



Developing the restorative cities of Lecco and Como: overview of the process and lessons learnt

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Abstract

Aim: To comparatively examine the development of the restorative cities of Lecco and Como—two interdependent but distinct local processes in Lombardy—by analysing their origins, governance, institutional embedding, legal framework, practices, results, and limitations.

Methodology: Documentary analysis combined with the authors' practitioner-researcher experience.

Findings: Both cities extend restorative justice beyond criminal proceedings through intermediary bodies connecting citizens, civil society, and public institutions. Lecco retains a more citizen-driven and experimental model, whereas Como is more organisationally and institutionally coordinated. The strongest shared outcome is the creation of territorial restorative capacity (networks, trained actors, dialogue spaces, and links between community and criminal justice).

Value: The experience of both cities shows that restorative-city development depends on bottom-up participation, diversified institutional support, sustained resources, and context-sensitive adaptation.

Keywords: restorative city, restorative justice, restorative practices, intermediary bodies, institutionalisation

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Introduction

This article examines the construction of two restorative cities on the two branches of the same lake in Lombardy, Northern Italy: Lecco, whose process began in 2012, and Como, which began in 2017. The two are treated together because their development is interdependent: the Como process was inspired and guided by the experience of Lecco and nowadays the two networks exchange knowledge and experience and jointly collaborate in common initiatives.

The article is based on the desk analysis of the reports, unofficial documents and the lived experience of the two authors. The authors write from two overlapping positions: one as a member of Como Restorative Justice Working Group and the other as a member of the Lecco Restorative Justice Working Group. This gives them access to internal perspectives, but at the same time carries a risk of favourable interpretation, against which two safeguards are applied: claims about effects are separated from claims about activity, with the evidential basis of each stated.

The restorative city of Lecco and Como are rooted in the paradigm of restorative justice.

Restorative justice emerged in the criminal field as an alternative to a purely retributive logic, placing at the centre not the abstract breach of a norm but the fracture of the bonds between people and groups (Christie, 1977; Zehr, 1990). It returns the management of conflict to those directly involved and to the community, resting on the conceptualisation of wrongdoing as a breach of a relationship (Chapman et al., 2015). It is thus an ‘approach of addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in coming to a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved’ (European Forum for Restorative Justice, 2018, p. 3). Repairing means recognising the needs of those harmed, of those responsible and of the community, and reactivating networks of care (Braithwaite, 2002).

These principles have since crossed the boundaries of the penal system. Restorative justice began in ‘circumscribed, sectorial experiences related to criminal offences’ (Mannozi, 2019), but as Wachtel (2004, p. 207) observed, it ‘is only one of many areas of human activity that can benefit from a restorative approach’. Opening it to other domains meant questioning how schools, businesses and public administration are run (Mannozi & Lodigiani, 2017) and creating conflict prevention services at community level (Shearing & Wood, 2003), while acknowledging that people must develop the capabilities to participate in civil society rather than remain passive clients of the legal system (Chapman et al., 2015).

The restorative city is the most recent extension of this movement, prefigured by the argument that restorative justice is a philosophy applicable to every aspect of a society's response to crime and conflict (Van Ness, 2006). It came alive in 2008, when Hull declared its intention to become the world's first restorative city, as restorative principles spread into schools and children's services under the new name of restorative practices - a shift that distanced the work from the stigma of offending and allowed restorative values to address cultural change rather than discrete incidents of harm (Chapman, 2021). The concept has since become a lens for rethinking the relationship between safety, social cohesion and democracy (Pali, 2020; Gavrielides, 2021), moving attention from the control of deviant behaviour to the quality of the relations that hold a community together (Lepri & Vasilescu, 2026). Strategically it offers a municipality a way of reinvigorating civic values; structurally it enables partnerships between public services, economic actors, civil society and citizens, with restorative values acting as the glue between professional cultures (Chapman, 2021).

The cities of Lecco and Como emerge precisely within this broader movement. Their experience can be understood as an attempt to translate the restorative city from an abstract model into a situated and evolving municipal process in Lombardy region in Italy. The restorative trajectories of Lecco and Como can be described through a literary image: Tecla, the city under permanent construction in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. When the traveller reaches Tecla, they find a city hidden behind scaffolding:

Those who arrive in Tecla see little of the city, hidden behind wooden fences, sackcloth screens, scaffolding, metal frameworks, wooden walkways suspended from ropes or supported by trestles, ladders, and trellises. When asked, 'Why has the construction of Tecla been going on for so long?' the inhabitants, without stopping their hoisting of buckets, lowering of plumb lines, or moving long brushes up and down, reply, 'So that its destruction may not begin.' And when asked whether they fear that, as soon as the scaffolding is removed, the city will begin to crumble and fall apart, they quickly add in a whisper, 'Not only the city.' If, dissatisfied with their answers, someone puts an eye to a crack in the fence, they see cranes lifting other cranes, frameworks encasing other frameworks, beams supporting other beams. 'What is the meaning of all this building?' they ask. 'What can be the purpose of a city under construction, other than a completed city? Where is the plan you are following, the design?' 'We will show it to you when the working day is over; we cannot stop now,' they reply. At sunset, the work ceases. Night descends upon the construction site. It is a starry night. 'There is the design,' they say. (Calvino, 1972)

Tecla's inhabitants never complete the city because completion would mean the beginning of decay, and the scaffolding is not merely temporary support:

it is what keeps everything standing. Lecco and Como frame the building of a restorative city in the same terms, as a permanent construction site. A city is a living body whose values, policies and social substructure evolve over time, and it therefore needs permanent scaffolding rather than a finished design. And as in Tecla, where the inhabitants answer the question about the plan by pointing at the stars, building a restorative city means building towards an ideal pattern: a vision approached by contaminating as many people and policies as possible, without presuming that restorative justice is fully embedded in every social setting.

