The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin

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Chapter VI. Genesis of a food aid hub

In this chapter, I introduce the case study at the core of this part of the dissertation, namely the food aid hub that was put in place at the community centre *Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè* (public washrooms of Agliè street - from now on also designated as Via Agliè) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The community centre is situated in the neighbourhood Barriera di Milano, which characteristics were presented in the previous chapters. I examine the premises based on which this hub was put in place, such as the origins and management of the community centre. I do so to shed light onto the more long-term cultural and spatial transformations around this specific configuration of "institutional" food aid – which I study as a form of welfare organisation. I write the term "institutional" into inverted commas because this was the term used in the field to classify the Via Agliè food aid hub. However, my aim here is to problematise the meaning of institutional in a context of blurring boundaries between the roles and practices of the public and third sector in the delivery of welfare.

This chapter serves precisely to introduce such blurring boundaries and the long-term mechanisms through which a local community in northern Turin was formed and got involved in the welfare system following and reproducing a model of community care. Community care can be analysed as a "locally constructed subset of welfare" (Russell and Edgar 2003, 3). This concept emerged in Britain from the 1970s onwards to create an opposing ideology to prevailing views of what a welfare state is or should be (Russell and Edgar 2003). Anthropologists such as Susan Brin Hyatt (2001) analysed community care by discussing the engagement of citizens-volunteers (especially women) in the management of vulnerable communities. As explained by the author, the neoliberal state, while withdrawing public resources from local development programs, fosters volunteerism as "an *obligation* of citizenship" (Hyatt 2001, 228). At the same time, in the communities where forms of civic engagements were already present, these were co-opted and transformed into low-wage labour as part of local administration (Hyatt 2001). This author highlights how the development of community care and related culture of volunteerism can be regarded as a form of neoliberal governance:

> Given the widespread acceptance of the dictum that the era of big government is over, it is the volunteer who now stands at the ready as the citizen who has been liberated from the morally debilitating belief that the state should be the primary source of such services as schooling, policing, welfare and maintenance of the physical infrastructure, embracing in its stead the far more invigorating notion that people can and should take on the responsibility for providing many of these amenities themselves. (Hyatt 2001, 205- 206)

This quote speaks to the context of Barriera di Milano, and the Italian case more generally, where such reconfiguration (especially in terms of welfare, security and maintenance of the urban space) is part of the everyday public debate and accompanies neoliberal reforms of the welfare state (e.g. Caselli 2015). During my fieldwork, the question of who should be responsible for the delivery of such services was often discussed by the research participants and, in peripheral areas, accompanied by a general feeling of long-term abandonment from the state. Waiting for the state intervention was presented by local non-profit organisations as an old mindset to be replaced with local configurations of civic engagement and community care (*welfare di comunità)*. As I will elaborate, community care was promoted as an immediate response to local *needs*, a form of welfare of higher moral significance. A form of welfare linked to the supposed primacy of acting over asking, and the local administration's lack of resources and inefficiencies. Discourses around the notion of community care also recast citizens' rights (e.g. right to social services, adequate infrastructure, food) into citizens' *needs*, understood as individual difficulties, responsibilities and special conditions.

The main questions addressed in this chapter are the following: which shape did community care take in Northern Turin? How did local non-profit organisations and other collective actors become involved in the delivery of welfare? How were these mobilised at the times of the emergency? How did they work as urban assemblers (Koster and van Leynseele, 2018)? How did they play a role in the widespread morality of citizens activation? The chapter is structured as follows: I firstly introduce the local meaning of community care by presenting the history of the community centre *Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè*. In

particular, I problematise its role as intermediary between institutions and the local population, contextualising it as part of a broader evolution of the shapes of civic engagement in recent Italian history (e.g. Marcon 2004). In the second section, I briefly explain the rationale of food aid during the COVID-19 crisis. I report on how this community centre became a hub of the city-wide network of food aid called *Torino Solidale*, meaning, literally, Turin in Solidarity. The chapter is based on participant observation and interviews conducted at the community centre before and during the pandemic. I also build on secondary research, which helped me understanding the history of the centre and the urban governance dynamics in which it is embedded.

Genealogy of a community centre

Public washrooms

In the street Via Agliè number 9 stands one of the fifteen public washrooms that were constructed in Turin between 1900 and 1960, when many houses did not have washrooms. The one of Via Agliè started operating in 1958, after the restructuring of the building which had served as a wash house (*lavatoio*) since 1916 (Bagni Pubblici of Turin n.d.). After remaining closed for approximately 20 years, in 2006, the local administration decided to reopen the baths of Via Agliè and, through a call for tenders, devolve its management to a social cooperative called *Liberi Tutti*. This cooperative developed project for community building (*sviluppo di comunità*) such as social inclusion projects and social and educational services (Liberi Tutti 2022).

The devolution of the management of the baths to this organisation is to be contextualised in the principle of subsidiarity of the Italian Constitution (article 118) and the subsidiarity reform. Horizontal subsidiarity, more precisely, guides the relation between institutions and civil society, allowing the latter to actively engage in the shared management of common goods when in the interest of a territory or a community. To this regard, the municipal council of Turin adopted a specific bylaw in 2016 called "Regulation over the collaboration between citizens and the administration for the care, shared management and regeneration of urban public goods" (Città di Torino

2016) which was renewed and rendered more detailed in June 2020 (Città di Torino 2020).

[Image 28. Façade of the Via Agliè public washrooms. 2011. Photo by Giuseppe Beraudo. Retrieved on May 23, 2022 at *Museo Torino* website: https://www.museotorino.it/view/s/1cbd5abbeae54b67af4a9300b6e6568e]

Among the principles of the regulation, the one of "non-subrogation" (*non surrogazione*) reminds that the co-management should never become an instrument for the administration to hand over its duty to deliver public functions and services. In Turin, this remains an intensely contested issue as the local administration strongly relies on such mechanisms and collaborations with local non-profit organisations - as already exemplified and discussed in the previous parts of the thesis.

Erika Mattarella, manager of the baths and employee of the cooperative *Liberi Tutti* for 17 years, was part of the reopening of the public baths since the beginning. As she explained in an interview published on the Cooperative City magazine (Mosquera 2019):

> In 2006, during the Winter Olympics, the Municipality of Turin enacted welfare measures to fight poverty and to give the city a more welcoming look. One of them was the new plan called "Emergenza Freddo" ("Frost Emergency"). The plan included four dormitories, one in every sector of the city, to host homeless during the winter nights. Every dormitory had its own kitchen and bathroom, but here, in the northern sector, they could not connect it to the water supply because on an old factory's polluted soil. So, they reopened these public baths, allowing the homeless to use it for showers. The Municipality published a public call for tenders for the site's management, but nobody seemed to be interested in it and the district authorities involved us into the project. We were a social cooperative focused on assistance and with no experience in such big projects, but we accepted the challenge, although afraid of the huge responsibility it would imply. We renovated the building just enough to make it usable, only changing water pipes and part of the electric grid before beginning our activity. The rest of the structure remained untouched.

