

02 | 05 June  
**2022**

# FESTIVAL OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIZENS

**Civil society, debates and art in the  
City of the Elephant**

**A review**



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“ **What a joy to have been part of the Festival of Mediterranean Citizens 2022. Sociality, diversity, and hospitality.**”

*(Asma Mansour, Tunisian Center for Social Entrepreneurship)*

## Introduction

Conceived as the ‘final event’ of Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality, a technical assistance programme aimed at empowering Mediterranean civil society’s envisioning, strategising, and advocacy capacities, the Festival of Mediterranean Citizens became much more than that: a public stage for political debate and cultural expression on engaged citizenship, on regional issues of common interest, and on the future of the Mediterranean to come.

Med Dialogue’s civil society beneficiaries were not only able to address a public audience; they were also meeting, exchanging and debating with the widest Mediterranean scene, including intellectuals, historians, journalists, artists, writers or scientists, as well as with the community of the hosting city of Catania, its students, scholars, public institutions or civil society players.

**“ I am proud that I had the chance to participate in the Festival and meet gurus and experts from many fields.**

*(Claudine Zaarour, Platform for Peace and Humanity)*

The Festival of Mediterranean Citizens served the purpose of bringing together people, or better said, citizens engaged in building a better future and a common destiny beyond borders, believing that “We are Mediterranean”.

Indeed, groups and initiatives by Mediterranean citizens striving for peace, prosperity, democratic freedoms, equality, or environmental preservation in the region are in the dozens. However, they don’t have a space where to meet and recognize that they are part of a movement. This Festival gave them this opportunity, placing at the hearth of exchanges a notion which also moves emotions: ‘Mediterranean citizenship’. Mediterranean citizenship is the bond that could bring people together around common values that are conducive to a future of peace and solidarity. Based on the feeling of belonging to the Mediterra-

nean region and on transcending geographical or political borders, it is nourished by the belief that responsibilities and rights are derived from membership in the broader class of “humanity” and draws upon the communal heritage shared by both shores.

**“ A fantastic and inspirational Festival. Festival guests were a perfect collection of minds. I really enjoyed the discussions inside and outside the sessions.**

*(Sakhr Al-Makhadhi, AJ+)*



By narrating stories of active engagement in the Mediterranean - intended for social justice, freedom of movement, ecological renewal, solidarity-based economy or exchange of knowledge - the Festival showed that a form of “citizenship in progress” is possible. One that is open to others and to the realities of our neighbours around the sea, anchored in values and practices, in knowledge and in the heritage that we share as people of a region which is homogeneous in its complex and inherently pluralistic nature.

**“ History restricts our movements and our imagination, it is shaping our current present in many ways, that’s why what we do now, it should and will shape our future.**

*(Khaled Mansour, essayist)*



Held from June 2 to 5, 2022 (with a preview on June 1 for schools), the Festival was hosted in Catania and co-organised with the local Municipality and University. With events held in a dozen different locations in the city to facilitate the involvement of local civil society and institutions and enjoy the diverse urban landscape and heritage, Catania proved to be a unique setting for an event that places citizens at the core and tries to reclaim the Mediterranean as a beacon of enlightenment, humanism, hospitality, and progress. This is perfectly summarised in the famous elephant represented in the likely Carthaginian lava sculpture on top of the fountain of Piazza Duomo, one of the city’s main squares. Ancient Arab historians used to call Catania Madinat al-fil, “City of the Elephant”. Well, an elephant is said to never forget anything and often serves as an allegory for resilience and strength. But it is also acknowledged that the huge mammal’s thick and wrinkled skin is also extremely sensitive. Our sensitivity is what makes us strong, our “permeability” is what makes us durable: with this in mind, the Festival tried to address the haunting questions of our times - the ‘Elephants in the Room’. These questions included:

- Our Common Destiny as “Mediterraneans”
- The Fragility of Democracy
- Rights and Citizenship for Everybody
- The Resilience of our Civil Societies
- The Challenge of Ecological Transition
- A Civil Economy and Social Justice
- The Role of Women in our Societies
- Cohesion Across Cultural Differences and Matters of Belonging
- Rule of Law and Transparency

