Italy: Migrants bring new life to deserted villages

In Calabria, several villages, deserted by their inhabitants, were resurrected after opening their doors to refugees.

Riace, a small rural village lost in the middle of Calabria in southern Italy, was destined for obscurity due to a massive exodus of its inhabitants. Today, it has been repopulated through immigration. In July 1998, a boat washed up on the coast with 300 Kurds on board was greeted with open arms by the local residents. Afghans, Africans and other refugees of different nationalities have arrived since, helping to further revitalize the village.

Around 6,000 refugees have passed through the village over the years. Many move on, but some of them stay and try to start their own craft or retail businesses. In the 17 years since the first arrivals, many old buildings have been refurbished to provide accommodation. Schools have also been reopened for children but also adults.

This repopulation was made possible thanks to the efforts of the village mayor, Domenico Lucano. He fought with the State and the EU to obtain funding for the settlement of refugees. He believes that these migrants have saved Riace: “Migrants who arrive here are useful people. They have allowed us to rebuild and reopen schools, to launch businesses, to revive the village”, he says.

It is the same story in another village in Calabria, Satriano, which has received around 20 migrants: “The presence of refugees can be an opportunity to repopulate the town,” says Satriano’s mayor, Michele Drosi. “It can create a virtuous cycle.”
Riace and Satriano are part of a national network of 376 municipalities called SPRAR, the Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers. The network was created by the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs and is funded by the national government and the European Union. It is managed by a central office hosted by the National Association of Italian Municipalities.

Riace and Satriano are models of what SPRAR calls an accoglienza integrata, or “integrated welcome.”

In Satriano, a local cooperative known as Globe Media manages the project on behalf of the municipality. Globe is staffed almost exclusively by former migrants who have obtained Italian citizenship. The president, Khalid Elsheikhe, came to Italy from Sudan in the early 1990s. Globe helps refugees to buy food, find housing and learn to speak and write Italian. They also help them to write applications for asylum, prepare the necessary documents and coach them on what to say during their official interview.

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