

Perspectives on a recent visit by RENATE to a Primary Centre for migrants, near Palermo, Sicily.



RENATE Core Group members and staff working on the RENATE Strategic Plan recently visited a 'Primary Centre' near Palermo, Sicily, which provides shelter and support to minors.

The centre, which is categorised as a "Primary Centre," is housed in a property owned by a doctor & leased to a local social co-operative. A non-profit venture, the centre offers shelter and support to minors. Currently the centre is home to fifty youths, who hail from the countries on the African

continent, in addition to Syria and Bangladesh.

Each of the teenagers has arrived alone and frightened on the shores of Sicily, having survived perilous land and sea journeys, with memories of experiences and encounters that no human being should ever have to endure.

Some come to Europe looking for their families; some in search of a better life with money and work. Others come with the intention of tracing their family members who have moved on to other EU countries.

The migrants receive a modest weekly stipend, which most of them use to buy mobile telephones to help them communicate with friends and family, either in their home countries or scattered across Europe. However, such accessibility can often render the migrants vulnerable to their Madams and to traffickers. Because of such dangers, the Centre makes every effort to monitor and record the telephone numbers in order to protect the young people from further vulnerabilities, the greatest of which being the possibility that human traffickers might be able to trace their family members in other EU countries and threaten harm to them unless the minors comply with the traffickers' demands.

Centres such as this are the first 'port of call' for minors rescued from the sea. Although it is intended that the minors move on to longer-term accommodation, due to limited availability of accommodation because of the volume of



migrants arriving, there is an increasing shortage of spaces at Secondary Centres and so, the 'first port of call' becomes a longer-term option, similar to a shelter.



At its peak, this particular centre had 68 minors but currently there are 50, both male and female. The upper number occurred due to emergency accommodation needs in the region, where there were excessive numbers requiring shelter.

Traumatised on their migrant routes (assaulted, sexually abused, witness to deaths & suffering of others, some are pregnant etc.), it is clear that these young

migrants present many and complex human challenges to staff at the centre (social workers, teachers, therapists, nurses, doctors, administrative and ancillary staff). While a nurse is permanently at the centre, a medical doctor calls weekly, having firstly assessed the health & well-being of those who arrive.

Having established each migrant's educational level, staff must then devise a personalised programme for each individual. Throughout their work, staff are humane, kind and caring. During our visit, we witnessed such care and love for the youth, who enjoyed an ease with the staff. Although décor and furnishings are sparse, every effort has been made to create a warm and comfortable environment. Drawings done by the young migrants decorate the walls and some Christmas decorations lend cheer to the social room where we met.

Identification is a particular challenge. Without I.D., the minors have limited prospects. To counteract this difficulty, each minor is given an identification 'code' and if the minor actually knows his/her name, this is then added to the respective code.

In the case of minors unsure of their chronological age, we were informed that a special x-ray of the wrist can clearly indicate the correct chronological age. An instance of this is shown in the case of 'Angelica' (not her real name), who tried to register at the centre as a minor but the x-ray shows she's 25, so Angelica must be transferred to a shelter for adults, although she'd prefer to stay at this specific Primary Centre now that she has made friends, both with her peers and with the staff.

The co-operative employs a teacher to visit the Centre twice weekly, to teach basic Italian language. Seventeen minors attend public schools locally, in compliance with national legislation which obliges minors to attend school until the age of 16. The remaining students aged 16-18 are studying for their High School Diploma, again attending local schools.

A typical day starts with breakfast from 8.00 -10.00. Lunch is from 13.00-15.00 and supper from 19.00 - 21.00. All food is delivered from the local commune, as it is not permitted to store food at the centre. Staff spoke of this limitation creating difficulties for the staff and migrants alike, who cannot act spontaneously with something as basic as food preparation.



Socialisation skills are encouraged in addition to the disciplinary skills of adhering to timetables, punctuality, folding clothes in wardrobes and generally looking after oneself.

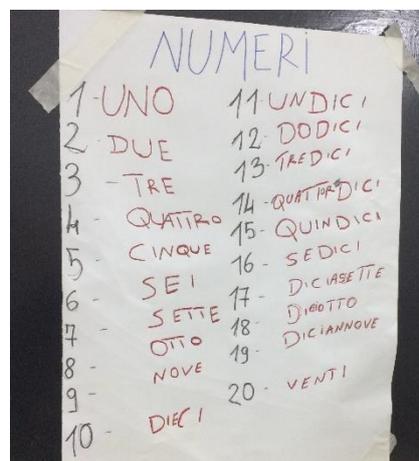
In terms of social life, the youths are allowed spend time visiting the local community, but under strict controls, having regard to their protection.

There have been some difficulties with Nigerian minors, who are in contact with their 'Madames' and also with some Eritrean minors, who have run away in search of their families who had arrived in Sicily previously and have moved on to other European countries such as France,

Germany or Switzerland, due to complications associated with registration in the first country of arrival.

Staff maintain that the main challenge for the Centre is an economic one, in trying to fulfil the needs of the minors. Material things such as additional pairs of shoes, clothes etc. are frugal & scarce, with staff offering/sharing from their own belongings.

Although EU funding is available to support migrants needs, bureaucratic processes hinder the work. This sometimes frustrates and disappoints the youth. Staff are anxious to explain to the migrants that they are fortunate to have a secure, safe, warm structure surrounding them, with food & health care & that's a significant achievement in its own right.



The visit to the centre has been uplifting in that we witnessed loving care and human kindness in abundance, yet we left the centre with heavy hearts, knowing that these brave, beautiful young people face uncertainty about their futures and deserve every support necessary if they are to realise their hopes and dreams for a better life in Europe.

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