This account not only sheds light onto the processes around the reopening of the structure, but also reveals interlinkages between issues related to the urban space, its image and social services. It also highlights connections between local assistance and large-scale events such as the Winter Olympics of 2006. In particular, the account shows how the idea to increase services for homeless was part of the municipal agenda to improve the outlook of the city during the Olympics, thus linked to the notion of decorum (*decoro urbano*) [111] rather than a structural social intervention. In the next section, I describe the services provided in this space, to examine how political agendas of public and private sector created specific practices of community care.

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[111] Refer to the introduction of the dissertation for an in-depth analysis of this terminology.

Social services, cultural activities and the network *Case del Quartiere*

Over the years, the reopening of these public baths transformed into a broader social and cultural project. In 2008, Erika Mattarella and the rest of the cooperative's local employees, through their encounters with the local inhabitants, assessed a more general need for a space for social gathering and hosting cultural activities[112]. I met Erika after she had worked as part of the cooperative for 17 years. After studying communication and working for three years in a communication and marketing agency, Erika had faced a personal crisis as she did not share the same values of her colleagues and did not like that competitive environment. She decided to quit her job and after a while started volunteering with the social services by supporting vulnerable teenagers in *Falchera* (northernmost periphery of Turin). In 2003, as her activities with children and teenagers had grown, she became an intern of the local neighbourhood committee, developed afterschool programs and got to know the cooperative *Liberi Tutti*, as it engaged in the urban renewal plans for *Falchera* (progetto Periferie, as previously discussed in the context of Mirafiori Sud). Through her participation in the local neighbourhood committee, Erika became active part in the social renewal plans, starting in this way what she called her "pathway working with and for citizens"[113].

In 2009, the cooperative received the financial support of the bank foundation *Compagnia di San Paolo*[114] to start transforming the public washrooms into a community centre, hosting, for example, art exhibitions, photography classes, music events, but also social services. Among these, free legal support to social housing tenants and

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[112] Erika Mattarella, director of the Via Agliè community center, interview, 18/11/2019.

[113] Erika Mattarella, interview, 18/11/2019.

[114] *Compagnia di San Paolo* (CSP) is a foundation of banking origin. This foundation, one of the biggest in Italy in terms of net assets and amounts of donations, is based in Turin. For more information on the involvement of CSP in Turin urban development agenda please refer to the introduction of the dissertation.

administrative support to immigrants. During our interview, Erika underlined that their idea always was to create a space open to all, where local inhabitants were free to propose activities: "we almost never looked for things to be organised here. They [the activities] are the result of the proposals of people who come here regularly"[115]. In 2011, the community centre also benefitted from the financial support of the urban renewal plan "Urban Project"[116]. These additional funds allowed for the restructuring of the building, which included the improvement of the washrooms facilities as well as the transformation of the ground floor into a space allocated specifically to social and cultural activities, and a café (Comune di Torino n.d. c). As visible in the picture below, the space was progressively readapted to host new guests, beyond the people using the washrooms. As per 2021, the main room on the ground floor was entirely dedicated to the clients of the café and used for activities and events.

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[115] Erika Mattarella, interview, 18/11/2019.

[116] The "*Urban Project*" was a Local Development Integrated Program funded by the City of Turin, the Piedmont Region and the European Union. It lasted from 2011 to 2015 and costed 35 million euro. *Urban Barriera di Milano* included 34 interventions which revolved around physical-environmental transformations, fostering economic activities and employment as well as socio-cultural services. See also part one and two of the dissertation for other examples of "*Urban Project"* interventions in Mirafiori Sud and Barriera di Milano.

[Image 29. Main room at the Via Agliè public washrooms. 03/09/ 2019. Photo by the author.]

As it grew, the community centre also served increasingly as a liaison between local institutions and inhabitants: on one hand, the administration started using the work of the community centre to get a better sense of what was going on in the area and the challenges faced by its population. On the other, it was presented as a bridge to bring the voice and requests of local groups at discussion tables with the administration. Erika mentioned the example of a group of elderlies who wanted to ask to replace the night tram with buses to reduce noise provoked by the railways track. As she explained:

> among other things, the intermediation of the community centre limits the expectations [of the citizens]. […]. You introduce in the head of the inhabitants how the process of public demands works[117].

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[117] Erika Mattarella, interview, 18/11/2019. Original quote: "*E poi tra l'altro l'intermediazione di una casa di quartiere frena l'aspettativa. […] Freni e costruisci nella testa degli abitanti il percorso delle istanze pubbliche*."

Again, the words of Erika reveal more than the simple functioning of the centre. Her sentence also highlights the context-specific understanding of the idea of voicing inhabitants' needs. Here it is connected to reducing their expectation and educating them to the normalising possibly lengthily and inefficient procedures. As I will further discuss, I argue that the morality that animates the community centre is one that aims to attenuate public discontent, mitigate local challenges, rather than advancing a radical transformation of local conditions. This approach should be contextualised as part of the transforming idea of "doing good", as retraced in the history of social solidarity practices in Italy by Marcon (2004). Particularly relevant here is Marcon (2004)'s analysis of the transformation of the way of understanding civic engagement in the 1990s. This was the period when the notion of Third Sector (*terzo settore*) developed in Italy. As part of this process, the idea of engagement transformed into a new form of entrepreneurship. The functions of critique and social transformations were put on the side and priority was given to new objectives such as economic efficiency and dialogue with institutions (Marcon 2004, 215).

Such function of intermediation of the community centre was officialised and further expanded in 2012, with the development of the city-wide network of community centres (*Rete delle Case del Quartiere*). The network gathered nine public spaces which were physically and socially renewed, thanks to the support of public institutions, private funding agents, associations and citizens. As described in its chart, the network is framed as a mean to "encourage a more symbiotic relation between institutions and citizens, overcome sectoral policies and put in communication the city centres and the peripheries" (Bagni Pubblici n.d.). To expand on these notions (such as "symbiotic relation" and "put in communication"), in the next section, I discuss how Turin community centres can be examined as urban assemblers (Koster and van Leynseele 2018). I also problematise their role in the context of austerity. I make use of theory on assemblage (Koster and van Leynseele 2018) and "governing through community" (e.g. Rose 1999) and contribute to this set of literature by arguing about the importance played by the actual physical space of community centres such as Via Agliè.