The next chapters will deepen understanding of Lecco's and Como's restorative vision and development trajectories.

A brief context of the two restorative cities

Lecco. Lecco is the capital of its province, with 47,401 inhabitants in a province of 334,316 (ISTAT, 2026). Located fifty kilometres from Milan, it is also known as the setting of Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Once an industrial centre, Lecco today has a largely service-based economy and still ranks among the wealthier Italian provinces. Beneath this prosperity, however, lie increasingly precarious employment conditions, particularly for women, young people, immigrants and vulnerable groups, together with falling incomes and widening inequalities (PTS, 2026). These dynamics have contributed to loneliness, psychological distress and a gradual fraying of the local 'social pact'.

Two contextual features are particularly relevant to the development of Lecco as a restorative city. The first is its dense civil society, which includes around 1,235 associations, a volunteering service centre and cooperatives active across social and care services. The second is a model of shared administration that has connected these actors to the municipality since the 1990s. Lecco has one of the longest-standing Italian experiences of *co-progettazione*, understood as the joint design of social services by public and private actors. This model is embedded in a public-private social enterprise that promotes community welfare through the active involvement of public and private actors and the integration of social, cultural, educational and housing policies. When restorative justice entered the scene, a habit of reasoning collectively across organisational boundaries was therefore already in place. Politically, the municipality was governed by the centre-left from 2010 to 2025, before shifting to the right in 2026.

Como. Como is the capital of its province, with 83,086 inhabitants in a province of 599,058 (ISTAT, 2026), and is located on the Swiss border. Its border

position makes it a crossing point on migration routes towards northern Europe. In this context, the political framing of migration as an issue of control and security has shaped the local debate and contributed to increasing polarisation in the city. Formerly industrial, the local economy now relies largely on services and tourism. The 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic contributed to a contraction of the labour market and a deterioration in employment quality (Provincia di Como, 2026), alongside growing feelings of insecurity and social isolation (Sole 24 Ore, 2025). Politically, Como was governed by a centre-left coalition between 2012 and 2017 and subsequently by a right-wing coalition, before shifting to a civic coalition in 2022. Unlike Lecco, the municipality has played a more limited role in connecting civil society organisations and has, at times, adopted a punitive approach to urban conflicts (Dighera et al., 2021). However, the city is also characterised by close collaboration between civil society, judicial institutions and public institutions involved in social policy, particularly in responding to offences and crime. These collaborations initially developed through rehabilitative approaches and, more recently, have also incorporated restorative practices. In addition, like Lecco, Como has a rich civil society, deeply involved in promoting social cohesion, and is home to a volunteering centre.

Three contextual features are therefore particularly relevant to the development of Como as a restorative city: its role as a crossroads city, where migration, social tensions and political polarisation have required civil society to continuously renew its approaches to conflict management; the presence of a dense and active civil society; and the existence of established collaborations between civil society, judicial institutions and the district-level body responsible for social policy management.

The comparison between Lecco and Como suggests that restorative cities can develop under different contextual conditions. In both cases, small urban scale, strong civil society networks and established forms of collaboration between public institutions and third-sector actors provide favourable ground for restorative approaches. The Como experience shows that visible conflicts and polarisation can become opportunities for activating a restorative city process. The Lecco experience, by contrast, shows that restorative cities may also grow in the absence of a specific open conflict, where there is a rooted interest in developing a different understanding of justice, welfare and community relations.

The local interpretation of the ‘restorative city’

Neither Lecco nor Como has adopted a formal definition of the restorative city through an institutional resolution. However, the concept is mainstreamed in

the District Social Plan (i.e. the main programming document of social policies at local level in the district of Lecco and Como). This absence should not, however, be read as a conceptual vacuum. In both territories, the meaning of the restorative city is assumed and progressively specified through practice: it is an open-ended process that extends restorative justice values, principles and practices beyond criminal proceedings into the settings in which people live together and conflict may arise, including families, schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, intercultural communities, prisons and justice institutions. As Tim Chapman argue ‘harm cannot be understood exclusively in relation to criminal acts, and the need for justice is not confined to the criminal justice system. It is felt just as strongly within families, schools, community and organisational life, and in serious social and political conflicts’ (Chapman, 2022). The local ambition of the two restorative cities can be summarised as constructing a justice ‘of and with the community’: justice is made with citizens, while participation in doing justice contributes to making community (Dighera, 2021), i.e. a form of justice that seeks both to prevent the conditions that generate suffering, harm and conflict, and to respond to them, when they arise, by enabling people to find shared solutions beyond the courtroom. Its aim is to strengthen the sense of justice, restore relationships and involve not only victims and those responsible for harm, but also the wider community (Patrizi, 2016). In this sense, restorative justice avoids ‘stealing the conflict’ from the parties (Christie, 1977), instead enabling them to take ownership of the harm and co-construct a restorative agreement.