**“ I applaud such a so culturally relevant initiative.**

*(Luigi Renna, Archbishop of Catania)*

# Figures



## Guests in Number

- 40%** Guests from the Southern Neighborhood
- 30%** Guests from Italy, where the Festival took place
- 30%** Guests from other European countries



## Profiles' Range

- 7%** Institutional representatives
- 20%** Academicians
- 48%** Activists and CSO practitioners
- 15%** Artists
- 10%** Journalists



## Audiences and Events

- More than **70** events hosted in a dozen locations.
- **1,800** presences were registered at the debate/ exchange events and **1,200** at the artistic events (estimated).





Accademia Di Belle Arti

OGNINA

OGNINA-PICANELLO

BORGO-SANZIO

Villa Bellini

Trame di Quartiere via Pistone 59

Città della Scienza

Chiesa di San Nicolò l'Arena e Piazza Dante Alighieri

SAN BERILLO

Piazza Cutelli

Palazzo della Cultura

CENTRO

Vecchia Dogana Porto di Catania

Gam Galleria d'arte Moderna

Isola Coworking Piazza Cardinale Pappalardo, 23

Piazza Federico di Svevia

**PALAZZO DELLA CULTURA**  
Cortile / Courtyard  
Sala Teatro / Theatre Hall  
Auditorium / Hall Marchesi

**OTHER LOCATIONS**  
Liceo statale Enrico Boggio Lera, Catania  
Polo delle Arti - Istituto Comprensivo Fontanarossa, Librino  
Istituto penale per minorenni, Acireale

## Formats and Events



Debates



Workshops and Citizen Arena



Film screenings



Artistic performances (readings, concerts)



Exhibitions



Guided tours



- **More than 70 events were held** including some **40** intense debates
- 5** thematic guided tours that opened each day of the Festival
- 4** participatory and self-managed workshops
- 3** exhibitions of photos, maps and comics focused on landscapes and human histories
- 8** children's activities
- 7** performances such as concerts and readings; and lastly, **a documentary programme** that exhibited high-quality films that are rarely shown in theatres.
- **14** Locations in the town hosted the events to facilitate the involvement of Catania's civil society and institutions.

## Inside The Topics

### Our Common Destiny as “Mediterraneans”:

The Mediterranean as our common destiny, is it a historical utopia or a concrete possibility? Twenty-seven years after the Barcelona Declaration, this central issue, if the Mare Nostrum is still a viable human project of togetherness, was at the core of several debates, and it stirred daily formal and informal exchanges. The Festival ended with an inspirational short movie, Embracing the Mediterranean, and a roundtable on what can we do now to defend and promote the vision of a Common House around the Mediterranean in the region.

### The Fragility of Democracy:

Growing economic and social inequalities among people, weakened fundamental civil and political rights, emboldened authoritarian regimes, manipulated justice and the Covid19 pandemic are all factors still negatively impacting democracies around the Mediterranean. During the Festival, civil society, human rights lawyers, Institutional representatives, and journalists discussed, in several roundtables, the effects of the latter factors on democracy and suggested ways to defend the democratic values and empower people. The war on Ukraine was also tackled, as well as its impact on Europe and the Mediterranean.





## Rights and Citizenship for Everybody:

Cities are the junctures of exchanges, multicultural and multilingual contexts where citizenship is reinvented daily. During the Festival, guests celebrated the notion of citizenship beyond borders and discussed ways to invest in promoting a culture of rights and municipal democracy. A special workshop was dedicated to young detainees on activism and citizenship, another to unravelling spiritual energies beyond gender and racial identity. While fruitful debates focused on new ways to deal with migration, an exhibition portrayed immigrant & refugee stories through comic strips, and a guided tour followed the presence of the Mediterranean migration experience in Catania.

## The resilience of Our Civil Societies:

One way to foster resilience for improving our society is through participation, which is why the Festival dedicated its first workshops to encouraging civic engagement of Catania's high school students. At the Festival, light was also shed on civil society's work on different issues related to active citizenship. The Festival provided room for networking and discussing collaboration and alliances between civil society actors from the north and the south. Not only that, but representatives from the European Commission described EU funding and project development opportunities to the guests.



