

Anti-mob mentality

Local entrepreneurs and activists are standing together against the Mafia to lift their communities out of the cycle of violence, poverty and control

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It's mid afternoon in the Calabrian town of Gioiosa Ionica and the only sign of life is a stray labrador lazing in the main piazza. Facing Greece to the east, the Ionic Sea glistens. To the west, the craggy foothills of Aspromonte loom over scruffy terracotta rooftops. "We are probably the area of Italy with the highest youth unemployment, something around 70 per cent," says Vincenzo Linarello, president of the Goel Cooperative Group. "We also happen to be at the strategic centre of operations for the N'drangheta." This is Calabria's brand of Mafia; it is ominous and pervasive in the region's psyche.

Yet the stupor of the midday sun is deceptive. Gioiosa is the site of an ethical entrepreneurial movement. Here, and in dozens of towns across the south of Italy, businesses are using anti-Mafia legislation together with their own activism to make money. With the kind of social and legal hurdles that would make most businesses run a mile (and most of them have), Linarello explains how his organisation offers a concrete response to the Mafia. Goel, which comes from the Hebrew "to redeem", is his umbrella of 12 companies and non-profit organisations that allows entrepreneurs to shun the N'drangheta racket. With Goel's help they use land and property reclaimed from Mafia control, refuse to pay bribes or protection money and represent a brave voice of resistance to corruption. It now has an annual turnover of between €4m to €5m and is easily the largest private employer in the area.

Within the group are organic market gardeners growing produce on land seized from the Mafia, an ethical tour operator and even a psychiatric hospital that was closed down when the local state provider was found to be riddled with N'drangheta. This is all in the homeland of a huge organised crime syndicate that is estimated to make €30bn per year. In 2012, Italian officials said that 80 per cent of Europe's cocaine was coming through the nearby N'drangheta-controlled container port of Gioia Tauro.

Through co-ordinated ethical activism on the part of government agencies and local businesses, entrepreneurs are emerging from the shadows of Mafia control. This process has come with dangers. Linarello recounts that Goel's latest venture, a restaurant that fuses Calabrian specialities with the African cuisine of the area's migrants, was blown up in 2012 by the N'drangheta before it even opened. Farther up the coast at Monasterace Marina lies Cocintum, an *agriturismo* (farm and guest house). The vines, orchards and olive groves were all seized from the N'drangheta and are now looked after in part by Nicola Bartolo, who is proud of his local *contadino* (peasant) roots. Last year the upper level of the newly refurbished winery was firebombed, destroying the roof. "I never once thought of not continuing," says Bartolo as he looks up at the now half-rebuilt roof. "The sad thing was that this is something good for the community; this business has a social and economic function."

However, the roof and a dozen or so holiday houses are nearing completion, and the sheer beauty of the site – directly under a lighthouse and built on top of the ancient Greek port of Kaulon – seems to give Bartolo an unbridled sense of optimism. "I think we overestimate the intelligence of those types," the farmer says.



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"I look at it as a dog marking its territory rather than anything more complex."

Inland on the beautiful hilltop citadel of Gerace, where there seem to be more churches than people and the trees are improbably shaped by the near-constant easterly wind, is the home of the Cangiari brand, another in the Goel group. It was set up by women who wanted to preserve the ancient weaving traditions of the area and provide a firm alternative to Mafia domination. Their workshop is simple and contains several wooden looms with thousands of woollen threads arranged around batons, beams and shuttles. "There's an old Arabic proverb from here: 'By the time the loom is ready, even a sheep could do the weaving,'" says founder and manager Tina Macri.

The women's work is complicated and slow so the cloth is expensive and can be sold for no less than €100 a metre. Linarello recognised this product needed to find buyers with deep pockets and saw a gap for socially and environmentally sustainable textile manufacturing within Italy's high fashion brands. In 2010, Cangiari started showing its own lines at Milan Fashion Week and now sells its fabric to some of the most prestigious boutiques in the country. The brand was then given control of a central Milan showroom that was confiscated as a result of an anti-N'drangheta trial in the city.

On the infamous A3 Salerno-Reggio Calabria *autostrada* cars crawl through tunnels and across viaducts. The road has been in a state of "upgrade" for at least 20 years and although Calabria's terrain tests the abilities of even the most talented engineer, few doubt (including the EU) that the

