

Experiences of supportive co-housing communities in “Mondo di Comunità e Famiglia” Association

1. Social context

Professor Herman Schmid, a Swedish sociologist and former member of the European Parliament, used to say about Europe some years ago something which seems much more meaningful today: “we must engage in building a model of socio-economic development, which goes towards creating an area of social and cultural experimentation, based on humanism and solidarity, that could be an example for the rest of the world”.

Deposits of humanity seem to be worked out all over the world. Even in Mediterranean towns, which had in the past a fairly high average sociality, metropolitan behaviors have prevailed and overshadowed courtesy and public spirit. Even extended family in Africa is wearing out.

We are experiencing a complete homologation: some exceptions standing, there is no different proletarian or popular behavior anymore; privacy, in its strict and negative sense, (mind your own business, I'll do the same), has spread everywhere, from metropolitan outskirts like Secondigliano (Neaples) to former housing projects which have been cleaned out inside and outside.

Neighbours are no longer people we ask for salt or child care, and are instead becoming next-door enemies. Doors are more and more closed, steel-clad.

Statistics are showing us that in our country, homologation of behaviors and pauperization of the middle class are obliging the elderly as well as people who used to be “respectable” to ask for meals in soup kitchens. Our daily practice confirms this trend and shows that, along with widespread economic and social problems, our country experiences a thin, palpable existential disease. Individuals, couples, families are nowadays living in thorough isolation, but they look for relationships, sometimes unconsciously.

The isolation of our lives causes serious inconvenience, and our reaction is often nihilism, useless antagonism, consumerism when possible!

It's a general phenomenon, which has spread from towns to the entire country, including small villages.

We have the general feeling of a strong dichotomy between social supply and social demand.

We look for	We find
Proximity	Distance
Welcome	Closures
Cooperation	Competition
Cohesion	Dispersion
Security	Precariousness
Trust	Distrust

These unsatisfied needs are not a luxury, they are basic components of a human being. When they are not met, they create the above mentioned serious inconvenience.

Humanity deposits are not worked out, they are deeply concealed into our society;

we have to go dig further if we want to find them. While searching, we realize that there is a unique need summing them all up, the need of community. This hidden need is in individuals, in families, in neighborhoods.

How can we support each other in these gloomy prospects? This is impossible as long as we maintain the same housing schemes. A choice is necessary, a free choice, a conscious choice, the intention of changing and transforming the disease into prospects or hope. During the 70's many community experiences, often pretentious, failed, but something was left and is coming out in a different form, a project more pragmatic and consistent, aiming to propose alternatives in an urban environment.

2. Cohousing communities

The association I belong to is called "Mondo di Comunità e Famiglia" that means "World of community and family" and we wish to respond to existential disease by searching a really alternative lifestyle, not antagonist nor exclusive.

We believe that another way of living is possible, even in towns.

We believe in little communities of mutual supporting families and individuals, in the new forms of social aggregation.

We accept that we are not self-sufficient, which is a sort of laic version of the Gospel poverty, the poor being the one who accepts to depend on God and on the neighbor.

We share the same fate, it is not possible to save ourselves on our own. Don Lorenzo Milani used to say: saving ourselves on our own is egoism, saving ourselves together is Politics.

We search for a new lifestyle because we know that living in a communitarian environment which values diversity brings serenity. A fulfilled person is a resource for the entire society. We can say to each other "I can be a resource but I need you to make it happen". On these bases, the first experiences of housing communities and territorial communities were born. Territory can be a district of a big town as well as a group of small neighbouring villages: each a place where community members can develop important and frequent relationships. People and individuals may choose to live in the same building and have their own flat, or to move in order to be nearer to other families.

The term of cohousing community is now used to describe any housing solution open to some form of social features. It can remind us of the used-to-be neighbouring communities, very important in the past, such as described in "Il quartiere" by Vasco Pratolini.

80 to 60 years ago neighbouring communities or extended families were not a choice but a simple fact.

Today, entering a community is a conscious choice, consistent with our inner needs. Some sociologists say we propose to go back to a way of life impossible to practice nowadays but we rather think that we go "back to future". Building a neighbouring community is not a vane wish to return to some idealized past, on the contrary this is responding to present time needs by creating a socially sustainable way of living. Not a highly demanding and exclusive experience, but an attempt to fill up the lacks of relationship.

People wishing to join in this adventure are asked to take the time to write a mutual support pact, engaging people in becoming a resource for each other:

- I commit to support you, according to my possibilities, in your wish of fulfillment and I ask you to do the same for me
- We choose to pool our money (1) as a tangible sign of mutual support (this could be Bilanci di Giustizia (families whose aim is to move their household budget toward products and producers that respect either the environment and the society), ethical savings or purchase groups as well).
- We choose a moment to check regularly where we are heading: for believers, this could be exchanges around Gospel; or exchanges on ideals and lifestyles, always regarding tangible, daily choices showing a progression, with one's limits and falls.
- We commit to tell the others about ourselves by "sharing" our life experience, listening to the others without discussion, non-judgment.
- We stay in touch with people and experiences external to our community, in order to learn and to widen our views.
- We wish to improve in exchanging material and immaterial goods, such as time, knowledge and abilities exchanges.
- We support each other, according to our possibility, in everyone's choices of housing the neighbour
- We promote when possible cultural and social activities on our territory.

Being resource for each other helps to tend to sobriety as a lifestyle through a slow process including material and spiritual aspects of life. Sobriety in renovating houses, in furnishing, in everyday purchases. Creativity helps to recycle and re-use what is thrown away by others. We free ourselves from the objects themselves, but without renouncing to them. We learn that goods can make relationships easier or more difficult. We share cars and tools.