This interpretation combines two restorative approaches placed in continuity (Wachtel, 2016) in the restorative city. The first is proactive and preventive. It seeks to create relational and cultural conditions in which tensions can be recognised, voiced and managed before they develop into violence, exclusion or durable fractures. Conflict is therefore approached not as a threat to be controlled, but as a possible occasion for recognition, learning and change. From this perspective, urban safety is not reduced to surveillance and punishment; it also depends on trust, inclusion, mutual attention and the collective capacity to remain engaged when relationships become difficult (Dighera & Lizzola, 2019). The second approach is responsive. When harm has occurred, those harmed, those responsible and members of the community should be offered voluntary and safe opportunities to understand its consequences, assume responsibility and co-construct possible forms of repair. The community is not merely an audience, a beneficiary of reparation or a resource placed at the service of the principal parties. It is a participant with its own responsibilities in relation to the social conditions in which harm is generated and addressed (Patrizi et al., 2016; Christie, 1977; Dighera, 2021).

Neither city prioritises conflict management, relationship restoration, victim-centredness, community participation or prevention over the others; rather, the local interpretation deliberately combines all five. This reflects the attempt to hold together two perspectives usually kept apart (Dighera & Lizzola, 2019): the criminal-law perspective, centred on offence, harm, accountability, restoration and community participation; and the perspective of social coexistence, where conflicts, fractures and experiences of justice and injustice are embedded in everyday relations between people, groups, generations, cultures and identities. This repositioning also changes the understanding of safety. The restorative city moves away from a securitarian idea of security as control and predictability, and towards a humanitarian one (Fassin, 2018), based on the responsible management of risk, mutual attention, non-abandonment and the restoration of frayed bonds. In this sense, it is future-oriented: it seeks not only to contain past harm, but to create the conditions for constructive behaviour (Lizzola, 2019). Read alongside positive psychology, this gives the restorative city a transformative orientation: not only restoring harm, but activating individual and collective resources (hope, resilience, courage, self-efficacy and collective efficacy) so that the community can flourish (Lepri & Vasilescu, 2026).

From this perspective, the restorative city concept promoted by Lecco and Como follows the Co.Re. model of restorative relational communities, which identifies three interconnected levels (Patrizi et al., 2016; Patrizi, 2024). The first is a social and cultural level, focused on building a common language, a shared memory of conflicts, and public spaces for speech and listening, where citizens can become co-authors of collective choices. The second is an ecological level of responsibility, concerned with the reciprocal relations between individuals, institutions and rules, where obligations are co-defined through interaction rather than imposed in advance. The third is an individual and group level, centred on the emotional and social competences that make it possible to act with others, rather than for or to them.

This framework is complemented by the social discipline window (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). As Patrizi (2017) argues restorative perspective in a community dimension is translated into the activation of participatory processes, understood as doing things *with* people. This reflects the idea that what happens between two or more people, or between groups, does not concern them alone, but the entire community within which events and conflicts take place. Doing it requires parity of voice and symbolic safety for the most vulnerable parties, and therefore investment in training, care in the construction of frames, attentive management of power asymmetries and protective mechanisms without which the commitment risks producing re-victimisation or drifting into performance (Lepri & Vasilescu, 2026).

In both Lecco and Como, the restorative city is understood as a network, strategy and societal culture. Building a restorative city requires a shift in the cultural, legal and policy approach to conflict across all layers of a community, and therefore a mobilisation of knowledge, legal, consensus and economic resources that no single actor possesses. Lecco and Como, as many other restorative cities (Vasilescu, 2023), rest on an advocacy coalition (IPAA, 2023). In Lecco citizens are at the heart of the construction; in Como the promotion of restorative principles is likewise bottom-up, though civil society is the guiding actor with citizens occupy this role only partially. In both cities the advocacy coalition constitute an ‘intermediary body’ (see section 5).

History of formation and stages of development

Lecco and Como restorative cities followed interdependent but non-synchronous trajectories. Lecco was the earlier, volunteer-led experimentation; Como began later through a programme funded by Cariplo banking foundation, which allowed to transfer the experience from Lecco to Como.

In Lecco, the prehistory lay in collaborative welfare and projects for the inclusion of people under judicial measures. The catalytic event was the prison-theatre performance held on 23 May 2012: demand exceeded capacity, and the organisers treated this interest as a civic resource rather than a one-off audience. The same year they established L’Innominato, the intermediary body of Lecco (see next section). Between 2013 and 2015, awareness raising and trainings on restorative justice disseminated the restorative justice concept at community level, created a shared vision and language and consolidated the restorative justice network; from 2016, the network was further consolidated and with the support of civil society backing the restorative city building process, several funded projects including restorative justice interventions were activated (e.g. Innominate Vie, Porte aperte). At the same time, awareness raising and trainings continued.