“ **The Festival was a real space for exchange and inspiration for civil society actors, encouraging their work and allowing them to strengthen their network beyond borders**

*(GIZ Morocco)*





## The Challenge of Ecological Transition:

Preserving climate, biodiversity and water were concerns discussed between UN Institutions, activists and journalists, in a context where the environment has long been the poor relation of Mediterranean civil society, crippled by inattention and insufficient resources. The challenge is: how to rebalance the relationship between humans, nature, and water resources. While citizens' groups presented some good practices, an artistic performance was specially proposed on the devastating global economy of toxic waste. Last but not least, the Festival tried to give the good example by integrating sustainability into its provided services, such as transportation or catering.

## A Civil Economy and Social Justice:

The current economic order is not sustainable, neither socially, nor economically, nor ecologically. Recurrent crises make people unable to cope with rising costs or scarcity of resources. Young entrepreneurs and leading economists exchanged on the reforms needed at the micro- and macro- level and on reclaiming democratic accountability and generating labour, with a special focus on social and civil economy experiences. A guided tour on reclaiming urban spaces in Catania's popular neighbourhoods was also organized to know local socioeconomic revitalization actions.



### **The Role of Women in Our Society:**

Gender-based violence is a phenomenon deeply rooted in inequality and continues to be one of the most notable rights violations within all societies. And that is why empowering women is essential to the health and social development of families, communities, and countries. At the Festival, two important debates were held about this matter, and a couple of movies were screened showcasing the struggle of women in war contexts, like in Syria, while literary readings from outstanding female writers and researchers were organised.

### **Cohesion Across Cultural differences and Matters of Belonging:**

The Festival started with exploring Catania's multifaith identity, with its diverse spaces and stories of spiritual heritage. Indeed, an important factor of belonging for Mediterranean people. The ethics enshrined in Jewish, Christian and Muslim teachings, inspired by the common father Abraham, offer humanity, hospitality, solidarity and wisdom to people. How to reclaim those ideals as spaces to shape a new inclusive Mediterranean identity was the focus of a special dialogue across frontiers and faiths. At night, Zappalà Danza Company interpreted with vigour and energy a Sicily without borders, where tradition and modernity meet, cross each other and merge.



**“ I wanted to shed light on the declaration that was signed by Pope Francis and the Cheikh of Al-Azhar, the charter of Human fraternity, which was a very good step for the Mediterranean, and the efforts that we are witnessing in the colorful city of Catania, are contributing to this**

*(Hossameddien Allam, Al-Azhar University)*



## Rule of Law and Transparency:

Many of the films screened at the Festival shed light on the unresolved issue of justice and rule of law. Ayouni, for instance, addressed the issue of the forcibly disappeared people in Syria, with all the pain of those families who never heard the truth. Shooting the Mafia told guests about people's struggle against the Mafia in Sicily. The Festival took the decision to run events in several locations of the town where civil society and citizens do their best for delivering justice and opportunities for all, especially for those living in impoverished or poorly equipped districts, where organised criminality widens its meshes.

**“ We are all calling for international shared responsibility and pushing for the right to development, we are calling for a third generation of human rights in the region.**

*(Zeina Mohanna, Amel Association)*

## Inside the CITIZEN ARENA

A special section named “Citizen Arena” was opened, whereby grassroots organizations and civil society practitioners were able to present their own work and lead the debate. Among the “collaborative workshops” held, we can mention:

A workshop using performing arts and arts-based techniques to unpack inner conversations beyond concepts, labels, and contexts towards building inclusive and intercultural communities out of gender and ethnic profiling.

Another workshop to discuss a vision and roadmap of possible actions and policies for designing a free, fair, and united Mediterranean, as a common space and a permanent environment for cooperation, rights and equality.

An interactive workshop on Interreligious Dialogue in the Mediterranean aimed at opening a window on current practices, providing a safe space for people to reveal their assumptions; and positioning IRD as a contribution to resolving conflicts.

