



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Series: City Management

Interview no.: B7

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Interviewer: Rushda Majeed and Laura Bacon

Date of Interview: 23 March 2012

Location: Palermo
Italy

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MAJEED: This is Rushda Majeed on 23rd March, 2012. I am with Dr. Alessandra Siragusa who is the former Commissioner of Education under Mayor Leoluca Orlando's administration. I am here with my colleagues Laura Bacon and Roberto Pitea. Dr. Siragusa if I may start this conversation by asking you when you were appointed as Commissioner of Education and what were some of your positions before you became Commissioner?

SIRAGUSA: *I became Commissioner in 1993 when I was 30 years old. I had started in local politics in 1985 as a member of the neighborhood parliaments that we have around the city called Circostrizione and then I was also a member of the city council. Then in 1993 towards the end I became Commissioner but I started politics when I was 19 years old. I was very young and I was very involved with civil society movements in Palermo.*

My professional life started a bit later. I had my university degree so after I was Commissioner I entered a public competition to become a teacher and I won the competition. So in a sense it was atypical because it was the reverse. I became so interested in school and education that then I became a teacher.

MAJEED: Would you tell me a little bit about how you came to be appointed Commissioner of Education? What was your relationship in terms of Mayor Leoluca Orlando and what was the mandate that he gave you when you became Commissioner?

SIRAGUSA: *I met Orlando for the first time in 1982. That is when I started becoming involved in politics. That year the General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa was assassinated by the mafia and he was a relative of an aunt of mine, so it was like a family friend. I was very touched by this event and felt that I had to do something to make sure that it was not in vain.*

Back then Orlando was approximately 34, 35 years old so we started getting involved in politics together. We were also on the city counsel of the opposition in the 1993 period. So when Orlando became mayor he asked me to become the Commissioner for Social Activities. Back then the Commissioner for Schools, for Education, wasn't a very important Commissioner. Not at that time. So in September 1993 the priest, Father (Pino) Puglisi was assassinated. Father Puglisi was almost obsessed with building a middle school in Brancaccio which is this neighborhood of Palermo. So this is when I asked Mayor Orlando if I could become also the Commissioner for Schools.

So with Orlando first we had the relationship it was based on friendship but professionally we had a very free relationship in the sense that even though I was very young Mayor Orlando never tried to dictate what I had to do. We were left with a lot of room for our own initiative.

MAJEED: Could you tell me why you felt or Mayor Orlando felt the need to focus on education? What were some of the challenges or problems that were facing you at the time.

SIRAGUSA: *The mission, the basic idea of the Orlando giunta was the need to reopen the city to the citizens, make people go out and feel like the city belonged to them. So when I started off as education commissioner there were a lot of problems pertaining to education. The mandate of the Commissioner was all educational stages from kindergarten to middle school because high schools used to be part of the provincial administration.*

So back then we had 200 classes. They were meeting on what were called double shifts. So 200 classes were meeting in the afternoon because there weren't enough buildings available to have everyone go to school in the morning. Then 75% of these classes were hosted in private buildings, like an apartment like this would be turned into a classroom.

These private buildings a lot of them were actually owned by the Mafia as well. Of course there was nothing in terms of services like a school canteen, transportation. There wasn't an educational framework, a project of how to educate children. There wasn't an educational philosophy in the classrooms.

So the mission under the Orlando giunta as mentioned was to recreate an urban identity, recreate this feeling of belonging, of citizenship. We used to say Palermo è nostra e non di Cosa Nostra's. Palermo is ours and not Cosa Nostra's. This is a sort of pun in a sense. So first thing we started to do, one of the things we felt we needed to do was build new school so we could vacate the buildings that were owned by the mafia.

Then one of the big projects we did is Palermo opens doors, adopt-a-monument. As you probably heard from Professor Civico and others, this idea was to open to the public monuments that were not open. Behind this, the initiative had two objectives if you will. On one side it was an education project so with the excuse of re-learning about a monument, we were trying to use what kids would learn about history, about math, about science, the various subjects they would be studying.