Como restorative city has two origins that converged. The judicial track began in 2010, with the cooperation between a criminal judge-initiated and civil society to expand alternatives to detention and introduce restorative elements into adult criminal justice. This led to a 2011 agreement between the Court, Bar Association, Probation Office and voluntary sector, followed in 2014 by an agreement embedding restorative content in the new adult probation programme. The community track began in 2016, when the Lecco group supported the Como volunteering service centre, the Office of the Social District Plan – ASCI, third

sector associations/social cooperative (il Gabbiano, LOTTA) and other local actors in designed ConTatto: trame riparative nella comunità, funded by a banking foundation and implemented between 2017 and 2020. Beginning in Rebbio and then extending in other areas of the province of Como, ConTatto created intermediary bodies of citizens and combined awareness-raising, training and restorative work in neighbourhoods, schools and justice settings. ConTatto 2 (2020–2021) marked a second stage by connecting community practices more explicitly with offenders, victims and criminal-justice services.

From 2020 onward, the trajectories of Lecco and Como restorative cities converged. The subsequent regional programmes *Un futuro in comune* and *Un futuro in comune accanto alle vittime* consolidated the inheritance of previous phases through a territorial restorative-justice hub and a victim-support office in both cities. In Lecco, the COVID-19 pandemic became an opportunity to show the potentialities of the restorative cities. ‘L’Innominato’ intercepted the community suffering and fractures and experimented RestoCovidCircles (RCCs). RCCs are a restorative practice that responded first to shared trauma and later to the Green pass related polarisation, showing that the restorative city can deal with collective trauma and turn polarisation into constructive dialogue. While trauma related restorative circles were implemented only in Lecco, Green pass related restorative circles were initially tested in Lecco and afterwards delivered also in Como. In the subsequent period, the construction of both cities was recognised as a strategic welfare objective by the respective District Social Plans. More recent initiatives include *Comunità Attive* (2024–2025) broadening restorative practices across educational and community settings and strengthened coordination within the two intermediary bodies. A recent turning point was the establishment of Territorial Restorative Justice Centres, following the Ministry’s 2025 agreements: the Lecco Centre on 13 February 2026 and the Como Centre, based in San Fermo della Battaglia, on 4 March 2026 (Ministero della Giustizia, 2026) (see the next section).

Despite their different origins, both cities followed a broadly similar trajectory: cultural mobilisation, project-based experimentation, territorial consolidation and, more recently, statutory embedding. Their development was favoured by their relatively small scale, dense civil-society networks, recognised and reputable promoters, pre-existing cooperation among third sector organisations and public institutions in the judicial and social area, as well as an approach explicitly centred on citizens’ activation. In both cases, the creation of bottom-up networks strengthened local ownership and continuity, while civil-society and citizen’s engagement sustained activities during periods of limited funding or uneven municipal commitment. Their principal difference lies in how these

resources were mobilised: Lecco emerged from civic activation around a symbolic event and retained an informal, citizen-centred identity, whereas Como developed through the structured ConTatto partnership, resulting in a more organisational configuration involving civil-society actors and public institutions.

Institutional embedding

The intermediary bodies. The distinctive institutional form in both cities is the intermediary body, in the sense given to the term by Ardigò (1980) and developed here as a restorative justice working group. Both are bottom-up, voluntary construction sites of community, made of people or organisations interested in coexistence based on trustworthy relations rather than securitarian logics, and acting as antennas able to intercept suffering and social tension and to construct restorative practices as threshold experiences: areas of respectful and positive dialogue, and regenerative transition of relations interrupted by conflict (Dighera et al., 2021; Dighera & Lizzola, 2019). Additionally, in both cities the intermediary bodies allow the restorative city to operate as a formalised, but flexible, ecosystem of restorative justice at community level.

They differ in what drives them, and the difference follows from the contexts described previously. The Lecco body is citizen-driven: it grew from the mobilisation of individual residents and works at provincial level with a strategic focus on disseminating restorative approaches across the territory. It now has around 28 active members, most of whom are employed women on average in their 40s. On the contrary, the Como body is civil society-driven: designed within a project run by civil society organisations, in a context of weaker municipal engagement and more fragmented governance. While initially, it was established at neighbourhood level with an operational focus on neighbourhood conflicts and more citizen focused, now it operates at provincial level and has a more organisational structure, being composed of representatives of third sector organisations (Il Gabbiano, Volunteering Centre, etc.), the Probation Agency of Como-Varese-Sondrio, the Court of Law of Como, the Bar, the University of Insubria (Como) – Mediation Centre - the municipality of Como and of the Social District Plan (now located within the Municipality of San Fermo La Battaglia).

Governance. Both cities use participatory, multi-actor governance, but distribute authority differently. In Lecco, L’Innominato is simultaneously the principal deliberative forum, a community ‘antenna’ and a space for co-design. Its

members contribute directly to setting priorities and implementing restorative practices, while a steering committee manages day-to-day coordination, and the relationship with project teams in the restorative justice field. As L’Innominato has no legal personality, participating organisations assume the formal, financial and administrative responsibilities of funded projects. This produces a comparatively horizontal and permeable structure, in which citizen participation and organisational delivery overlap, but also makes governance dependent on relationships between individuals and supporting organisations. To facilitate L’Innominato’s direct access to funding, a formal association was established alongside the informal group in 2025. Created by L’Innominato, the association is composed of citizens participating in the intermediary body. Como’s governance remains bottom-up and only loosely formalised. Strategic and operational management is concentrated in a smaller coordination group composed of public and third-sector organisations, while a specialised operational team delivers restorative practices. This smaller group coordinates with and co-designs both the local restorative strategy and practices with the wider group of participants in the Restorative Justice Working Group. Both architectures connect civil society actors, including citizens, with public institutions operating in the social and judicial fields. In both Lecco and Como, this has facilitated the integration of restorative city-building into strategic local policy frameworks, such as the District Social Plan.