The community centre as an assembler

The increasing number of roles played by the social cooperative *Liberi Tutti* (from the management of public washrooms to the promotion of social and cultural services) represents yet another instantiation of the growing functions of Third Sector organisations in the delivery of welfare in a context of austerity. As suggested by Anjaria and Rao (2014) (who propose a different approach to the study of neoliberalism), contemporary processes of restructuring should be analysed as "co-produced by top-down and bottom-up processes" (411). Based on their analysis of local government reform and new health insurance in India, the authors invite to pay greater attention to "the ways the state is restructured by the social processes that follow on from neoliberal reform" (Anjaria and Rao 2014, 410).

In the case of Via Agliè, the community centre emerged as a bottom-up response to local needs in the face of the limited engagement of the administration. Following Anjaria and Rao (2014), it also contributed to an acceptance of austerity, promoting citizen activation through the idea that citizens involvement is central to the revitalisation of the neighbourhood and its services. The growing collaborations between the local administration and the cooperative *Liberi Tutti* also further normalised the fact that local organisations should act as brokers between the city administration and the inhabitants. Following Koster and van Leynseele (2018, 804)[118], who link brokerage to assemblage theory, the community centre can be regarded as an "assembler":

> […] as 'assemblers', as connective agents who actively bring together the different elements of the development assemblages they operate in and are targeted by. They assemble government, citizen and corporate actors, institutions and resources.

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[118] This article opens a special issue, also edited by the Koster and van Leynseele, entitled *Assembling development across the globe: Ethnographies of brokerage*. It functions as a theoretical introduction to the special issue: the two authors review anthropological literature on brokerage and present their contribution to such debate, namely the ways in which they understand brokers as assemblers and make use of a comparative approach.

The authors further argue that such assemblage can engender "practices of alignment, coercion and resistance and also spur experiments aimed at reconciling old and new subjectivities and modes of organisation" - while underlining that assemblage is not governed by a singular logic (Koster and van Leynseele 2018, 805).

While the community centre offered a multiplicity of activities, partook to and developed various projects and results, it also created alignment around a specific morality. To discuss such moral features, I take the example of a food aid related project co-promoted by the centre before COVID-19 pandemic which was called *Fa Bene* (introduced before). Before describing the project more in details, it is worth mentioning that, more generally, when I started my fieldwork at the community centre, food was used as means to create new relations and social inclusion. It was present at the community centre in multiple ways but most directly through its bistro (where food was offered at accessible prices and procured only in the nearby shops) and through Fa Bene.

Fa Bene was a project born in Barriera di Milano in 2014, and later extended to several other neighbourhoods in Turin, with the objective of collecting unsold food surplus or client's donations at the marketplace. The food was then redistributed to families living in precarious conditions, which, in exchange, made themselves available to volunteer within the local community. The goals of the project (developed by the social committee *S-nodi* in collaboration with *Liberi Tutti* and funded by *Compagnia di San Paolo*) were to create social inclusion and a support system for families in need at the local level as well as develop community-based entertainment and capacity building both at the marketplace and the community centre (Fa bene 2020; Mari and Vasile 2020).

[Image 30. Fa Bene volunteers getting ready to go to the market. Via Agliè community centre, 08/01/ 2020. Photo by the author.]

Conducting research within the Fa Bene group from October 2019 to February 2020, when the local section of the project ended, led me to regularly visit the community centre and develop a friendly relation to its manager, employees and Fa Bene food recipients and volunteers. Many activities as part of Fa Bene were based on volunteer work and the idea of active participation of beneficiaries. Such participation occurred through their engagement in the collection of food, at the market, or through volunteer work at the community centre. The latter often meant cleaning or rearranging shared spaces and facilities. Following the logic of the Fa Bene project, this was key to foster inclusion and give these people more opportunities to develop new relations rather than being there as "passive recipients". For example, as highlighted by Fa Bene local coordinator Nadia, being at the community centre was an opportunity for women of foreign origins to interact in Italian, get to know other people and maybe find a job through word-to-mouth. In this perspective, Fa Bene and food donations were just a small part of a broader project for transforming social interactions in the area, namely, using Nadia's words, "an excuse for reviving all kind of things in the community"[119].

[119] Nadia Burdese, Fa Bene worker, interview, 01/03/2020.

Building on de Wilde and Duyvendak (2016), I frame such morality as part of the process they name "engineering community spirit". These anthropologists, who analyse a community participation programme in a deprived Amsterdam neighbourhood, build on Rose (1999) analysis of "governing through community" to point to the central place of community participation and active citizenship in Dutch programmes of urban renewal. de Wilde and Duyvendak (2016) stressed how local practitioners make use of "sensitising policy techniques" for "getting residents "into the spirit" of community engagement […], feel, see and desire in *designated* ways" (979).

In the neighbourhood of Barriera di Milano, where many people live in precarious conditions, such techniques represented a shift in the way of thinking and operationalising urban regeneration (Salone 2018). Such techniques of community participation, and the specific morality that came with it, also found a fertile ground as many local inhabitants were keen to do anything to "make things change" (*far cambiare le cose*), a recurrent expression used by the research participants. Abandoned by the local administration, they felt like they had no other choice than partaking in these schemes. This was also the case of Nadia, whom, however, brought in these practices also the spontaneity of interactions she took with her from her past experiences as grassroots activist. While she operated within Fa Bene and related standards, she also detached herself from its bureaucracy, valued self-organisation and informal mutual help. On several occasions, she told me that she did not understand all the funding and partnership mechanisms at the back of the project. Nadia simply navigated this system to be with people and because she lacked food herself. These elements about the life path of Nadia are important to underline that the community centre also acted as an assembler of people with very different backgrounds and visions of social organisation. However, in a way or another, their visions ended up being incorporated in the logic and morality of the non-profit sector.