There was also training of teachers and how to use whatever they had, the subject they would be teaching in school, to help people adopt-a-monument. Then the other objective was to take over the territory, make sure there was a presence. Actually it was successful and I'll send you some testimonials, some text. A lot of these monuments then after this initiative became open to the public for a longer period. Those were other private monuments, private houses. There were also public monuments.

Everything, from the graffiti on the ways, the illegal mechanic's shop that was inside the monument. So the people wrapped up their stuff and moved on and said we're very happy you're taking care of the monuments. It was a success on many levels.

MAJEED: Good. In terms of two questions related to this. In terms of the different activities that you undertook, where were some of these ideas coming from and did you have a strategic plan or a vision before you began?

SIRAGUSA: *I have written a book with the actual step-by-step strategy and example on how this was implemented. It is in Italian but we can perhaps try to get it. So in the sense of the strategy we had what we'd call education projects. On one hand we wanted to train the teachers because in Italy we tend to study history from our books but we never study local history. For instance the people thought that the Ruggero Settimo, which in Italian means Ruggero the seventh, was a Norman king when in reality Settimo was his surname and he was a Palermitan revolutionary who built the big [Indecipherable] and so forth.*

So we wanted people, teachers first to study the history of the city so they could teach the kids. In a sense we wanted to enhance the role of teachers and we wanted to put the school at the center of society because usually in Italy back then but especially now, the school is kind of like the stepchild of public activity.

Everybody doesn't think very highly of schools and usually we get less resources than we need.

So in addition to involving the children, we started involving the parents in this whole adopt-a-monument. They will drive the children to the monument but then they will stay there and perhaps create a little booth with some small arts and crafts which could be sold to finance some the activities, would create little brochures for people to take out.

It was something very interesting that through the children we also managed to catch the parents. So some of the messages that were aimed for the children went to the parents. We also tried to offer explanations in different languages, not just to build citizenship, the skills of citizenship as a whole, but also to build professional skills and then the children could use in professional development.

Also this was done to change the image for tourists. They were used to hearing about Palermo, the city of the Mafia, Mafia killings and so on and so forth. So by changing the image of Palermo for outsiders, this created a great positive spillover in terms of self-image and so forth and perception of Palermatins and citizens to change their identity toward the outsiders as well. So that was more or less the strategy that we were following.

MAJEED: Could you tell me especially in terms of adopt-a-monument, where were some of these ideas coming from? Did you look to other cities or speak to others?

SIRAGUSA: *It started off actually from an initiative that took place in Naples in 1999 which was called adopt-a-monument but that was more like a cultural event. So we took that idea but adapted it to the needs in Palermo so that it could become an educational project and a project about building citizenship.*

In this book, this is explained in more detail.

MAJEED: Thank you. You said in 1999, when was the adopt-a-monument started in Palermo and is it still going on?

SIRAGUSA: *Actually the foundation was called Naples '99 but I think the foundation was probably [founded in] 1799 because it was an old Naples foundation. It started here in Palermo from the school year '94-'95 and it went on until the school year 2000-2001.*

MAJEED: And the foundation you said was around from 1799?

SIRAGUSA: *The name of the foundation is called Naples 99 but I think it was probably [from] previous centuries.*

MAJEED: Thank you. Going back a little bit some of the school buildings you said you tried to reclaim because they were connected to the mafia. I want to know, it must have been difficult to do so. What kind of resistance were you seeing from people who were connected to the mafia and how did you overcome that because it must have been a big challenge?

SIRAGUSA: *So yes, there was a lot, a lot of resistance. Perhaps because I was young and irresponsible, that's why we overcame the resistance. We wanted to build a school in a neighborhood called Croceverde-Giardina, which is the neighborhood of Michele Greco, a mafia boss who was in jail but whose family was still in the area. So I sent the engineer who was working with the construction company, a*

big, tall man. The son of Greco, the mafia boss, came up to him when he arrived and said, "You will never build the school."

The guy was really petrified because he knew what he meant. But we started working with an association of parents in the neighborhood and I also helped out with establishing a presence of authority in the territory. So every now and again when things to really hairy I would come with my official car and the siren so that people will see that the authorities were the good people.