Under “You have 15 minutes”, activists had the opportunity to present on a rotating basis their projects and achievements along specific thematic lines, such as democracy, ecological challenges, or economic development. Such a format allowed for networking and partnership building among speakers and the audience. Other sessions were finally devoted to pilot advocacy campaigns carried out by civil society platforms operating across borders, dealing with legalizing migration, changing the narrative on the Mediterranean, or accessing information on health at times of Covid19.



## Calling for The Festival to Continue

Civil society is not about distant entities, it is about us: our neighbourhood community, my association or venture, the city I live in, cultural spaces, activists for freedoms and rights, the faith group I belong to. Promoting civil society's skills in playing an influential role for rights and equality is, however, not enough. 'Technical support' has never changed realities alone. A change in people's mindsets is also required because culture is the only means to assess, understand, and elaborate an informed and truthful narration of contemporary challenges, beyond stereotypes, fake news, and close-mindedness. Culture is the tool to explain societal phenomena, move emotions and explore ideas for engaging people for change. A Festival like this one offers exactly the proper environment for that, by going beyond the views of professional insiders, and involving the most diverse profiles, the public and media operators in the debate on and the representation of the matters we care about. It is about reconnecting action and culture because an activist who does not know the battle of visions and ideologies that is raging in his times, or an essayist who does not know the difficulties of changing things in daily life are like two Don Quixote's fellows lonely preparing to assault a stone-made windmill.

**“ We are always dealing with an asymmetrical form of power; the Mediterranean is a place where we can dismantle this narrative and liberate other narratives which are not yet recognized by legal institutions and power structures.**

*(Iain Chambers, anthropologist)*

Such a Festival plays also another extremely important role: there, new networks or partnerships are born, projects are prepared, and ideas questioned, often behind the scenes, in less formal or in convivial moments, when guests can get to better know each other. If you give the opportunities to intellectuals and practitioners to meet, you offer the opportunity to go well beyond the classical methods of capacity building, you create a movement of ideas, you connect social groups or stakeholders who often do not cooperate together. If you give the opportunities to people coming from countries which are distant for political or geographical reasons to talk directly, you open new perspectives for critical thinking and understanding. If you give the opportunity to display the most diverse forms of addressing an issue, such as humanizing migration, or experimenting ecological transition – either with the presentation of a community-based project, the work of a social innovation hub, a theatre play, a novel reading, an institutional debate, or the outputs of an advocacy action, you open amazing channels of innovation when ends can be pursued using unexpected and sophisticated means.



“ We in the Mediterranean enjoy the necessary preconditions for becoming unified and playing role models for other nations; we must follow up on the efforts of last three years’ working together in the Mediterranean, and come up with the next steps for meeting our common challenges.

(Maher Essa, Civitas Institute)

