3. Aspecten van maatschappelijke opbouw

An approach to community development in Partinico*)

Gerrit Huizer

"Impariamo a fari della verità amorevole uno strumento di conoscenza, d'azione e di lotta."

DANILO DOLCI

"First of all we must oppose and resolutely eliminate one of the biggest evils bequeathed to us by the education and learning of the old society, the separation of theory from practice."

LIU SHAO CHI

Studi e initiative per la piena occupazione, study and initiative for full employment, are inseparable. As it seems useless to take initiative without preceding study, so it seems undesirable to study without taking initiative. In "action research" "fact-finding is consciously used as a first step of action" (KURT LEWIN) but on the other side action can be used as a first step of fact-finding. Is it not true that it is only possible to learn to know reality while dealing with it, struggling with it, changing it?

So, although the concrete results of half a year of community development in Partinico are not very significant, some insights into the factors which play a rôle in development work have been gained and to document them may be useful.

As continuity is an important factor in education I felt I had to go on with the film projection program, the street- and neighbourhood visiting and the farmers discussion groups which others had initiated, and try to make the best of it, although my Italian was in the beginning very poor.

The film projection program aimed to show a selection of rather better films than can be seen in the normal small-town-cinema, so that the people might see the difference in quality and start discussing the problems which were inherent to those films.

This program could be considered reasonably successful as more and more people came to see the films I selected and showed in our Centre, in the local Centro di Cultura, and sometimes in a private home where there was enough room to receive a number of neighbours. Some people even thought that we ourselves made this interesting kind of film such as: André Cayatte's "Nous sommes tous des assassins", Edward Dmytryk's "Christ in concrete", Luchino Visconti's "La terra trema", Charlie Chaplin's "The emigrant" and several others. Preceding such a film I used to project a short educational documentary, e.g. the famous Walt Disney films on health and hygiene.

Unfortunately this program suddenly came to an end when the organisation, which had lent us the projector, needed it back, but we soon hope to rebegin this work with another projector in our new Social Centre, in collaboration with some promoters of the centro di Cultura, who came to join us in the new building.

The street- and neighbourhood visiting I

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had to do together with my wife Elsa, be-
cause it is practically impossible for a man
by himself to enter a house during the day-
time. The reason for this visiting was to
get people living in some bad streets
(without a sewer and/or unpaved) to or-
ganise some action towards improvement.
This work had concrete results in only
one case (the municipal council accepted
to pave this „mud pool“ after insistent
demands). The difficulty is always to find
a person in the street who has enough
courage to push things ahead among his
neighbours. Such persons, who are indis-
ispensable to any development work, proved
to be rare in Partinico. It was easier to
find such people in the campaign which
developed out of the discussion groups. In
order to become known and to win friend-
ship and confidence among the population
we continued our visiting in a less system-
atic and formal way all over the town,
not limiting ourselves to some bad streets.
So even shopping (Elsa prepares the food
for our group of collaborators every day)
and going to countless dance-parties proved to be useful.

Although there were in the farmers' dis-
cussion groups, thanks to the collaboration
of our agricultural technician Pasquale
Malpede, some good discussions about
agricultural problems, cooperatives etc.,
this kind of meeting did not seem very
satisfactory. People came too irregularly
and it did not seem possible to form a real
group, which had only discussion as a
purpose. Such conclusions as „Union
makes strength“ („Unione fa la forza“)
were in contradiction with the actual be-

havior and did not seem to be easy to rea-
lice in practice.
This became a little, but only a little,
better when we started discussing a more
„active“ subject. This was the construction
of the irrigation project on the nearby ri-
ver Jato, a project which Danilo Dolci
himself has been strongly pushing for
many years already.

From this irrigation the small farmers of
Partinico and the surrounding zone surely
will benefit, and it also means in this zone
3000 more jobs for agricultural daylab-
ourers whose underemployment forms
the biggest problem in this part of Sicily.
We came to talk about the possibilities of
doing something to promote the starting
of the construction for which some mil-
jards of lires had already been made avail-
able to the regional government of Sicily
by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno of Roma.
The idea to collect signatures for a petition
demanding this, found a positive response.
When Danilo himself was asked to join
our discussions at this point, he took the
leadership; a kind of action-committee
was formed. A big meeting was arranged
to which representatives of all labour
unions were invited. Pasquale Malpede
held a conference on the project and ex-
plained its benefits and economic conse-
quences. It was decided that the discussion
should spread to the different trade union
centres and other civic organisations
where a collection of signatures should
also be taken.

