office to be erected.

For several reasons, however, the administrative staff of the organisation and Danilo Dolci finally refused to accept the proposals of this committee. They found that the committee was not quite a representative sample of the whole population and they also found that the committee still asked too much from the Centro and could do more itself, either in the form of financial contribution or in the form of urging the local or regional government to give them a proper technical assistance office ("condotta agraria"), as it should.

The members of the committee who from the first discussion with Danilo Dolci had got some hope, later felt a little betrayed and discouraged by this decision and also a little offended about the scepticism expressed by it. Although the agrotechnician and I disagreed with this official standpoint I may have contributed to it because I had omitted to inform our staff precisely about every member of the committee and my relations with them. The two half-yearly reports I made about the methods and the little results of my approach, did not seem to be enough to convince the staff in this respect.

How exactly the differences of opinion and the different interpretation of facts arose, is still not quite clear to me.

As Guiseppe di Lampedusa says:

"Nowhere has truth so short a life as in Sicily; a fact has scarcely happened five minutes before its genuine kernel has vanished, been camouflaged, embellished, disfigured, annihilated by imagination and self-interest shame, fear, generosity, malice, opportunism, charity, all the passions, good as well as evil, fling themselves on the fact and tear it to pieces; very soon it has vanished altogether".

It is obvious that the difficulties encountered in C.D. work were not only due to the social climate of western Sicily, but sometimes also to the structure and policy of the agency, after it was founded by Danilo Dolci. Gavin Maxwell related this to Danilo's being put into jail because of the famous "reverse strike" in Partinico as a protest against unemployment:

"Because of this intense repression most Sicilian peasants are afraid of having anything to do with Danilo Dolci, even to admitting that they know anything of his work or that they think of it as praiseworthy".

This fear and politically biased attitude of the larger part of the population, and the general distrust towards any interference could not be changed overnight, also because qualified personnel lacked. Danilo Dolci, in "Outlaws of Partinico" declares:

"As a result of this dearth of experts we have been forced to proceed very slowly and, I might almost say, go backwards. In any well organised undertaking, a plan is drawn up first and the work goes forward from this starting point in an orderly manner, first with two workmen, then with ten, then twenty, then thirty and so on; whereas, for years now, we have had to burn up the energies of scores of young men who had little more to offer than their own good intentions. The experience we have gained in these circumstances has cost us time and money; while the population
has been subjected to inadequate and improvised experiments."

It is logical that the shortness of the stay of the many former collaborators must sometimes have had an effect contrary to that aimed at, an increase instead of diminishing of the distrust and "résistance au changement" among the population. Although short projects like inquiries, recreational activities etc., can as such be good, the fact that they are not part of a consistent program aimed at C.D. may be even contraproductive, because they evoke a vain hope of change.

This is why the group of Italian C.D. workers who were here when I arrived wanted Danilo to promise them not to undertake any more inquiries or to accept volunteers without special qualification who could be fit into a long term program. They found this principle so important that they all left when Danilo did not want to accept their "ultimatum", leaving behind them the beginnings of their just initiated program and another bad impression on the population of the working methods of the Centro.

At that time I was the only one left for this type of work, and I must confess that it seemed also to me that many other collaborators had no precise understanding of the C.D. process and did not respect the natural course of it, which in a place with so much resistance and (mostly justified) distrust necessarily had to be slow.

Several collaborators overestimated the capacities of a social worker and saw him as a kind of "deus ex machina", who can move people wherever and whenever he wants, even if there is instead of collaboration a rather strong hostility from local authorities. So they asked me sometimes: "Why do the people still throw their dirt at the streetcorner to be collected every morning, instead of putting it in barrels? Why is there not yet a big campaign against the flies? Cannot something be done about the noisy and too curious children of the neighbourhood who peep into the offices or the volunteers' house? etc."

I had just to endure this. Later this became easier when Ilys Booker from London came to do C.D. in our Centro in Menfi and Maria-pia Pieri joined me in Partinico to work with the newly rented social centre.