Covid-19 solidarities and food aid

Various crises and forms of solidarity

Comparably to other southern European countries, over the last decades, the Italian critical socio-economic situation and the policies of austerity affected people's "ability to ensure even their physical reproduction" (Matos 2020, 116). This became even more apparent with the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, which was accompanied (and still is) by dramatic socio-economic consequences, especially among the most vulnerable groups of the population. As per June 2020, statistical forecasts indicated that the COVID-19 social crisis would double the number of the "absolute poor" (1.7 million of households in 2019) and particularly affect the "relative poor" due to the increase of unemployment and worsening precarious working conditions (Ciccarelli 2020; Istat 2020). According to this data, the ratio of absolute poor was five times higher when looking at households of foreign origins who reside in Italy (Istat 2020). This is linked, among other things, to their limited access to state solidarity programs such as basic income (*reddito di cittadinanza*) – due, for example, to language and bureaucratic barriers and the criteria of number of years of residency (minimum 10 years of residency and long-term permit)[120]. COVID-19 also increased social inequalities in Italian cities (especially in the urban peripheries) due to interruption of informal labour: informal workers were left without work nor had access to any form of welfare state support such as unemployment benefits (Grassi 2022, 274).

In Italy, from March 2020 onwards, as the COVID-19 crisis hit the country, a high number of solidarity initiatives flourished all over the country (e.g. Polchi 2020; Vitale 2020). Aid and solidarity became buzzwords in the media and public debate: solidarity towards vulnerable groups of the population such as isolated elderlies, homeless people, or families in situation of economic hardship. Solidarity towards local businesses and precarious workers affected by the restrictive measures. Solidarity as state programs, donations by

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[120] See also (Hate Speech 2022).

bank foundations, businesses or individual contributors. Solidarity through the activation and operational work of volunteers, official associations and grassroots groups. News often reported on such solidarity presented as a social by-product of the pandemic and a motive of national pride. For example, this was the case of articles on the key role of volunteers and social movements in supporting the very functioning of welfare at city level (e.g. Musella 2020) or TV reportages and documentaries showing the everyday work of volunteers in charitable groups and religious entities (e.g. Piacenza 2021).

The agents and entities who acted in solidarity with these vulnerable groups were various, ranging from the Church and non-profit organisations to the family. As highlighted by the literature on COVID-19, which is further developing as I am writing this dissertation, solidarity and mutual aid initiatives increased in numbers, changed scale and forms, globally (e.g. Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar 2020). During my fieldwork in Turin at the time of the pandemic, I observed and differentiated between institutionalised forms of solidarity and more grassroots ones – meaning, most often, developed by smaller groups with a critical approach to the crisis and a broader scope of intervention, going beyond emergency aid. Institutionalised solidarity surely seemed more prominent and occupied much more space in media and public debate. From this perspective, I share the experience of Susana Narotzky (2021, 13) when she writes:

> Contrary to the accounts of solidarity grassroots movements that have emerged in the wake of the terrible breakdown of social reproduction after the financial crisis, we have witnessed only scattered experiments of alternative, non-market solidarities. Solidarity has mostly been tied to the Church, the state, the family and especially women.

In the case of Turin, solidarity during COVID-19 was indeed most often tied to these same structures. In most cases, solidarity operations were rather disconnected from the critical questioning of the origins of the crisis, including neoliberal urban governance and the inequalities it produced. However, I will keep these grassroots alternatives in the discussion throughout this part of the dissertation and, more

specifically, refer to the case of the grassroots neighbourhood network Rete Zona Aurora Solidale. This network was also referred as SOSpesa, meaning SOS shopping but also hinting to the practice of the *caffè sospeso* or 'pending coffee', which is a cup of coffee paid for in advance for any following customer who might need it, as an anonymous donation. The network was a collaboration between grassroots groups, namely a neighbourhood committee (*Comitato di Zona Aurora*), an occupied social centre (*Laboratorio Culturale Autogestito Manituana*) and a non-profit organisation (*Educadora*), all based in the Aurora neighbourhood. This network supported many families with food aid packages from March to July 2020, while promoting an entitlements-based (versus charity) approach to the crisis response. As we summarised in the article *Torino: from food to demands,* the network organised several public food distributions and demonstrations to hold local institutions accountable for the social crisis and demand adequate income support and social policies (del bello *et al*. 2020).

Between the end of April and July 2020, I took part to the activities of this network, when compatible with my work at Via Agliè. I did less shifts there than at Via Agliè but partook to the assemblies and all the public food distributions. My participation to this network happened as a natural continuation of my personal engagement within the neighbourhood committee Comitato di Zona Aurora. While, during the previous months, I wanted and had managed to keep this separated from the research activities, the engagement of the committee in food-related activities implied for me the implosion of the complex (and maybe fictitious) boundary between personal life and fieldwork (and between friends and research participants) (see also Thajib et al 2019). I had to question and redefine (with myself and the others) my positionality within the group as well as what was going in and what was staying out of the research. This process was facilitated using audio-recorded interviews (during which I felt that my role was clear and the information gathered consensually shared for research purposes), my possibility to share contacts, information and reflections gained throughout the research, and the short duration of this overlap (only the last three months of my fieldwork).

Punctual comparisons between the case of the Via Agliè food aid hub and the network Rete Zona Aurora Solidale allow for the specific features of the case of institutionalized solidarity to emerge more clearly. Moreover, it will help also going beyond a dichotomic narrative of clearly differentiated forms of solidarity but rather discuss porous boundaries between public and third sector solidarity and between institutionalized and grassroots solidarity. The case of Rete Zona Aurora Solidale will also be important to report on what is being discussed in recent literature in terms of a renewal of grassroots solidarity linked to COVID-19. For example, as reported in Interface special issue 12(1) (2020), globally, COVID-19 was accompanied by the development of a series of grassroots movements' struggles and forms of solidarity. These included feminist solidarity networks in Mexico, collective claims by healthcare workers in Egypt, solidarity kitchens in the UK, and the establishment of self-governed and autonomous food systems in Italy, to name a few (Interface 2020).

Different responses to food insecurity

In Italy, food insecurity was one of the most immediate consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. This was revealed by the increasing number of requests for aid registered by *Caritas* (more than 153.000 new requests) and *Banco Alimentare* (an increase of 40% in food packages delivered), which are the largest food assistance organisations in the country (Actionaid 2020). To respond to such food emergency, the government allocated 400 million euros to be shared among the 8000 Italian municipalities. With this budget, and thanks to the additional mobilisation of private donors and local associations, municipalities such as Turin developed a system of food vouchers and food aid packages. In most cases, the public intervention was insufficient as resources mobilised showed to be inadequate when compared to the number of demands and needs of the population. Moreover, the aid programs' application criteria often revealed themselves discriminatory, penalising people based on residency and income benchmarks (Actionaid 2020). The emergency also shed light on the absence of large-scale strategies that would facilitate coordinated interventions (at municipal level, for example) to tackle food poverty city wide (Actionaid 2020).