Restorative justice centres. Both cities now have a restorative justice centre established under the framework described in Section 6. These centres are components of the broader restorative city processes. In both territories, the restorative city preceded the centre by several years: it was the existence of an organised network - including trained facilitators, institutional agreements and a documented history of practice - that made the establishment and approval of the centre possible.

The restorative mediators working in each centre are also involved in building the restorative city, meaning that the statutory service and the community process share personnel rather than operating as separate systems. In Lecco, the collaboration between the Restorative Justice Centre and the Restorative City Network is embedded in the centre’s statutory documents. In Como, by contrast, the relationship remains informal and operates through mediators who are part of both teams. As a result, the Como system is more person-dependent: the presence of the same staff in both the centre and the Restorative City Network ensures continuity across political changes, but leaves questions of succession unresolved.

Legal and policy framework

Before 2022. Both processes were built without comprehensive legislation, on competitive, time-limited project funding whose shape both processes reflect. Restorative interventions were delivered by civil society organisations with local institutions and judicial offices, financed through the European Social Fund projects or banking foundations.

The 2022 reform. Legislative Decree 150/2022, under the delegation in Law 134/2021, gave Italy a specific restorative justice legal framework, aligned with the international instruments in the field; it is the legal framework for both cities.

Italy adopted a maximalist option as to scope: programmes are available for any offence without exclusion, at any stage of proceedings, and also independently of proceedings. The relationship with criminal proceedings rests on complementarity - restorative justice does not replace the traditional system, which continues to provide the basis on which programmes operate - and on separation, which operates through confidentiality, the unusability in criminal proceedings of anything emerging in a programme, and the extension to mediators of the professional secrecy protections applicable to lawyers, doctors and clergy. In the cognition phase the judge may recognise a special mitigating circumstance, suspend sentences of up to one year, and take the programme into account in quantifying sentence; in execution participation is relevant to external work, reward leave and alternative measures. In cases prosecutable upon complaint the restorative outcome operates as a ground for extinction of the offence - the one point at which the scheme amounts to genuine diversion. Failure to complete a programme may not produce adverse effects for the person identified as the author of the offence. The reform is not yet fully implemented: transitional provisions have entered approximately 350 expert mediators in the national register, of whom about 91 are also trainers, pending recognition of organisations already operating in the territories and accreditation of funding. It also mandated the creation of regional Centres for Restorative Justice to coordinate services locally (see previous section).

Regional and local policy. Lombardy adopted a regional programme for territorial restorative justice interventions ('Un futuro in Comune') before the national legal framework entered into force. The programme aimed to foster a unitary development of local capabilities in the delivery of restorative justice interventions in all provinces of Lombardy region. Both Lecco and Como organisations part of the restorative city network participated in this programme.

More recently, Lombardy Region promoted the regional programme ‘Comunità attive’, providing funding for restorative justice interventions at community level. Moreover, Lombardy Region also provides funding for restorative justice interventions through the European Social Fund allocated to the social inclusion of (ex)offenders. Locally, restorative cities and, more in general, restorative justice are part of the District Social Plan, the main social policy programming strategy at local level. However, while the mainstreaming of the restorative city in the Social Plan is important from a strategic institutional perspective, it does not imply a direct and continuous budget line provided by the District Plan.

The legal and policy framework creates several shared challenges for both cities. First, restorative-city activities depend heavily on project-based funding, which is often short-term and fragmented, making it difficult to sustain coordination, retain expertise and develop long-term strategies. Second, institutional support may fluctuate with political priorities, particularly when restorative approaches conflict with more punitive or control-oriented local policies for managing conflict and public safety. Third, restorative practices in criminal justice are governed by stricter procedural and professional requirements than community-based interventions. While these safeguards are necessary, the regulatory divide can reinforce an artificial separation between criminal and community restorative justice, limiting continuity between the two fields and making it harder to build an integrated territorial restorative ecosystem.

Main areas of restorative practice

Community active participation in restorative justice (both, through different infrastructures). In both cities, it occurs through intermediary bodies (see previous sections). In Lecco, L’Innominato is a citizen network that identifies suffering, designs responses and involves residents trained in restorative justice in their delivery. Como initially created neighbourhood intermediary bodies using the Lecco format. However, in the more recent phases of restorative city development, the three restorative bodies have been brought together in a provincial Restorative Justice Working Group, driven by third-sector organisations and public bodies. This group jointly defines the restorative strategy and practices and delivers them on the ground.

Community awareness raising and training on restorative justice and practices (both even though differently). Several initiatives, targeted to the general population of Lecco and Como have been implemented along the years to

build social support for and knowledge about restorative justice and practices: restorative corners in public spaces (e.g. bars, libraries) where a volunteer provides information on restorative justice and the restorative city; broadcasting of movies opening to reflection on restorative justice followed by specific debates; human libraries involving offenders, victims and citizens; public meetings involving representatives of other European/international or Italian restorative cities; theatre of the oppressed on various topics ranging from conflict prevention to conflict management through restorative practices.

