



Fighting the Mafia with solar energy

It sounds like the plot of a 1990s Mafia movie or a brand-new Netflix gangster series: it starts during a series of important trials against organized crime in an Italian city. Two judges who have been fighting the Mafia for years get murdered. A young physicist who had left the region to earn his PhD returns to his city of birth. He is fed up with the Mafia controlling people's lives and decides to fight back.

This is not the plot of a Mafia movie. It is real. The city where it takes place is Messina, in the north-eastern part of Sicily. The young physicist is Gaetano Giunta and the fight he is starting is not one with weapons and violence, but with a very effective, sustainable social economy programme. Gaetano Giunta is the founder of Fondazione della Comunità di Messina – the Community Foundation of Messina. With the foundation, Gaetano wants to give the city and its future back to the citizens.

Since the Mafia seemed to have all areas of social life under its control, that was not an easy task. "We understood that to have a real change, we also had to change the economy", he said in an interview. So the first project, the foundation realized, was to invest its 500,000 euro baseline endowment in a renewable-energy photovoltaic system. This made it possible to achieve an environmental and social impact as well as a financial return to fund social projects. The project was realized in collaboration with hundreds of citizens, who allowed the foundation to put solar panels on their roofs. In return, they got clean energy – and gave the surplus back to the foundation to fund its social programmes. Today the project provides the foundation with 500,000 euros a year in this way.

The most important aspect that turned this first initiative of the foundation into a success is trust. Since the region hasn't exactly made good experiences with trustworthy institutions and authorities, convincing the citizens to participate in this programme was a task not just anybody could do. It took Gaetano Giunta to accomplish this feat. He gained the trust of people because he has been trying to create justice in the city for quite a long time, leading civil actions in 20 trials against Mafia. "He is an outstanding leader", says Carola Carazzone, secretary general of Assifero, the national association of Italian grant-making foundations. "He offered something positive – an alternative model of human development."

And it turned out to be successful and lasting, too. When the foundation convinced local donors, private equity investors and banks to transform a century-old, almost abandoned brewery into a sustainable social enterprise, it created jobs for around 150 people. In an area where the unemployment rate is around 23 per cent, this is a huge outcome. The foundation reaches out to people who have been outsiders for a long time, such as former inmates of a psychiatric prison hospital, but also to everyone else who wants to be engaged in community life. The initiatives of the foundation range from music festivals, to provide training in traditional local skills to integrating education. Carola Carazzone is proud of the foundation: "Fondazione della Comunità di Messina is a role model. They did what all community foundations should aim for: identify niches where they can really make a difference."

The story is based on an interview with Carola Carazzone, secretary general of Assifero.

Further information:
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