In Turin, the problem of food insecurity quickly became visible in Aurora and Barriera di Milano, the neighbourhoods where I lived and undertook part of my research. One of the most emblematic information in this sense was the number of food vouchers requests (Aurora and Barriera reaching the highest numbers of the city) and the ones which remained unanswered: around eight thousand families who asked for such aid were left behind, as the vouchers exhausted a day after the application process had started (Ricci 2020).

Therefore, local non-profit organisations, charities, religious entities, as well as grassroots collectives were key for forwarding social support. Similarly to what was pointed out by Grassi (2022) in the case of Milan, not all people facing difficulties managed to access official support systems, be it because these were overloaded or because their navigation required social and cultural capital. In this context, grassroots and informal networks played a key role in extending access to aid to more households. Local mainstream news applauded daily the bourgeoning of local solidarity initiatives. In a way, these also contributed to spreading the imaginary that the social costs of the pandemic (and past years of austerity) could be faced by mutual care and acts of responsibility (r*esponsabilizzazione*) of single citizens and local communities.

In the domain of food insecurity this was already the case before COVID-19. A variety of analysis of food aid emerged in the Italian literature, focusing specifically on the responses put in place by non-profit organisations. In the book *Food Poverty in Italy: the responses of the second welfare*[121], Maino *et al*. (2016) narrate about the non-profit organisations and resources that are mobilised to face food poverty and the welfare state retrenchment in the peninsula. The authors discuss the example of the *Banco Alimentare* (Food Bank), a country wide network composed of a main foundation and local

[121] In Italy, the term second welfare (*secondo welfare*) is used to refer to "a mix of social protection and social investment programs which are not funded by the State, but provided instead by a wide range of economic and social actors, linked to territories and local communities, but open to trans-local partnerships and collaborations (including the EU)" (Ferrera and Maino 2011, 20).

organisations promoting the recuperation of food surplus and their redistribution to charities (Banco Alimentare n.d.). Maino *et al*. (2016) also present a variety of other forms of aid such as solidarity supermarkets managed by volunteers (*empori solidali*)[122], purchase groups and urban agriculture. Toldo (2017) reports on Turin context and a variety of local initiatives engaged in food surplus recuperation and distribution, similarly to food banks[123].

As part of the local responses to the COVID-19 crisis, both Via Agliè community centre and Rete Zona Aurora Solidale mobilised to provide basic support to food insecure households. Both groups got organised to collect food donations and deliver food aid packages following, however, different approaches in terms of their resources, collaborations and relation to food recipients. As I participated to these two groups - and discussed about the theme of food insecurity with research participants, friends and activists engaged in the area -, I discovered how these different approaches not only represented differences in the practice of food aid but also in terms of its ideology and underlying visions of welfare and community. As also problematised by Narotzky (2020, 13):

> Forms of mutual help rely on different ideological discourses, expectations and entitlements that result in different moral valuations, practices and material transfers. Charities, state benefits, third sector organisations, self-organising groups and family networks imply different reconfigurations of self-worth as well as feelings of dependency and autonomy, entailing the

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[122] The *Empori Solidali* are free supermarkets managed by non-profit organisations often working as networks. The first one developed in Genoa in 1997 and, as per 2020, they are more than 200 all over Italy. They are based on the redistribution of food surpluses and often function on the basis of volunteer work (Redazione Nonsprecare 2022).

[123] Toldo (2017) presents these initiatives as practices of care. The author argues that this is because of the ways in which the activities are co-organized with the aid recipients, and more generally, because these projects tend to frame food needs as a "social deprivation and not only as a form of material injustice" (271, translation is my own).

> renegotiation of the boundaries between claims and entitlements, rights and needs.

It is precisely around these various practices, valuations and ways of conceptualising welfare that the two groups I observed were different from one another. One of their key ideological differences was the way of understanding mutual help around food aid. While the development of the Via Agliè hub represented a way in which institutions and third sector criss-crossed their operations – in a process that I will unpack in detail in the next chapter -, the grassroots Rete Zona Aurora Solidale aimed at building relations of informal mutual help among who organised and received food aid. These activists wanted, in the long term, to move away from such dichotomic division between food giver and recipient. They framed their intervention as part of a broader set of actions targeted at enhancing new relations among people in the area. The network wanted to differentiate itself from aid and charity-like practices (*assistenzialismo*), though this was not always easy and immediate in the practice. It aimed at fostering a sense of shared conditions and ability to act collectively, beyond the pandemic. The vision of these activists was influenced by their long-term political engagement in the area and the notion of mutualism (*mutualismo*), which they used recurrently, and which has a long history in the Italian context (e.g. Marcon 2004; Cannavò 2018). This is especially true in the case of working-class Turin, which, already in the first decades of the twentieth century, was characterised by self-managed networks of relations, informal exchanges and solidarity at neighbourhood level (Gribaudi 1987).

Cannavò (2018) reports on different contemporary forms of mutualism, for example the one of conflictual mutualism (*mutualismo conflittuale*) as part of which the author includes a classification of several examples of food related initiatives. These include the case of *Mondeggi Bene Comune – Fattoria senza padroni* (literally Mondeggi Common Good – farm without owners), a farm of 200 hectares situated close to Florence (Italy) which is occupied and managed autonomously by a committee of local inhabitants, farmers and unemployed promoting food sovereignty and peasant agriculture (Cannavò 2018; Mondeggi Bene Comune n.d.). It also includes the case of *Solidarity for All*, a Greek network of solidarity initiatives

which developed after the protests of 2011 and continues to organise self-managed food distribution, solidarity kitchens and short food chains. These initiatives do not want to have only a social function but also have a clearly stated political positioning and the broader aim of reorganising societal interactions (Cannavò 2018). Based on the analysis of these and other cases, the author frames conflictual mutualism as a set of practices which:

> […] is not part of a process of welfare state dismantlement. On the contrary. It advances as an antidote to that process and as a tool to reinforce unusual forms of public service guaranteed to and managed by all. (Cannavò 2018, 147, translation is my own)

The case of the Zona Aurora Solidale network is to be contextualised in such set of experiences because of the above-mentioned political nature of its self-organisation and claims. It presented itself as a tool for finding collective solutions to ongoing problems but also to mobilise for transformation, beyond the management of poverty.

Such setup contrasted with the one of the Via Agliè hub, which, referring back to the quote above, emerged precisely from collaborations between the public, private and third sector to fill the gap left by the lack of public intervention. In this perspective, this approach to the alleviation of food insecurity (and poverty, more generally) is inscribed in continuity with welfare state retrenchment. Similarly to other interventions of the third sector, these are perfectly compatible with austerity policies and in fact are frequently used by many local governments to alleviate itself from social reproduction responsibilities (Del Re 2015).