RestoReadingCircles deserve specific attention. RestoReadingCircles are a culturally grounded, circle-based practice, building civic competences in active listening, constructive dialogue across difference, and democratic participation, and actively engaging citizens in reflecting and debating positively and in a safe space on several issues, such as hate, polarisation, conflict, violence, community care, community wellbeing, etc.

Restorative justice in schools (both cities). Since 2017, Como has involved pupils, teachers, school managers and parents from infant to upper-secondary education through training on restorative practices targeted to school staff and students, peer education targeted to students, co-design of the restorative school groups targeted to teachers and students, restorative questions, restorative circles and restorative libraries in schools. Comunità Attive continued this strand in both cities and in Como it proposed restorative oriented listening points for students harmed by bullying and cyberbullying.

Restorative-oriented groups and victim-offender mediation (both cities). Restorative oriented groups are addressed to people who have committed offences, people who have been harmed, and community members, to open dialogue on the experience of guilt, the suffering generated by an offence, the harm experienced, and the possibility of overcoming pain without forgetting it. The process is staged: referral, usually by probation officers or residential facilities; preliminary individual listening by the facilitator; separate restorative listening groups for those harmed and those responsible, each with community members; and, where the paths allow, a joint group. Participation is free, voluntary, unpaid and confidential. Running between 2016–2019, they have now been integrated within the interventions implemented by the Territorial Restorative Justice Centres. Restorative Oriented Groups have been integrated with victim-offender mediation, where needed and feasible.

RestoCovidCircles (Lecco). Five circles involving approximately 100 residents in 2020 addressed pandemic trauma; three involving about 35 vaccinated and unvaccinated participants in 2021–2022 addressed Green Pass-related polarisation. A third phase in 2023 worked with an association fractured by the dispute. Trusted recruitment, preliminary listening and the gradual movement from separate to joint encounters were central to the design. The practice is significant as an experimental response created by the intermediary body to address an emerging collective harm, rather than as an ordinary restorative practice.

Criminal justice field (both). In both territories, restorative work connects probation, alternative measures, prisons and the wider community through referrals, training, circles, restorative dialogues and mediation. In Como, this has included individual restorative listening and prison circles involving detained people, staff and volunteers. In Lecco, *Cerchi di Voci: Visions of Coexistence in Prison and in the City* extends the approach from individual pathways to the prison as a relational community. Promoted by the Lecco Prison Directorate and L'Innominato from November 2024 to November 2026, it gathers the perspectives of detained people, prison staff, professionals, volunteers, students, citizens and institutional and civil-society representatives. Six internal and three external circles are followed by joint circles framing prison coexistence and reinclusion as shared responsibilities of the institution and the wider community. It is worth underlying that with the creation of the Territorial Restorative Justice Centres all restorative practices in the criminal area are implemented by the Centres.

Social policy and victim support. Both cities train local public institutions and third-sector staff. Lecco recently extended restorative practice into social housing through the Erasmus+ Harmony pilot in Malgrate and Calolziocorte, combining stakeholder analysis, circles with residents of the social housing building, and the planned co-design of shared building rules.

Taken together, these practices show that both restorative cities operate through a layered model combining cultural dissemination, citizen participation, conflict prevention and responses to specific harms. Their distinctive contribution lies less in any single intervention than in the connections created between community life, schools, social policy and criminal justice. Lecco's portfolio is more strongly characterised by citizen-led experimentation and the rapid development of context-specific responses, as illustrated by RestoCovidCircles, *Cerchi di Voci* and the social-housing pilot. Como displays a more institutionally coordinated model, particularly in schools and through the provincial working

group. In both cases, however, the transition from project-based practices to stable territorial provision remains uneven: some activities have become embedded in institutional settings, while others continue to depend on temporary funding, trained facilitators and the mobilising capacity of intermediary bodies.

Target groups and access

Initiatives promoted in the two cities reach citizens, pupils and parents, teachers, public- and third-sector staff, legal professionals, adults and minors under judicial measures, victims, detainees, prison personnel and, more recently, social-housing residents and students harmed by bullying. Access follows several routes: open public and school activities; mobilisation through intermediary bodies; referrals from courts, probation agencies and territorial services; intake through victim-support offices; and targeted outreach in prisons and social housing. In both cities linguistic and intercultural mediation integrates restorative practices, especially in the criminal area, when needed. Trusted recruitment and preliminary listening can increase participants' safety and readiness, but may also produce self-selection and dependence on network members' social reach. Institutional referral may broaden access, while requiring particular care to preserve the voluntary nature of participation.

Professional quality and standards

Locally, the practices exhibit quality features that are exercised but are not codified in formal documents. Voluntariness, gratuity and confidentiality are stated conditions of participation. Impartiality is approached through the facilitator's posture rather than through a rule: facilitators act as a scaffolding, intervening only to the extent needed, and explicitly do not perform therapeutic, educational or helping functions even where participants hold those professional identities. The confidentiality provisions described in section 6 provide a statutory basis for protecting participants. Victim-centredness is at the centre of restorative practices implemented. Trauma informed practice is ensured through the involvement of facilitators with a psychological and psychotherapeutic background. This background allows them to detect and interpret specific trauma related dynamics even when they act as a scaffolding,

Both staff and volunteers involved in the Restorative bodies are continuously trained in restorative justice. In Lecco, for instance, internal training targeted to

members of L'Innominato runs as a permanent monthly programme over eleven months a year, alongside three sessions delivered with the bar association in 2024, the first drawing 47 participants, and a two-day training in 2025 for some twenty citizens, members and staff of external services.

