

CASE STUDY

Como: restorative wefts in the community

*Bruna Dighera**

1. Origins of the project

ConTatto: Trame riparative nella comunità is a community welfare project that aims to promote cultural, social and network conditions to spread the values, principles and practices of the restorative community's approach in handling conflicts. The operational goals of the project are to go beyond the rationale of pitting the conflicting parties against each other and to spread mediation and restorative community practices. The aim is to encourage voluntary and consensual meetings between the parties, while also potentially involving groups of citizens.

The project has been funded by Fondazione Cariplo as part of a call for projects to implement social welfare. Having been devised in 2015 and planned in 2016, it has been running for three years (2017-2020). The project is implemented in the city of Como and the surrounding areas. Twelve partners are involved, including two local public institutions, among which are the municipality of Como, two universities (Insubria and Bergamo), a social research agency and different social agencies and third sector non-profit organisations. The project is also supported by a wide network of local public and private institutions.

Insubria's Restorative Justice and Mediation Centre and Bergamo's Restorative Community approach contributed significantly during the design phase. Experience gained among the partners in social reintegration of offenders, empowerment of victims, community cohesion work, legal innovations in the period (e.g. L.67/14) and operative protocols among different agencies added to this endeavour.

2. Theoretical and conceptual basis

A common theoretical and conceptual framework guided and directed the development of the project, consisting of the following elements:

- the CoRe model (Restorative Relational Communities) (Patrizi, Lepri, Lodi & Dighera, 2016) which focuses on the complex circular relationship between human actions and the social context, recognising that the local community

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is the preferred system for intervention to spread and practice restorative approaches;

- Insubria’s Humanistic Victim-Offender Mediation approach (Mannozi & Lodigiani, 2015, 2017), which focuses on listening, showing empathy, sharing memories and respecting the emotional experiences involved in a conflict, as well as on the use of common/emotional language;
- Bergamo’s social-pedagogical approach (Lizzola, 2018; Lizzola, Brena & Ghidini, 2017), which focuses on individual and collective responsibility, on the collaborative handling of conflicts and on the educational dimensions underlying restorative processes;
- Wachtel and McCold’s Social Discipline Window (2001), adapted by Campbell, Chapman and McCredy (2002), which develops the various ways of responding to challenging actions and their consequences along the two axes of responsibility and social support;
- Wenger’s Communities of Practice (1998), which underlines the importance of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire;
- The ConTatto project looks at community welfare based on the principles of inclusion, participation and restoration as guidelines for the joint planning and development of activities together with groups of citizens, schools, services and organisations. Participants were always invited to plan the course of action with ConTatto staff based on: joint preliminary analysis of the needs, resources, critical situations and conflicts;
- shared languages and concepts from a restorative perspective to re-interpret conflicts and to reflect on what can be done.

3. Operationalisation

The ConTatto project is organised into four macro-areas.

3.1 *Social area: schools and districts*

Six schools are involved and in each of the co-planning groups with headteachers of schools, teachers, parents and students have started to identify and analyse conflicts and to plan training to improve their conflict analysis and alternative management skills. Then students, pupils, teachers and parents, first in parallel sections, later in cross section meetings discussed about how to handle conflicts in a restorative way.

‘Intermediary Bodies’ were organised in the two urban contexts involved: these are groups of citizens made aware of the restorative approach and people running the ConTatto project who periodically and voluntarily meet up to share situations of conflict affecting the local community. These conflicts often stem from suburban districts, social housing units, soup kitchens, parks or libraries and involve people and groups with many different needs, belonging to various generations, cultures and ethnic groups. Inside these vital areas of society, opportunities emerge to experiment with bonding, dialogue, the sharing of emotions and needs or the creative development of restorative-based courses.

3.2 Legal and victims area

Training seminars were set up in the legal area on the subjects of community and criminal restorative justice, in collaboration with the Court of First Instance, Probation Services and the Bar Association. The seminars were aimed at magistrates, lawyers, justice service workers and social workers, sometimes in mixed groups, to raise awareness about restorative justice programmes, as required by supranational law.