In the context of the community centre, mutualism was not part of the terminology used. The idea of collective action only included the group of volunteers, who worked together creating a "community of volunteers"[124], but most of which never really encountered the food aid recipients. While people at Via Agliè often referred to the idea of

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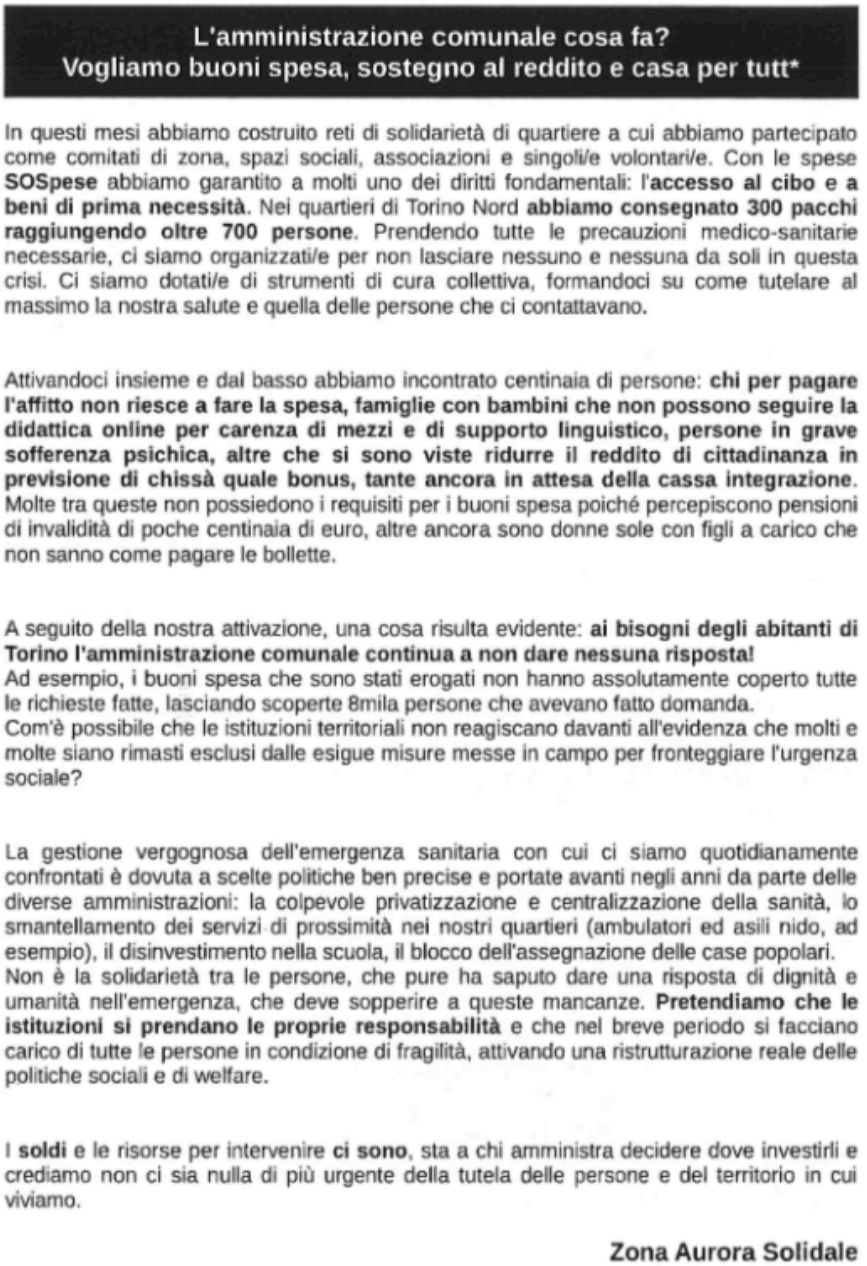
[124] Erika Mattarella, Hakima Eljamaoui and Martina Dragoni, director and employees at the Via Agliè community centre, group interview, 11/05/2020.

community care and neighbourhood solidarity, the separation between who distributed and who received food remained present until the very end of the project. Moreover, volunteers were not part of decision-making processes (for example, no assemblies to discuss the directions of the project were organised) but they followed the instructions of the community centre's director and employees. Their possibility to play a role in decision-making was relegated to the operations around the construction of the food packages. Moreover, when discussing with the centre's director and employees, they also sometimes felt that they lacked control over decision-making, as they depended on public and private institutions in terms of their material and economic resources.

Another fundamental difference between the two initiatives and approaches to food insecurity revolved around the valuation of food as a need or as a right. After the reduction of the lockdown measure, the network Aurora Solidale organised public food distributions in front of the local administration offices, that aimed at highlighting the responsibility of institutions to ensure basic rights such as food. Moreover, they made use of various leaflets: some with contact information in Italian, French and Arabic, some with references to other grassroots solidarity initiatives, and others with a scan of a newspaper article about the protests organised by the network. Leaflets were inserted in the food aid packages to share with recipients a political analysis and the invite to take part to the discussion.



L'amministrazione comunale cosa fa?
Vogliamo buoni spesa, sostegno al reddito e casa per tutt*

In questi mesi abbiamo costruito reti di solidarietà di quartiere a cui abbiamo partecipato come comitati di zona, spazi sociali, associazioni e singoli/e volontari/e. Con le spese **SOSpese** abbiamo garantito a molti uno dei diritti fondamentali: l'**accesso al cibo e a beni di prima necessità**. Nei quartieri di Torino Nord **abbiamo consegnato 300 pacchi raggiungendo oltre 700 persone**. Prendendo tutte le precauzioni medico-sanitarie necessarie, ci siamo organizzati/e per non lasciare nessuno e nessuna da soli in questa crisi. Ci siamo dotati/e di strumenti di cura collettiva, formandoci su come tutelare al massimo la nostra salute e quella delle persone che ci contattavano.

Attivandoci insieme e dal basso abbiamo incontrato centinaia di persone: **chi per pagare l'affitto non riesce a fare la spesa, famiglie con bambini che non possono seguire la didattica online per carenza di mezzi e di supporto linguistico, persone in grave sofferenza psichica, altre che si sono viste ridurre il reddito di cittadinanza in previsione di chissà quale bonus, tante ancora in attesa della cassa integrazione**. Molte tra queste non possiedono i requisiti per i buoni spesa poiché percepiscono pensioni di invalidità di poche centinaia di euro, altre ancora sono donne sole con figli a carico che non sanno come pagare le bollette.