Supervision is practice-based in the case of Lecco. In Como, it is peer supervision is facilitated by the discussion of all practices within the small coordination group described in section 5. Additionally, the University of Como and an ex magistrate are also part of this group, providing an additional specialised and academic perspective.

Since 2022, formal quality standards are adopted in restorative practices in the criminal area: mediators must be entered in a register following a training pathway divided between universities and restorative justice centres, with roughly 160 hours delivered by the former and 320 plus 200 hours by the latter.

Results, impacts and evaluation

Data sources and what each can carry. The evidence base is uneven, being stronger for outputs and short-term outcomes than for broader social impact. Evaluation was conducted mainly within projects and this limits overview of results at city scale. Results should therefore be understood as documented activities, institutional changes and participant-reported or practitioner-observed outcomes.

Participation and reach. Both cities created durable infrastructures for citizen participation and cross-sectoral cooperation. In Como the process has involved over 9,400 citizens since 2017, of whom around 290 were actively involved in delivering it and around 150 took part in restorative practices; 116 organisational actors were engaged beyond the coordinating organisations. The figure is an aggregate across seven years and several projects.

For Lecco the record covers a longer span. The intermediary body meets roughly every forty days with an average attendance of 25 to 28 people; entries and exits balance so that the median holds, and eight new members joined in 2026. Attendance is mostly continuous and participation active. The RestoCovidCircles ran in three phases: five circles of two meetings each with around a hundred participants in 2020; three circles with 35 participants, half vaccinated and half not, in 2021–2022; and in 2023 three circles comprising twenty people - thirteen men and seven women, including three couples - who met across fifteen sessions between March and October, twelve within the separate circles,

two joining circles in pairs and one bringing all three together, each lasting between two and a half and three hours. Five RestoReadingCircles have been held since May 2025, each drawing around fourteen new citizens alongside six to eight returning members. Between 2024 and 2026 the group recorded more than 1,100 attendances across ten public events with counts, the largest a lecture on restorative justice held with Caritas in April 2025 (324 people), a film screening in November 2024 (127) and a meeting with two victim witnesses in July 2025 (119).

Governance and institutional outcomes. A major common result is the creation of networks capable of connecting citizens, civil society and public institutions around a shared restorative language and vision. In both cities, the intermediary bodies have survived beyond the projects through which many activities were funded, generated further initiatives and contributed to the inclusion of restorative-community development in district social planning. Additionally, in both cities restorative city and restorative practices entered the local social policy strategy (i.e. District Social Plan). Furthermore, restorative practices became part of the ordinary offer of the district, of the adult and juvenile probation offices, of the schools involved in the restorative initiatives delivered in Lecco and Como. Moreover, the building of the restorative cities proved a key factor for obtaining the nomination of a Territorial Restorative Justice Centre in Lecco and Como.

Changes in knowledge, attitudes and relational capacities. The most consistent outcome across both cities is a reported change in how participants understand conflict, justice and community responsibility.

Teachers reported greater knowledge of active listening, mediation, non-blaming responses and constructive conflict management, although some still required external support. For instance, at Mozzate school, 73% of participating students frequently or consistently used restorative concepts, alongside greater awareness of conflict, behavioural reflection, empathy and stronger relationships. Restorative pathways for offenders supported recognition of the offence and its harm, responsibility, willingness to repair and, sometimes, renewed trust in justice; citizens reported less prejudice towards offenders. Victim-focused pathways enabled suffering to be heard and, in some cases, improved communication, prompted apologies and strengthened family relationships (CODICI & Istituto Italiano di Valutazione, 2021).

In Lecco, RestoCovidCircles provide the clearest evidence of responsiveness to collective trauma and polarisation. In 2020, five circles involving about 100

people supported the sharing of pandemic experiences and a collective account of suffering, with participants reporting changes in perspective, pain and anger. In 2021–2022, three circles with 35 vaccinated and unvaccinated participants showed that the conflict also concerned exclusion, rights, public health, employment, stigma and institutional trust; participants reported greater openness and reduced hostility. In 2023, 20 members of a Green Pass-divided association joined 15 meetings. Apart from two early withdrawals, participants completed the process, softened accusatory positions, resumed communication and, in some cases, returned to the association. No formal evaluation was initially planned, so evidence rests on testimony and facilitator observation (RAN, 2023).

Harmony (Lecco) transferred this adaptive capacity to social housing. Of 13 training survey respondents, 11 reported seeing conflict more as an opportunity for mutual understanding and 12 reported stronger restorative conflict-management skills. In Malgrate, listening and parallel circles created safer spaces, reduced immediate escalation and shifted attention from blame to collective wellbeing and shared rules; participation grew unevenly, and proposals for a local guarantor suggested movement towards shared regulation. In Calolziocorte, no joint residents' dialogue was achieved, but communication among institutions and frontline actors was restored, the conflict was reframed beyond security concerns and possible entry points for later restorative work were identified. These are intermediate outcomes, not evidence of conflict resolution (Associazione Comunità Il Gabbiano, 2026).