When we opened the school—I'm actually going to go there very soon. It is a shame the way things are, that I can't take you with me. It is a very nice school. I became friends with all these parents because we were fighting a battle together. When we opened the school all the kids were wearing these kind of sandwich posters, one in the front, one in the back. They stood together and [the posters] said, "Everyone said that this school is not possible." Then they turned around and it said, "But we made it."

We had very difficult times. For instance, once the car of one of the engineers was set on fire and exploded just outside the office. There were really difficult moments but when I left at the end of my term the staff of the school department said we were always a department of—Italy has football leagues, so league A is the top league, then B and C. So we were like a department of league Z but now we are a department of league A. I was very touched because people were not so worried about their own personal safety but they were worried about the safety of the projects. They kept saying for instance, what if they come in and torch all of our computers, the blueprints and all the documents. What are we going to do then?

Then we started putting an alarm system in the department. Even at the level of the top management we started to try to confuse the mafia. In the sense if there was a project there would be four or five people involved in the signing of important documents. So they will get the understanding that there wasn't one person that if they killed or get rid of the project will stall, the project will still go on. So it was a disincentive for them to go for these high profile tactics.

A lot of credit has to be given to the managers in the city administration and the actual employees.

MAJEED: How many schools did you build and when did your term end?

SIRAGUSA: *Forty schools. In 2000. December 2000. So we built forty new buildings and we also reorganized the way classes were allocated to each building so that by the end of 2000 there was not a single class that would go to school in the afternoon any more from the 200 that we started off from. We changed the composition. Only 20% of buildings were buildings that were owned by private individuals. None of those were actually owned by mafia, by people linked to the mafia.*

It is not just us but also a lot of these buildings had been confiscated by the authorities. I thinks it might be a national record 40 schools in seven years. When I came onboard there wasn't even one single blueprint or project in the whole department. Fourteen were the ones that were actually opened and there were others that were still in construction.

MAJEED: Where did you get the budget from?

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- SIRAGUSA:** *Back then national public finances were in better shape than they are now. We got a big chunk of financing from the national government, some from the regional government, some was our own budget and the rest was bank mortgages, private forms of finance.*
- MAJEED:** Would you give me an estimate of the budget per year that you would be operating with?
- SIRAGUSA:** *I can't recall because so much time has passed. We were also having other programs that would pay for school trips outside of Palermo for the children. We would assist children from more disadvantaged families with buying the schoolbooks which can be expensive, tracksuits for physical education and so on and so forth.*
- I can't recall because those were in there that it was in the order of a few billion lira so a few million US dollars.*
- MAJEED:** You mentioned just now that you made sure that the school buildings that you built were not given to people who were linked to the mafia or they did not get any of the contracts. How did you make sure that people who were getting those contracts were not linked?
- SIRAGUSA:** *We used the anti-mafia certificate and hoped that those were correct.*
- MAJEED:** You mentioned a number of initiatives, adopt-a-monument, in terms of building schools, training of teachers and so on and involving parents. Among these initiatives which ones do you think were the most successful and which ones weren't and why was there a difference?
- SIRAGUSA:** *There were three key successes plus one actually that came up after. The first was adopt-a-monument, the second was education to the environment. For the first time we involved schools in recycling. It was a big initiative. You have seen the problem with trash collection right now in Palermo but back then they'd get a prize, an award from the Italian major NGO that deals with the environment. So in a sense an equivalent of the Sierra Club: Legambiente, the Environmental League. We got the big recycle award, number one in the whole of Italy for the initiative.*
- MAJEED:** They as in the organization or the city?
- SIRAGUSA:** *The city, the kids in Palermo, this initiative. The third one would be the project in cross-cultural education which had two main pillars. The first one was teaching Italian as a foreign language to both new migrants and their parents. We were pioneers because that was the beginning of the wave of immigration into Italy. So it wasn't as high on the agenda as it is maybe now. On the one hand it was teaching Italian as a second language and the second one was to build an identity and to create a sort of art of living together, leveraging on Palermo's own identity as a multicultural city. During the height of its [Indecipherable] for the second time was a city in which people spoke four different languages and in which Christians, Muslims and Jews were all present. This initiative involved even high schools which were not within my mandate.*
- The fourth success was that I actually managed to open up a school in Brancaccio, that middle school. Now it is there, it is dedicated to the memory of Don Puglisi.*