A seguito della nostra attivazione, una cosa risulta evidente: **ai bisogni degli abitanti di Torino l'amministrazione comunale continua a non dare nessuna risposta!**
Ad esempio, i buoni spesa che sono stati erogati non hanno assolutamente coperto tutte le richieste fatte, lasciando scoperte 8mila persone che avevano fatto domanda.
Com'è possibile che le istituzioni territoriali non reagiscano davanti all'evidenza che molti e molte siano rimasti esclusi dalle esigue misure messe in campo per fronteggiare l'urgenza sociale?

La gestione vergognosa dell'emergenza sanitaria con cui ci siamo quotidianamente confrontati è dovuta a scelte politiche ben precise e portate avanti negli anni da parte delle diverse amministrazioni: la colpevole privatizzazione e centralizzazione della sanità, lo smantellamento dei servizi di prossimità nei nostri quartieri (ambulatori ed asili nido, ad esempio), il disinvestimento nella scuola, il blocco dell'assegnazione delle case popolari.
Non è la solidarietà tra le persone, che pure ha saputo dare una risposta di dignità e umanità nell'emergenza, che deve sopperire a queste mancanze. **Pretendiamo che le istituzioni si prendano le proprie responsabilità** e che nel breve periodo si facciano carico di tutte le persone in condizione di fragilità, attivando una ristrutturazione reale delle politiche sociali e di welfare.

I **soldi** e le risorse per intervenire **ci sono**, sta a chi amministra decidere dove investirli e crediamo non ci sia nulla di più urgente della tutela delle persone e del territorio in cui viviamo.

Zona Aurora Solidale

[Image 31. One of the leaflets of the network Zona Aurora Solidale entitled "And what is the municipality doing? We want food vouchers, income support and housing for all". May 2020.]

In the leaflet above, for example, the activists of Zona Aurora Solidale explained in detail their activities as well as denounced the limited intervention of the public administration. In particular, the leaflet points to the importance of developing more food vouchers as well as income support subsidies. At Via Agliè, ideological discourses and political discussions about citizens' rights were, on the contrary, rather silenced. However, they surely influenced the functioning of the hub. In the next section, I discuss the initial set up, resources and material of the hub to provide examples of how moral and political premises shaped its daily activities.

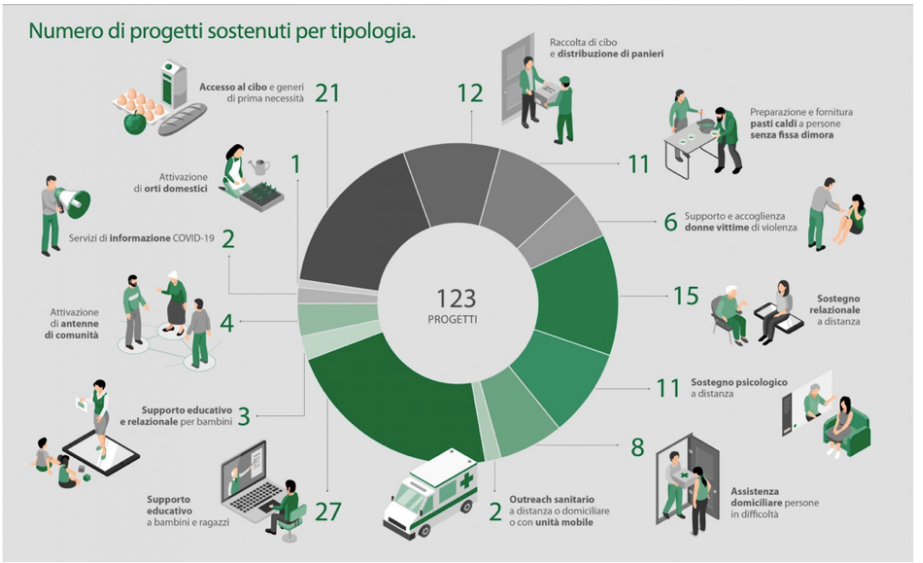
Assemblage or the making of the Via Agliè food aid hub

"Together everything will be alright"

Mid-March 2020, I learned that Via Agliè community centre was going to be involved in a COVID-19 emergency food aid initiative financed by the banking foundation *Compagnia di San Paolo* (from now on CSP). The foundation had developed an emergency call for projects named "Together everything will be alright" (*Insieme andrà tutto bene*) through which it distributed two million euros among 123 social projects, 34 of which situated in the metropolitan area of Turin (Compagnia di San Paolo 2020). Such intervention is to be contextualised as part of this foundation's long history of involvement in the urban development agendas and in social services in the city. Ravazzi (2016), among others, analysed the influence of the foundation in terms of its financing of public interest interventions and its participation in local policymaking. Even more as austerity impacts the ability of local governments to address public needs, such foundations have gained an increasingly significant role in terms of public administration (Ravazzi 2016). CSP emergency call for project is also to be analysed as part of the Europe-wide mobilisation of several foundations during the pandemic (EFC 2020).

The selected project proposals had been submitted by various non-profit organisations, social cooperatives, volunteer groups - including some that were part of my research and were already discussed in the

dissertation such as Eco dalle Città. They proposed to deal with several issues brought to the forefront by the sanitary crisis and lockdown measured, including food security, psychological and educational support on distance and COVID-19-related information services.



[Image 32. Number and typology of projects financed by the call *Insieme andrà tutto bene*. Infographic developed by *Compagnia di San Paolo*. Retrieved on 22/12/2020 at:*https://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/it/news/esiti-del-bando-insieme-andra-tutto-bene-di-generazione-urbana-2/*]

On March 25th, I called Erika (the director of Via Agliè community centre) to ask if she could tell me more about the project in which they were going to be involved and whether I could join their team as a researcher and volunteer. She responded positively, explaining that they were about to organise a large call for volunteers, who were needed to actually forward the project in practice. Erika sounded enthusiastic about starting this new initiative, this "new challenge" as she put it, while already overwhelmed by the number of calls and organisational work it entailed. As she explained to me some practicalities, she mentioned several local partners that would be part of the initiative including private companies in the area such as the local branch of the retail company *Leroy Merlin*. While such

cooperation initially seemed to me out of place, I soon got used to the assemblage (Koster and Van Leynseele 2018) of diverse local and transnational actors which composed and sustained the functioning of the food aid hub. While it already worked as a contact point between the local administration and inhabitants, as well as among different local initiatives, more than ever, the COVID-19 crisis transformed the centre into an assemblage of urban agents who had nothing to do with one another, but now wanted to cooperate. The centre assembled firstly in the sense of "fitting together different actors, institutions and resources" and giving shape to "a temporary structure" (Koster and Van Leynseele 2018, 804)[125]. Secondly, assembling meant that its very functioning also started to depend on an increasing number of other actors differently included in the operations – such as actors who donated food, delivered it, insured the volunteers or identified recipients.

