

E4 | COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE STRUGGLE FOR HEALTH IN ITALY

The neoliberal order affects people's lives in myriad ways and it is thus contingent that the struggle for health be conceived and constructed as a very broad struggle. It incorporates different strands, different objectives of an immediate nature and diverse strategies, while upholding the vision of a globe that is free of the ills of neoliberal globalization. This chapter focuses on two struggles from Italy of communities, defending and reclaiming their rights, in the face of the neoliberal onslaught. The first relates the collective endeavor to defend land and food sovereignty; the second recounts the struggle for justice by families of victims who fell prey to the Asbestos industry.

Genuino Clandestino: struggle for food and land sovereignty

Genuino Clandestino (GC) is an Italian network of collectives, associations and individuals who advocate and practice the re-appropriation and collectivization of land for autonomous, self-managed small scale farming, as an anti-capitalist politics/way of life. It includes small-scale producers, urban and rural groups as well as individuals engaged in the struggle for food and land sovereignty. GC's actions are designed to re-build local communities and organize resistance against the expropriation of land.

The roots of this movement lie in the formation of many local networks of small-scale producers at the end of the 1990s, as part of the anti-globalization movement. GC itself was launched in 2009, as a response to new regulations, regarding 'direct-sale' markets and processed food, issued in the city of Bologna. The regulations sought to equate the processing of food produced by individual and small producers with that produced by the large-scale food industries¹. This led to a campaign by small-scale producers and consumers for 'Genuine Clandestine Products'. The campaign promotes home-made processed food (which have long been part of rural traditions) and advocates that it is impossible for small producers to abide by the same norms that are applied on the organized food industry. The campaign soon spread across Italy and is currently loosely structured as network of local groups, rooted in their own lands and communities.

In 2012, Genuino Clandestino launched a campaign called 'TerrABC' ('Terra Bene Comune' meaning land as a commons) in the attempt to bridge the separation between urban and rural resistances and to build a common global analysis on the process of expropriation of land. This campaign denounced the

(mis)appropriation of land belonging to communities, by industrial agriculture, extractive industries and other corporations, where land was taken over for construction projects, for building road networks, factories, supermarkets, military bases, and for real estate speculation. TerrABC soon led to a wider movement for the re-appropriation of land. It focused on reclaiming access to land by local communities and also developed links with other movements, like the ones against imposed ‘mega projects’, movements for housing, and the movement for reclaiming of the ‘commons’ and for self-organized public spaces. Genuino Clandestino defines itself as a movement of communities that struggle for self-determination regarding practices related to food. The manifesto of GC declares that it is an anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-sexist movement, based on the need to mobilize rural and urban resistances in the common struggle against expropriation and exploitation.

The practices of GC GC advocates that radical analysis regarding food sovereignty needs to be rooted in practice. This becomes necessary given the global debate on sustainability of local agricultural practices in the face of advocacy by agribusiness about the ‘superiority’ of industrial modes of food production. GC represents ‘a movement of practices’: one of the major planks of its activities relates to sharing experiences regarding different practices among different local networks. These practices are intrinsically linked to the specific needs of local communities.

The movement advocates for and promotes small-scale organic food markets, participatory certification of products, self-organized popular kitchens and access to land.



Image E4.1 Self organised farmers' market (Michele Lapini)

Self-organized small-scale organic markets are mainly located in urban social spaces. The farmers' markets promote rural organic agriculture, and also promote respect for biodiversity of the region, short food-production chain, and co-production – involving a direct relationship between the producer and the consumer. The markets are also public spaces for conducting public debates, concerts, drama, videos, meetings; and for agitating in support of food and land sovereignty and the re-appropriation land.

Participatory certification is an alternative practice of GC that seeks to replace official certification of products as 'organic'. In Italy, small farmers are particularly handicapped as official certification procedures are designed for large-scale food producers. Participatory certification involves quality control by a voluntary open group of people that follow practices of the producers by observing, participating and knowing their *modus operandi*. This practice offers an alternative method of certification based on the development of trust between producers and co-producers, and questions the legitimacy of the institutional apparatus as guarantor of the 'genuineness' of products.

Self-organized popular kitchen: Industrial modes of food production and large-scale distributions systems may lead to reduction in food prices, but they are predicated on a model of agricultural practices that promotes exploitation of workers employed in all sectors of the food production chain. On the other hand, rural organic agriculture can lead to higher cost of products, thus making them inaccessible to a majority of the people. Popular kitchen are designed to break free from the dichotomy where the rich can eat healthy food while the poor can only access low quality cheap food. Self-organized popular kitchens promote self-organization and collective forms of mutual support.