Several things were undertaken by other collaborators which, although they were initially not always explicitly asked for, were later very much appreciated by the population, like some programs in the social centre: the "afterschool" (helping children with schooltasks), recreational activities with children, sewing classes for girls, language classes, and also of course the little clinic where sometimes also medicines were distributed. Some of those activities, like the medicine distribution, were often discussed among our group of collaborators on their validity for C.D. Too many people in Partinico expected us to do such more or less charitatitive work from the money that they knew that came in because of Danilo Dolci's publications about their misery, but although on his recent trip to U.S.A. Danilo Dolci said "that the most critical problem was to understand and to respond to the needs of the people as they themselves felt these needs to be" *) this did not mean doing such things. Charity had been more and more abandoned as a humiliating and bad way to resolve Sicilian problems. This argument...

*) Press release from Peace Corps Headquarters.
also played a role when the proposals of the farmers' committee for a technical assistance office were rejected. In every new case it is difficult to judge to what degree material support should be given to stimulate local initiatives from which people may get strength. Too much help easily may kill self-activity.

Another influence on the normally slow natural course of C.D. was that sometimes projects were undertaken by our Centro which only in the future could be understood by the population and which initially run even the risk of being unpopular. This risk had to be taken sometimes to the opinion of the administration.

So there is now a large office in Partinico from where an economic survey is carried out and where a concrete regional development plan will be drawn up afterwards, both under supervision of Michael Faber, a capable Oxford economist.

C.D. in Partinico will more and more have to become "C.D. which tends to open the population for democratic planning" as was recently stated by Danilo Dolci. A newly arrived group of Italians, called "the group for organic development" is taking up contact with the population with the task of "extending the agro-social work of the Centro and encouraging the local people to participate first in the formulation of the Plan and later on its realisation" (as Danilo Dolci said in a recent speech at Yale University). This scope seems to need an approach which is different from mine and for this reason he may not have encouraged the above-mentioned farmers committee for technical assistance. It is quite possible that this new form of C.D. is more effective in facing big problems like maffia control, unemployment and a government which does not seem to care much about those things, and so appeals more to the Italian C.D. workers. Also in Tunesia, where great unemployment existed, this seems to be felt, as President Bourguiba said in a speech to the Nation's leaders:

"Success will not come just by drawing up correct and useful plans, having the right tools and making use of a well-founded State. The people must respond to our appeals for self-sacrifice"

and:

"We wish to widen our contacts and see to it that meetings and exchanges of views are held at different levels of popular representation: with national organisations, the Party's cells, professional associations and trade unions. The aim of such contacts and discussions will be not so much to obtain the support of the people as to induce them to take a real part in the work of analysis and preparation leading up to the drafting of a plan, in other words, to outline the guiding principles".

Of course, to obtain the support and confidence of the people does not seem to be a great problem at the moment in Tunesia, while it is the most difficult thing in Sicily. It seems to me that in order to get any real participation by the people it will be necessary to win their confidence also through undertaking concrete projects with them, as I tried. People also have a chance to win self-confidence in this way, which may be even more important. Perhaps if I had been more sensitive to the developments and changes in concepts about our work in the higher staff of our Centro, the disturbance in the C.D. process and the loss of goodwill which resulted from the rejection of the proposals concerning technical assistance,
could have been prevented, and the taking over of my work by the new group of Italians could have been smoother. From this experience I found that C.D. workers should take care at least as much about their relations with the agency they work for as with the local population, specially if they are foreigners. Also from experiences of friends working in Tunisia may be concluded that foreign technicians often have an easier contact with all kinds of representatives of a local population, as Geoffrey Gorer explained: “There are numerous advantages in being a foreigner to the society one is studying; one is unplaced socially, for one’s foreignness masks the lesser differences of class or region; one’s accent, or one’s more or less halting employment of a strange language, mark one as a stranger, not as a rival, a superior or inferior to the people one is talking to; within the limits of one’s interest, the whole society, any portion of the society, can be open to one”.

This is still more a reason to be very careful in the relations with the authorities or agencies of the country itself, just because they sometimes make things more difficult then they are.

There have been ups and downs in the C.D. process in Partinico, but fortunately I found also among several of my local friends, both in the small successes and in the disappointments, the spirit which was expressed by William of Orange: “Il n’y a pas besoin d’espérer pour entreprendre, ni de réussir pour persévérer”. And does not this give hope?