The municipal hat

The picture became even more complex a few days later, during an initial online meeting with the first 21 recruited volunteers. Erika presented the initiative as part of a municipal, city-wide food aid program. She explained that the municipality had contacted her to ask if they were willing to participate and that this seemed like the natural continuation of their engagement to support local families. During her account of such developments, Erika never mentioned CSP and their funds. I argue that, in a way, her narration revealed how, on a cultural level, this foundation's intervention in the social sector was normalized – CSP and the municipality were often mentioned as one. Such overlap, which appeared recurrently during my whole fieldwork in the accounts of workers of non-profit organisations, seem to add to Ravazzi's (2016) analysis of the increasingly significant role of CSP in funding public interest activities.

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[125] Koster and Van Leynseele (2018) use these terms precisely to define what the process of assembling is. Their definition is developed on the basis of the work of other scholars who wrote on assemblage theory before. Assemblage theory is based on Deleuze and Guattari (1987)'s philosophical concept of assemblage, coming from the French term "*agencement*".

Looking at the role of the foundation from the perspective of non-profit organisations on the ground, it is possible to observe its impacts not in terms of policy processes but on a cultural level. The way in which the interventions of CSP were perceived as common sense speak of cultural transformations in the ways in which Turin municipality and the local administration are envisioned. More precisely, it speaks of the widely shared perception that the public sector is limited in its operation due to lack of resources. As part of this approach, there are no other options than to support its action through the private sector. The long-term and pervasive interventions of the foundation normalised its presence, as it increasingly acted as part of local institutions, as a figure to which the financing of welfare was outsourced. Over time, such interpretation legitimised the role of such foundations as "co-producers of public goods" (Ravazzi 2016, 920).

As Erika accepted the municipal request, together with many other organisations around the city (among which six community centres), Via Agliè officially became part of the network "Solidarious Turin" (*Torino Solidale*) and an official food hub (*snodo alimentare*). From then onwards, for several months, it dedicated its courtyard and main room to the storage of various food donations[126]. The term "hub" (*snodo, snodo alimentare, snodo territoriale*) became widespread as part of the new vocabulary of emergency food aid, reflecting the assembling function, once again, of these actors. In addition to the community centres, the network was composed of several non-profit organisations such as the food bank *Banco Alimentare* and private agents, which donated part of the food needed to compose the packages. It also included the participation of the public sector in the form of the Civil Protection forces (*Protezione Civile*) and the municipality.

The Civil Protection forces worked to support the management of the requests for help that arrived via the dedicated helpline. They then divided these between the different city hubs, usually following the

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[126] See also the first news and articles explaining about the development of the network: Rete delle Case del Quartiere (2020) and Comune di Torino (2020a).

criteria of geographical proximity (between a hub and a household) and hubs' maximum capability. The helpline of the Civil Protection became a symbol of institutional emergency response, as it was advertised on websites, newspapers and leaflets in the street. At the community centre, whenever new people called or passed by to ask for support, we could not handle their case directly but had to ask them to go through the helpline. Only in this way they could be inserted in the official list of beneficiaries. The helpline got congested soon after it was put in place, as too many people called to ask for support. This was also reported by Grassi (2022) in the case of similar helplines set up in Milan.

For what concerns the municipality: in the first months of the pandemic, it was mainly in charge of the distribution of emergency food vouchers. For several months, it was not clear how and to what extent it was involved in the food procurement for the hubs. This mixed system also characterised other cities including Milan – and, in particular, the response to food insecurity in the peripheral area San Siro (Grassi 2022). Also in that case, the emergency response involved a variety of actors which gathered around the funding given by Milan banking foundation *Fondazione Cariplo*. Moreover, in Milan as well, these improvised food aid centres were called "hubs" (Grassi 2022, 277). In Turin, the engagement of the municipality changed over time and its responsibilities became clearer from summer 2020 onwards, as it took more direct control of the composition of the food packages – a change of approach, which I will further investigate in the next chapter.

To conclude, in this chapter, I introduced the community centre and the various actors it assembled before and during its temporary transformation into an official food aid hub. By retracing the history of the community centre, I underlined the continuities in the local shape taken by welfare in the form of community care. In particular, I explained about the long-term role played by the community centre. Building on Koster and Van Leynseele (2018), I analysed it as an assembler, namely functioning as a juncture between the local administration, non-profit organisations, collective initiatives and the population. Through its various activities, the centre encouraged

volunteering and citizens activation as means to achieve better living conditions in the area.

In the context of Barriera di Milano, the idea of community participation found fertile ground as proven by people's active involvement at the community centre. More generally, the area is characterised by a high number of non-profit organisations, cultural associations and informal groups differently involved in its renewal. These forms of participation speak of a local feeling of abandonment by the public administration, often perceived by research participants as inefficient and lacking resources. Moreover, the advancement of a strongly morally connotated vision of community care is to be contextualised as part of the progressive retrenchment of the welfare state and neoliberal reforms in Italy, more generally. In this context, I argue that while carrying out its role as assembler, the community centre became nested into and contributed to neoliberal reform and its legitimisation from the bottom-up (see also Anjaria and Rao 2014). Some of the instantiations of these trends are the following: the local recasting of rights into needs, in both the language and practices; the community centre's key role in the COVID-19 emergency response; and the legitimisation of philanthropic foundations as co-producers of public services.

By presenting some of the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic such as food insecurity, I have juxtaposed such approach to solidarity and welfare to other forms of mutual help. In particular, I introduced the case of the network Zona Aurora Solidale to talk about local configurations of conflictual mutualism (Cannavò 2018). I will keep referencing back to the case of this network to juxtapose it to the hub of Via Agliè to reveal discontinuities but also some of the shared challenges and operational skills needed for handling emergency food.

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the work of the community centre as a food aid hub by discussing the materiality and morality at the basis of its operations during the pandemic. I will explain about the process around the making of food aid packages and particularly focus on the food that was used. I will then describe the key figures of the hub, namely the ones of the volunteer and the aid recipients, pointing to their roles, social representations and moral differentiation. I will

also come back to the interactions between the community centre and Turin municipality: in particular, I will explain more about the municipality's evolving intervention and its blurring boundaries.