Less successful, mostly because of lack of time. We were trying to integrate different neighborhoods within the city so the more well-off areas with the ones that were less well off. We didn't have a chance to have a lot of success in that, mostly for lack of time. The other thing, I didn't manage to open all the schools that were important from a symbolic point of view, because of technical problems. I wasn't able to be there at the ribbon-cutting ceremony as commissioner but I did go back as a private citizen later.

MAJEED: You said that there were some things that you weren't able to do because of lack of time. Was it because they came later during your tenure or had you started them earlier but other things took priority?

SIRAGUSA: *Just because they were started towards the end. We opened fourteen classes like kindergartens for babies so the mothers could drop the babies off and go to work from zero to three years old.*

MAJEED: Day care?

SIRAGUSA: *It is like a day care center, we call it like a nest school, just for babies zero to three.*

MAJEED: During your time in office, you were there for a number of years and you undertook all these initiatives, how did you define success? What were some of the metrics that you used to define success?

SIRAGUSA: *In terms of metrics, for instance, for the adopt-a-monument, of course we looked at the number of teachers, school children and parents who were involved. We also looked at the care the neighborhood used for the monuments. We looked at how the neighborhood responded after the monument was [adopted], also the number of visitors, both tourists and Palermitans.*

Then we tried to look at the impact of this experience in the life of children. Of course we couldn't do it for every single participant, we did a sampling of participants. The children would write letters about their experience and how it affected them and what their personal experience was.

As far as the environmental education was concerned we [looked at] the number of participants at all the competitions like for collection of paper and glass. Those were pictures from those times. Also at the end there would be some kind of exhibition of various products that were produced with these materials, the schools were competing against each other. At the end everyone would get a prize but it was a good way to stimulate participation.

For the education to cross cultural things, of course the number of participants but also the feedback from the teachers. Also in general all across we were trying to triangulate assessments so we would look at what the children would do, school plays that were put together. We would look at various other [things]. We were trying to cross check. It wasn't just one initiative we were trying to look at it from a more cross-cutting angle.

MAJEED: I have two more questions if that's okay.

SIRAGUSA: *Just a few minutes.*

MAJEED: In terms of sustainability, when you left office, did you make any efforts to build sustainability and what is the situation now in terms of some of these initiatives that you started?

SIRAGUSA: *I feel that after I stepped down they tried to erase my legacy. For instance the group that was looking at school buildings was totally taken apart. The unit was disbanded. They still have the Palermo open doors and adopt-a-monument project but it doesn't have the educational component it used to have. A lot of these day care centers they are all being shut down, a lot of schools have not received the level of maintenance that was required.*

I feel that this is not accidental, it is part of a conscious effort to marginalize schools. I feel that when you have a lot of schools you have less mafia because schools mean freedom, self-determination, self-worth and little school means you're under the yolk of someone. In my opinion bad politics looks a lot like mafia because bad politics doesn't want real citizens, it wants citizens dependent on things. When citizens do not have freedom of choice but are dependent on—in the past it used to be a packet of pasta, now it is a job. This is my opinion on the sustainability.

MAJEED: Thank you so much. The final question is, have some of your ideas and some of the things you did, have they been adopted elsewhere? Do you know if other cities in other places may have learned from your ideas?

SIRAGUSA: *We had a lot of contacts with different cities in Italy while I was commissioner. I also know that Orlando sort of traveled around the world and shared the experience of Palermo with many people but unfortunately the relationship is not as strong as it used to be so I haven't been able to follow up. School has become very important in my experience and now I am a member of the School and Culture Commission in the House of Parliament in Italy.*

MAJEED: Thank you so much.