Access to land: In 2012 in Italy, as a response to the public debt crisis, reforms were approved that allowed public land to be sold to private entities. As a response to this, some initiatives were developed to safeguard and re-appropriate state-owned land that had fallen into disuse. In 2014 the TerrABC campaign initiated a struggle against the appropriation of land for mega projects and for real estate speculation. Since then, state-owned land has been utilized as common and open spaces, where local communities manage public land.

Significant aspects of GC Re-appropriation is the keyword and underlying principle of the movement. In Italy, as in many other parts of the world, food and land sovereignty movements represent a break with top-down governance structures and an experiment in 'direct democracy' involving grass-root communities. The act of claiming access to land is supplemented by actions on the right to housing, basic income, public health, education and self-determination in other aspects of life. Food-sovereignty movements show that the access to healthy food cannot be possible without fighting against exploitation, land grabbing, environmental devastation, as well as without practising alternative forms of governance, which are rooted in local and autonomous communities.



Image E4.2 Selling directly to consumers (Michele Lapini)

Rebuilding Legitimacy: Re-appropriation also requires defining again, what is fair, and what is not. It challenges the situation where a polluting factory is allowed and supported by governmental institutions, though it is harmful for health and the environment, while a hand-made bread is defined illegal because it has not been prepared in a laboratory compliant with legal standards. This is the focus of the claim of food and land sovereignty movements. On the other hand, current food and employment related laws do not address issues regarding the nutritional value of food, the working conditions of people employed in agriculture, and the use of pesticides, antibiotics and other substances in industrial modes of food production. The struggle for genuine and clandestine products seeks to affirm the legitimacy of rural traditions and to defend popular knowledge and habits that are now defined illegal.

Self-organization and decentralization: In *Genuino Clandestino* self-organization is not a mere principle but also a practice that leads to the nurturing of a non-hierarchical organization. This is a novel and challenging aspect of a national movement that has the ambition to be large and inclusive, involving the participation of several struggles. In the network there are no representatives, no spokespersons, no delegates; the life of the movement is rooted in the autonomy of the local networks that adopt the practices and the organizational forms that are appropriate for their specific context. Their inclusion in the national movement is based on the respect of its principles and manifesto; on the daily struggle for food and territorial self-determination; and on the exchange of practices and knowledge between people and networks.

The movement organizes at least two national assemblies every year, in which people have the opportunity to share experiences, discuss common perspectives and take decisions that concern the entire movement.

Communities and relationships: The organizing principles described above can work only through the creation of relationships based on trust. The reconstruction of local communities is a crucial issue in the struggles today, as the defence of land is tightly linked to the aspirations of people living on it. Both at local and at national level, mutual support allows people to create communities based on solidarity, to practise alternatives that claim legitimacy, and to experiment practices that are explicitly against the dominant system which is based on expropriation and exploitation.

Supporting community struggle against effects of asbestos

This is the story of citizens' resistance in Casale Monferrato (a town in the Piedmont region in Italy) against asbestos-related health and environmental hazards. The story originates in an action-research led by a group of psychologists named DUPP (Diritti Umani Psicologi Piemonte – Human Rights Psychologists Piedmon) that, in 2015–2016, organized several activities (focus group and meetings) in Casale involving citizens' organizations (such as AfeVA³ – the association of asbestos victims and their families), local schools, representatives from local authorities and the regional psychology board.

There are no 'safe' levels of exposure for asbestos The effects of exposure to asbestos have been widely known for decades. 'Asbestosis' is a chronic disease that leads to shortness of breath (most prominent among workers who handle the material), and in some to pleural mesothelioma, an incurable and extremely aggressive form of cancer, with an average survival rate of 8–10 months. Exposure to asbestos also increases the risk of other forms of lung cancer. Unlike other carcinogens, there are no 'safe' levels of exposure to asbestos. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates asbestos related annual death higher than 107,000 worldwide and has asked for a global ban of all forms of asbestos. Before 1970 there were very few regulations against the use of asbestos despite increasing scientific evidence about the carcinogenic effect of asbestos. Things have changed since, and now, primarily as a result of pressure from social movements around the world, asbestos has been banned in over 50 countries. Despite this, asbestos is still used in many low- and middle-income countries, often with few, if any, protective measures. At present an estimated 125 million people worldwide are exposed to asbestos. (WHO, 2014; Castelmann, 2005)

While some countries have prohibited use of asbestos entirely, emerging economies such as India, China and Russia continue to allow the use and production of asbestos. In spite of evidence to the contrary it is claimed that protection against risks are possible through the use of protective measures.

In the 1980s and 90s, some directives against exposure to risk agents were adopted in the EU, and from 2005 the exchange and use of all asbestos fibres and products containing them, has been finally banned. (WHO, 2006).

Italy banned asbestos in 1992. Under Italian law, those whose properties are contaminated with asbestos, are required to notify the health authorities, so that they can determine the extent of asbestos contamination. In the event of an established risk from dispersion of asbestos fibres, the authorities can proceed for immediate remediation of the property (involving steps to remove asbestos).