A problem which arose already during the
first discussions in our Centre, was the
compensation for the owners of the 600
HA of land which will be covered by the
water of the reservoir behind the dam. In
the past it has often happened that expro-
priated land was never or years late in
being compensated, and even then not
adequately. A demand for proper compen-
sation to the farmers-to-be-expropriated
was therefore included in the petition.
This problem however became a great
handicap to our campaign. The local board
of the Federazione Nazionale dei Coltiva-
tori Diretti, the christian-democrat farm-
ers union did not dare to collaborate because of this and during a meeting at the Alleanza Siciliana dei Coltivatori Diretti (the centre and left-wing farmers) where also most of the members of the Federazione came, a great dislike of the whole project was expressed in a very emotional way. Most of the small landholders present had all or parts of their mostly very scattered land in the zone to be inundated. They have a strong voice in Partinico.

Reasoning about the economic benefits for the whole zone to be irrigated: 7500 HA of land between Alcamo and Carini, did not appeal to them. They were not willing to sign any petition in favour of „the dam”, on the contrary, they would do all possible to postpone or to stop construction.

During following more informal discussions with small groups of those farmers in our Centre, in the main street, in the „piazza” or in the bar, those men were a little more reasonable, specially when the idea was advanced that they make another, stronger petition for themselves, which a delegation would present to the Sicilian government, so that they could get a direct response. (They wanted to demand an estimation of the value of their land by a technician and compensation in money or in other land in the zone to be irrigated). But when those men were on another occasion all together in a large meeting, they let themselves be carried away by the emotional opposition of others. So it was even impossible to discuss properly this second petition, formulated by Pasquale Malpede, which had had the agreement of many of them individually after some thinking and persuasion. This petition would now be mimeographed, so that they could discuss it „among themselves” as they said. The hope that this would lead to more unity proved however to be an illusory one. It was possible to convince many of them individually, but once they were together the olf fear and distrust took hold of them and they refused to participate in any positive action. Some even said that they rather would let themselves be shot by the police on their land. A little result of all this was that finally also the Federazione, to which most of the farmers concerned belong, started to move on behalf of its members in this connection. The local president of this union, who also is a member of the municipal council, made there a proposal that the municipal authorities should do what they could for the farmers to be expropriated.

Most farmers themselves however seemed to be sceptical about this action too. They often don’t trust either their own leaders, or their local government. This almost general lack of confidence which I met through this campaign, is probably one of the greatest barriers to community development. Some of those farmers are now going to make individual demands or in small groups of people which know and trust each other. So after some further warming up one of the originally most strongly opposed farmers came to ask Pasquale Malpede’s help with this. Such a fact is a hopeful sign that people finally may see the need of cooperation. Did we originally push too hard so that they became still more distrustful also towards us? The original petition to promote the initiation of the construction, was of course well received among the farmers who will benefit from the irrigation and specially among the mostly underemployed day-labourers, who are dominant in Partinico and environment. Some union leaders did not even think it necessary to discuss the petition at all. There had been rumours about this dam since long and every
worker would be glad to sign, because it would mean more chance of full employment. The question mostly asked during discussions in those labour union centres was naturally: „When will finally this work start?”. People often expressed scepticism, but they had nothing against signing in favour of it. By now some thousands of signatures (or crosses, from the illiterate) have been collected. Another positive result of this action may be that the dam became a subject of interest. A great help was a leaflet written by Pasquale Malpede about the project and its consequences, which was mimeographed and which I used wherever necessary. People are talking about it now and so the soil is prepared for the many changes which will have to accompany the irrigation.

Also a good thing is that all political colours are interested and collaborate more or less: CISL (Free Labor Union), UIL (social democrat union), Camera di Lavoro (communist and socialist union), the businessmen and the artisan organisations, etc. This movement spread, sometimes thanks to their help, to several other small towns around Partinico, which will benefit from the irrigation. Specially in Alcamo, where Pasquale Malpede and I went several times, our action found a very positive response and not only because there are no farmers to be expropriated. In this larger town people seem different from those of Partinico, more alert and active. It might be worthwhile to investigate the reasons for this.

If the petition gets a positive response from the Sicilian government, it may be that apart from the construction having been started people will gain some confidence in their government and in their own power to get things done when they unite. Unfortunately there are many discouraging examples. For instance: the recently built international airport at nearby Terrasini cost milliards of lites; not only does this turn out to have been a badly planned scheme in that air currents from the nearby mountain frequently prevent the landing and take-off of the planes, but also a large party of the expropriated land still remains uncompensated. Every time this sort of thing happens the people's distrust of the authorities naturally increases and they feel their own weakness more acutely than ever. A lack of confidence even in their own capacities and possibilities is demonstrated in almost every discussion on such subjects as cooperatives, market policy, etc., related to the future irrigation. How often people hopelessly conclude: „Siamo tutti cattivi“ („We are all wicked“)!

So, by trial and error we found some of the factors related to the „résistance au changement“ as professor Georges Friedmann called it when he came to visit us. How to cope with this attitude, the great stumbling block to development?