As *Cerchi di Voci* (Lecco) is ongoing, its results are mainly procedural. Around 80 people joined the initial circles and 50–60 the joint phase, facilitated by four practitioners and four trained citizens. The project created a deliberative space linking detained people, prison staff, professionals, volunteers and the wider community. It identified two central themes: the tension between punitive and rehabilitative understandings of imprisonment, including recidivism risk versus reinclusion opportunity; and the practical meaning of respect for people, roles, rules, spaces, privacy, values and commitments. Claims about changes in prison coexistence or reintegration remain premature pending completion and evaluation.

The strongest common result is not a demonstrable city-wide reduction in conflict or offending, but the construction of territorial capacity: networks, trained citizens and professionals, spaces for dialogue, referral pathways and practices connecting community and criminal justice. In both cities, participant accounts consistently indicate perspective-taking, active listening, reduced role-based prejudice and greater recognition of shared responsibility. However, the absence of common indicators, longitudinal follow-up and monitoring systems

extending beyond individual projects prevents conclusions about the durability, representativeness or population-level impact of these changes.

Challenges, limitations and setbacks

The principal shared challenge is the mismatch between the open-ended construction of a restorative city and the short-term, fragmented funding through which most activities are delivered. Inclusion in district social plans provides strategic recognition but not a permanent budget. Civil-society organisations and citizens have sustained both processes between projects, yet this resilience also produces dependence on voluntary contributions, key individuals and organisations able to allocate staff time. It can therefore slow territorial expansion.

Institutional support is also politically contingent. In Lecco, early municipal interest was not matched by financial support, leading L'Innominato, citizens and third-sector organisations to mobilise their own resources. In Como, municipal support weakened after 2017 and at times coexisted with more punitive approaches to urban conflict. Continuity was secured by relocating the process within a broader territorial coalition involving district social-policy bodies, judicial institutions, other municipalities in the territory of Como and civil society. This distributed anchoring increased resilience but reduced direct municipal ownership and slowed city-wide institutional embedding. Harmony further shows that restorative practices cannot be applied as isolated techniques from dealing with inequalities. Restorative processes can reactivate communication, but cannot substitute for policies addressing the structural causes of conflict.

The Territorial Restorative Justice Centres provide statutory recognition but also create a new boundary challenge. Criminal restorative justice is subject to stricter professional and procedural requirements than community practice, potentially reinforcing the separation between the two fields. Their effective development therefore depends not only on stable funding, qualified mediators and clear governance and referral arrangements, but also on preserving operational links with intermediary bodies and citizen participation. Otherwise, statutory institutionalisation may professionalise restorative justice while weakening the community infrastructure that enabled the Centres to emerge.

Lessons learned and transferability

The comparison of the Lecco and Como restorative cities shows that the transferable element is not a fixed model but a process architecture. Lecco's

experience informed Como, yet Como adapted the intermediary-body format to a different institutional and political context. Across both cities, the enabling mechanisms were recognised local promoters, detailed knowledge of community conflicts and resources, a shared restorative vision, participatory governance and networks linking citizens, civil society and public institutions. Intermediary bodies are therefore transferable as functions - acting as community 'antennas,' building legitimacy and coordinating responses - rather than as identical organisational structures. Their composition should reflect local social capital: citizen-driven in Lecco, but more organisational and territorially coordinated in Como (European Forum for Restorative Justice Working Group on Restorative Cities, 2023).

Practice transfer also requires adaptation rather than mechanical replication. The Harmony findings underline the importance of preliminary context and stakeholder analysis, trusted local facilitators, voluntary participation, culturally sensitive engagement and careful attention to power imbalances. In complex conflicts, separate listening or circles may need to precede joint encounters, while sustained presence and follow-up are necessary to build trust and support agreements. Moreover, restorative interventions cannot resolve structural problems, such as inadequate housing, poverty or institutional fragmentation, without being connected to wider social and housing policies. Transferability therefore concerns a sequence of context analysis, relationship-building, safe experimentation, reflection and gradual institutionalisation, supported by learning-by-doing rather than the simple adoption of a standardised tool (Harmony, 2025).

The two cases also show that sustainability depends on combining bottom-up ownership with distributed institutional anchoring. Civil society and citizens can initiate and sustain a restorative city, but long-term expansion requires stable financial and human resources, integration into ordinary services and policies, and monitoring beyond individual projects. Support should not depend exclusively on one municipality, funder or key individual; a diversified coalition can preserve continuity during political change. The new Restorative Justice Centres may strengthen transfer by providing statutory infrastructure, provided that they remain connected to community networks rather than separating professional criminal-justice practice from citizen-based restorative work. As suggested by Tecla, restorative-city development is transferable principally as a permanent capacity for collective construction, adaptation and renewal not as a completed institutional blueprint.

Finally, the most usable finding may be the least expected one. Neither city began with a definition, a strategy, a budget line or a law; both began with a small group of people who decided that those caught in conflict should not be left

alone, and who kept meeting. The institutional architecture came afterwards, because the group had made itself impossible to ignore.

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