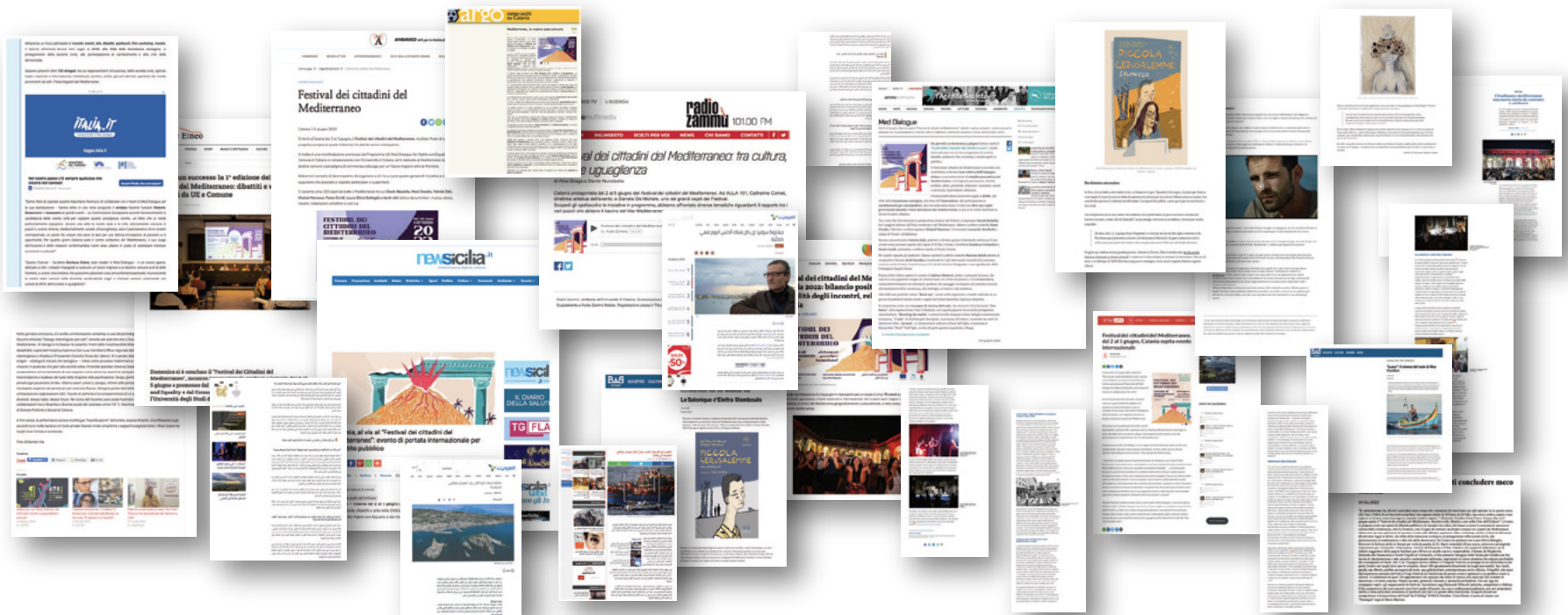
For all these reasons, the experience of the Festival of Mediterranean Citizens deserves to go on, to continue in the long run. To receive the adequate resources to build step by step a group of people who share a common dream and lead for change. Celebrating such an encounter every year or every two years, for instance, maybe moving location from one hosting town to another, would consolidate networks, ideas, and actions beyond the borders. The Festival of Mediterranean Citizens is an extraordinary endeavour of civic mobilisation towards creating a “community of destiny” between the peoples of this so diverse and resourceful region of the world. It would help connecting the North and the South, challenging the inequalities which lay at the grounds of crises and turmoil, and reconciling historic narratives and cultural identities around a shared project of a “free, fair and united Mediterranean”. And – who knows – preparing the ground for the launching of a social and political process toward establishing an integrated space, the common house many of us dream of.



# Media Coverage and Movies

## Press review

- 50 Online and printed Press articles
- 4 Radio interviews
- 35 Local, Italian, European, and Arab media outlets participated in the coverage



## Social media

### Facebook

- People reached on Facebook 227,991
- Engagement 19,222

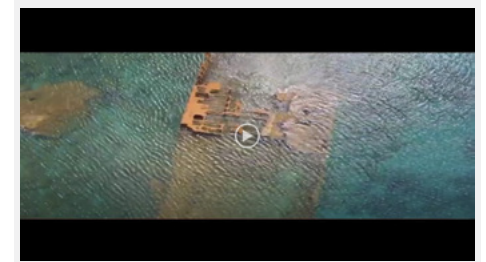
### Instagram

- Impressions 59,289
- Reels 12,500+
- Posts 3,000

## Movies



Festival of Mediterranean Citizens overview



Embracing the Mediterranean documentary

# Partners

## Organizzatori / Organizers



Regione Siciliana  
Assessorato Turismo  
Sport e Spettacolo



## Comitato locale / Local Committee



**SOUTH MEDIA**  
officina culturale

## Media partner



## Partners



Autorità di Sistema Portuale  
del Mare di Sicilia Orientale



isola



## Eventi associati / Associated events



Marranzano  
World Fest

## Con il sostegno di / Supported by



ti regalo una storia

Rotary Club Catania  
Rotary Club Catania Ovest  
Rotary Club Paternò Alto Simeto