It seems from all these experiences that as long as the authorities in Sicily do not radically change and work in a way so that they inspire the confidence of the people rather than destroying it, community development work cannot be really effective, nor can social science. Can research in the present situation, also „action research“ which makes people more conscious of their own attitude, even be harmful? It often seems that people already know their own problems and attitude only too well. It is part of their apathy that they know so well that they are apathetic. They also know too well that this attitude is related to painful experiences as described above, to corruption, unemployment, poverty and even crime.

The best line for us to take in community
development seems to be that of "active patience", of trying and experimentation, also of self-education and realising our own limits, of not imposing and pushing too much. This last may be worse than barely pushing at all. From mistakes made in the past we are learning that it is better not to arouse expectations in the population which do not have a chance of being fulfilled, and only to start a program if there is a reasonable certainty that it can be continued or completed.

The errors made, those things found impossible to accomplish, have not only helped towards an increased understanding, but also towards ignorance, in the cartesian sense of the word, which means: openness and modesty. This openness, I found, can be a weapon to win the confidence of people who prove to be so distrustful of planning from above. Willingness to listen without criticism is not only a way to make friends and to find people who want to collaborate, but it can also strengthen the self-confidence of those persons who may become the yeast which finally may lift up Partinico. Together with such people it is worthwhile to experiment as we do, to try to achieve something about which they feel strongly and which has a reasonable chance of success. Specially the "common action" in favour of the dam proved to be a good way to find such potential local leaders, as they are called in the litterature about community development. And although Partinico with its 28,000 inhabitants is too big to be called a community, such experimental small scale initiatives can be called community development in the wider sense of the word. Does not T. R. BATTEN in his "Communities and their development" include the possibility that "community development is identified with almost any form of local betterment, which is in some way achieved with the willing cooperation of the people"?

Such an initiative was the formation of an agricultural cooperative. As we saw before, people in Partinico are too convinced of their own wickedness and individualism, so that they believe to be unable to form any cooperative. Time after time they told me the histories of cooperatives of the past which failed because of fraud by one of the members. But exceptions still seem to be possible. Now at least there is one, and the first three barrels of PARTINICO wine of this cooperative, which got even its own wine reservoir, are underway to Holland where I found a big importer interested in this wine. Opening a new way to earn a little more than they get when they trade through the traditionally corrupt local trade canals, proved to be enough to bring some of the farmers together in the end. After this initiative two other small agricultural cooperatives are on their way to be formed with the technical help of Pasquale Malpede. We hope that it will be possible to unite also some of the smallest farmers and day-labourers who have a piece of land, to this form of betterment, but as in most underdeveloped countries this is more difficult than with the farmers who are already above starvation level. Fortunately the Italian government gives much support when a cooperative is formed, which made it easier to start in this direction, in which so much should be done when the irrigation and an abundance of agricultural products will be a fact.

In general governmental help is scarce or inefficient in Sicily, as we saw already. The campaign for the dam brought me also into contact with many of the actual local leaders and authorities. Most of them seem often more a barrier to development than a stimulant. They are as apathetic as
the whole population and seem to think only of the interests of themselves or their party, instead of the common good. Thus of the roughly 30 members of a recently inaugurated committee for the protection of the wine, there were at the fourth meeting only five left. But this attitude may change a little when they see that some concrete things get started. It makes them at least less hostile.

A good way to become friendly with them was asking journalists which came to visit us, like Frank Barber of the „News Chronicle”, to interview them with me as an interpreter. Through thus created informal friendly relations it may be possible to get in the future the collaboration where it is necessary for concrete projects.

„Amicizia” is (unfortunately, that must be said) often the only way to get things done in this country. Even close „friends” among the people of the town who collaborate, do what they do sometimes more in order to get from us „favours” in return than out of a real concern for the welfare of the whole.

Also among the teachers those who are really concerned about change are rare and they mostly gave up hope after struggling long with the indifference of their colleagues. In discussions with some of them who belong to the Centro di Cultura the idea arose that something also might be done for (and with) some of the 50 or more unemployed teachers in Partinico, for instance in the field of literacy. We might give some of them an opportunity to be productive and at the same time to earn a modest contribution to their family-budget. Maria-pia Pieri, our social assistant, will occupy herself with this and other more direct educational work.

As we saw, the result of half a year of work is not very concrete, but more a discovery of many difficulties and some possibilities. Will our way of working be too slow, so that some day the people will submit themselves to more radical methods, as they often seem inclined to, or did we find the beginning of a practical approach? Facing the immense problems of underdeveloped Southern Europe we may ask ourselves what more we can do than discover some possibilities by trial and error and maybe even realize some of them?

Partinico, summer 1960