The Center for Epidemiology and Cancer Prevention in Piedmont estimates that in the health district which includes Casale, pleural mesothelioma has an incidence of 59.4 per 100,000 among men and 24.7 per 100,000 among women. Incidence in the city of Casale is 101.9 and 43.4 for men and women respectively. People are also at risk of higher levels of laryngeal and ovarian cancers (Maule, 2007).

The struggle against asbestos in Casale Monferrato The production facility of the Eternit company (Eternit is the trademark of a particular form of cement that includes 10 per cent of asbestos) in Casale Monferrato extended over an area of about 94,000 square metres, of which about 50,000 were covered cement slabs that contain asbestos⁴. The plant was the biggest in Italy. Production started on 1907 and continued till 1986. At its peak the facility employed 3,500 workers. For years Eternit's workers believed that the plant was a boon for



Image E4.3 A roof shed with Eternit (Di Karol Pilch (Karol91) - Opera propria, Pubblicodominio, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1497806>)

them as it provided secure employment. Eternit did not inform the workers of the extreme dangers posed by asbestos. Being totally unaware of the risks, workers returned home with their bodies and clothes covered and impregnated with asbestos fibres, embracing their wives and children and thus passing on to them the risks associated with asbestos.

In the 1970s, the news started emerged of the hazards associated with working in Eternit's factory. In the following years, complaints and lawsuits were initiated and the issue seized the entire community of Casale Monferrato. Some newspapers wrote about the Eternit factory as a producer of cancer and death. On 18 May, 1984, the national trade union CGIL held a national conference in Casale Monferrato to address the issue, exposing the fact that the asbestos-related diseases were affecting not only the workers, but also their families and the whole community.

Eternit shut down on the 6 June, 1986. The first epidemiological survey of former Eternit workers was published in 1987, and in the same year, the local mayor issued an order prohibiting commercial production and use of materials containing asbestos, thus preventing the opening of new Eternit factories. At the conference titled, 'No To Asbestos' in 1989, the legal ban on asbestos was enforced. In the same year, the Association of Relatives of Deceased Eternit Workers (AFLED) was formed. On 27 March, 1992, a law was promulgated to ban asbestos in Italy, which provided for compensation for former workers. In 1998, AFLED changed its name in AFeVA (Association of Asbestos Victims and their Families), with the aim to represent all victims, not just victims who worked at the plant.

AFeVA's founding objectives were: 'justice, remediation and search'. The association supports the need to build a different culture, which respects the environment and the health of the population. To advocate for this the association has organized, from its inception, activities in schools and other public institutions, through which information is provided on health and environmental protection. This has led to engagement of students in campaigns and advocacy on environmental issues and in research work. AFeVA also played an important role in the legal and civil suit in the Torino court, in which the last owner of Eternit, was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Law, memory and awareness The DUPP working group⁵, together with AfeVA, worked with families of victims affected by asbestos. In the context of interpersonal relationships they explored the suffering and pain of affected families. The interaction was premised on an understanding that when an individual becomes isolated and loses connection with personal relationships, she ultimately loses hope and the strength to face major challenges. A community that gathers around a common struggle adds value to the accountability and participation of each individual. In spite of procedural delays in delivery of justice the social commitment to defend rights is maintained.

Three pillars were identified, around which Casale's resilience is built: law, memory and awareness.

The knowledge of the law is useful to find possible legal weapons to defend those who are affected and to incriminate those who are responsible. It also helps and create precedents for others fighting against environmental pollution. Memory is necessary to pass on this story to future generations, and together with awareness regarding dangers that are still present, helps find solutions to problems.

When communities are pitted against the interests of multinational companies, the struggle is not easy. The three pillars of community resilience have consolidated on the work of health workers who have played an important role in supporting individuals and families. International support networks, which prevent local struggles from being isolated and place them in a larger context, reinforce the awareness of not being alone. The experience of Casale Monferrato, has become an example and an inspiration internationally, for the struggle against environmental pollution, and violence in many communities. This long process has allowed the city to find trust and hope.

Notes

1 See: <http://autonomies.org/ru/2014/10/the-autonomous-self-management-of-landfood-genuino-clandestino/>

2 We acknowledge help received, in putting together this case study, from: Afeva; Assunta Prato; Paolo Liedholm; Enza Gastaldi (Association Alt 76); Federica Grosso (ASL Casale Monferrato – MAIDASOLI); and Barry Castelman (Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization)

3 See Afeva website: <http://www.afeva.it/>

4 See: <http://www.comune.casale-monferrato.al.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/277>

5 See: http://www.souqonline.it/home2_2_eng.asp?idpadre=2431&idtesto=2436#.WV3vzoSGOig

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