'Restorative Oriented Groups' (ROG) were started: these are encounter-groups between offenders and citizens and between victims and citizens who freely choose to meet up and discuss issues related to conflict, crime, suffering, responsibility and each person's needs. Whenever and if possible, the groups of offenders and citizens meet the group of victims and citizens and they work together. In the meanwhile they seek to go beyond their confined roles to encourage discussion between different points of view, experiences and emotions. The aim of a ROG is to build up meetings, dialogues and common generational threads between people who have taken part to or have been involved in social conflicts and/or crimes, in different way that may change over time.

The citizens involved in a ROG often are members of intermediary bodies, teachers or parents who met in schools, or engaged citizens in the awareness and dissemination work undertaken by the project. The offenders and victims are people referred by social and justice services which are part of the project. The ROG's include trained project workers who encourage discussion, while refraining from any therapeutic involvement or support.

3.3 Communication and fundraising area

Communication and fundraising activities are aimed at spreading a culture and citizens' awareness of restorative justice as well as to handle conflicts inspired by restorative principles and practices:

- open conferences, training seminars, cultural events (e.g. concerts, theatre performances, reading workshops, neighbourhood parties, workshop stands at trade shows, etc.) have been organised in the community;
- media communication through the web (www.progettocontatto.com) and social media, newsletters and collaborations with local newspapers have been initiated, as well as social and fund raising activities to get people willingly involved.

3.4 Organisation

Setting up project activities people running the project adopted a 'facilitating social practice approach', not proclaiming themselves as external experts or specialists able to solve critical issues or conflicts, but rather as facilitators of encounters and dialogues between the parties or as participation and accountability processes enhancers in repairing the torn relationships, damage and scars caused by conflict. As regards conflicts arising from a crime or expressed through a crime, the project promotes the humanistic victim-offender mediation method.

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Managing project activities require a complex multi-level governance architecture, which needs permanent attention and involves several functions such as four operational teams and their coordination group; a technical-political coordination representing and managing the project; a scientific-technical group involving the two universities looking after the training and providing scientific monitoring and supervision of the activities.

To work with the community within a restorative view ConTatto is committed to:

- observe and analyse the contexts through field visits and local expert witnesses' interviews, discussing the findings with them and other stakeholders;
- reveal and recognise current or potential conflicts emerged from the contexts analysis;
- choose the conflicts to deal with, handling everyone's expectations;
- deal directly with conflicts through different restorative devices or trying to create conditions to do so;
- prevent conflicts and crimes strengthening social bonds and easing tensions.

4. Findings and challenges

The project has achieved significant results, as assessed through interviews and focus groups with project beneficiaries (e.g. teachers, citizens of Intermediary Bodies and Restorative Oriented Groups) and project staff, and through surveys to students, teachers and parents conducted by the project evaluator.

Trainings of lawyers, social and justice services staff, teachers, students and parents of the involved schools and members of Intermediary Bodies helped to raise awareness and improve knowledge of restorative justice. Most of the participants declared that they had little or no knowledge of restorative justice before their involvement in ConTatto trainings. Besides that, the project changed their views on conflict, damage, restoration, victims and offenders. Participants also understood the role of the community and of social trust in restoring crimes and conflicts and they changed their way of approaching offenders and victims, paying more attention to victims' rights and duties. In addition, they reported being aware of the fact that they are part of a community that could get into conflicts, and are able to handle them as opportunities of encounter and dialogue.

Moreover, the project tried to increase offenders' effectiveness and responsibility towards the community. According to the project staff, offenders' involvement in ROGs allowed them to become aware of their self-justifying mechanisms, of the harm done and of their own responsibilities in front of the community members.

Furthermore, the project helped to improve social relationships. According to teachers, some of the primary school students have been paying more attention to the way they relate to each other after the trainings and this improved the social classroom climate. The conflict analysis pursued in the social housing, involving all residents, brought about an increase in residents' awareness of their

responsibility in their interactions, as well as an improvement in the relationships between them. The project staff noted a reduction in the tensions between residents, in particular between Italians and foreigners.

However, the project faced several challenges in the implementation, such as:

- a lack of, or limited political commitment, especially in the Como town;
- people's and institutions' expectations that the project staff would solve conflicts immediately, despite their high level of complexity;
- a lack of, or limited experience among people and institutions with participatory processes in which citizens/institutions became actors and not passive beneficiaries;
- the rigid organisation of some institutional contexts (e.g. schools) resulting in inflexible outlines of the roles, limiting people's willingness to openly discuss conflicts together;
- the need to precede restorative interventions with social cohesion activities, where deeply rooted social conflicts exist.

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