In our association, we have today many examples of community life based on these ideas. There are some in Lombardy, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto and Tuscany.

Experiencing community life lets you learn, not without effort, the art of relationship, the value of trust and mutual support, that you have to find your own well-being in order to give it back to your neighbour.

Starting from a deep realism, or even from a sort of egoism, we can later open up to the surrounding territory and meet suffering people: evicted tenants, unemployed, homeless, lonely people. People experiencing material needs, who wish to talk to other people, to feel they are not alone. Community teaches us to listen. And then we try to offer it to others.

We are not health and social care professionals, we have no specific knowledge; we simply try to welcome the people we meet with the heart and some common sense. For example, we organize parties in the courtyard to let people meet and share something: traditional food, children playing together, elder people observing... Our communities act in their territories with spontaneity and discretion and at no cost to taxpayers.

In many big towns there are thousands of vacant flats belonging to public institutions, churches or private persons; there are, on the other side, thousands of people afraid

to be evicted or already homeless. And no prospects, because of extremely high house prices.

In this situation, experiences like ours can bridge the gap between privilege of possession and despair, as well as promoting new demand in cohousing of the mutual support kind.

We should re-think the town, and build it on a universally shared value: relationship. It may seem a little thing in comparison to the idea of building a town adapted to everyone (children, adults, elder people). It could nevertheless be the beginning of a process in which citizens, instead of being passive, become protagonists capable of problem solving through agreement, solidarity and personal contribution, instead of waiting the intervention of the authorities.

I believe I have so far communicated my belief: community is not an utopia, nor a repair of nostalgic dreamers, but a urgent necessity, particularly in these times of crisis, when risks of fighting to survive are very likely to end up in violence and overwhelming.

We have no preconceived solutions and we do not pretend to teach anything, we simply want to try an alternative way of life, without illusions or fanaticisms. We know these times are marked by generalized individualism which humiliates individuality and discourages trust; we try therefore to propose simple and natural cohesion elements.

I'd like to quote Martin Buber to conclude: "We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the place, and the place is called community".

Economy in *Mondo di Comunità e Famiglia*

Our "economic system" is based on the "memory of gift".

The memory of gift is a necessity for us, is a propelling energy. Our association is a system producing well-being and relational goods, helping everyone to be really him or herself, to be a resource for the other, to be happier et more fulfilled.

The system goes on because each person who takes part in this experience has received something and will also give something back as well.

Gift multiplies itself exponentially: each person spread the experience, by telling about it, implying others, donating. Cardinal Martini (former bishop of Milan) talked some years ago about "Charity not as a moral duty but as a lifestyle" and this is possible because we know that we have received so much.

The memory of gift has its origin in each family; the economy of the community is a gift greater than the sum of the economy of each family.

Engagement, fantasy, social responsibility, service, relationship, being open-minded are essential components of the community economy.

The community must be independent, it has to function relying on its own energies, as it were an extended family.

Debit and credit must be balanced, but neither contains only financial entries. Credits are not only salaries or compensations for children in foster care, as debits are not only blank cheques or invoices payments.

We try to create communities, which are open and disposed to exchanging energies (time, money, goods etc.). Each community has, along a traditional balance sheet, a social balance sheet. We'd like to make social profits in our accounts (we have invested in producing something positive for ourselves, for our neighbours, for the others).

On the other side, our experience proposes to avoid financial profits and reserve funds.

Each community builds its own rules and system to handle debit and credit. ¹At the end of the year, each community keeps a part of the cash for unexpected expenses and transfers the rest to the association, which uses this money to finance new projects-

Individuals and families are granted what they need thanks to the multitude of resources generated by the total engagement in the community.

Blank cheques and family economy in the community

The choices of pooling one's money and handing out blank cheques are used to be in each other's hands, with confidence, one's conscience being guarantee to co-living. My gains and the fruit of my labour are now used to pay more than my needs. Every person having a paid job transfers all his salary on the community account. At the beginning of the month, each family gets a blank cheque signed by the community cashier. Families confidentially fill in the cheques according to that month's need. Some use it to have cash and other transfer it to their own bank account, in order to use credit cards or EC.

Blank cheque is a guarantee of freedom from economic constraints, it favours development of conscience for individuals, couples and children, is an instrument of responsibility. First of all towards the community and its members, then towards developing a form of alternative economy.

Blank cheques allow separation of work from money, separation of money from consumption. Everyone consumes freely, according to his-her needs, and produce according to his-her capacities. Our aim is that everybody participates, without under- or overdoing, to equilibrate his balance (conscience balance first, and economic one then).

Family economy in the community is creative, alternative, exceeding on providence and is not always balanced in financial credit and debit. It is balanced, though, regarding to what the family invests in the community (money, engagement, fantasy, service) and what it gets back.

Community is a solidarity-based experience, it produces solidarity; there is no dependency culture.

The cheque guarantees the present, the community cash guarantees immediate future and its eventual needs; the "far future" and its needs cannot be guaranteed by the community, each individual and family has to provide by maintaining and developing relations and solidarity networks.

¹ Generally speaking, credits are salaries or pensions, guests' donations, compensation for children in foster care; debits are monthly blank cheques to each family and community charges (rents, bills, maintenance, vehicles etc.).

Blank cheques refuse accumulation logics because no sum will be sufficient to guarantee the “far future”. Blank cheque is the demonstration of trust, full trust in the Other; some may think it stupid, but this trust is stubbornly renewed every day.