RESEARCH ARTICLE

Including the excluded. Hybrid networks during Covid19: the case of the Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund in Milan

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ABSTRACT:

In the city of Milan, the pandemic generated by the spread of Covid-19 in 2020 led to increased inequality between different social groups. This paper reports the case of a neighbourhood community fund promoted by a group of non-profit organisations in one of the poorest areas of the city during the first lockdown (February-June 2020). While providing emergency aid to people who did not access institutional measures during the pandemic, this initiative has also boosted a process of reconfiguring the local network structure, supporting a collective redefinition of the practices and meanings of territorial networking for welfare provision. Referring to direct social action (DSA) theory, the article reflects on the role of community-based DSAs in innovating welfare policies and addressing social and territorial inequalities, looking at network-shaped forms of cooperation among third sector organisations.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, large urban areas have registered an increase in social polarisation and stronger segregation of deprived populations (Arbaci 2019; Baldwin Hess, Tammaru, and Van Ham 2018; Oberti and Préteceille 2017). The pandemic generated by the spread of Covid-19 in 2020 has worsened the inequalities between different social groups, once more highlighting the internal divisions of contemporary western society. These divisions are deeply rooted in the retrenchment of the post-war welfare states under the neoliberal thrust (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). As in many cities in Europe, local communities in Italy showed a great capacity for self-organising and supporting the most vulnerable populations during the epidemic. However, in many cases, these civic efforts weakened towards the end of lockdown, raising questions about the sustainability of this experience, the effectiveness of bottom-up mobilisations, and their role in the public welfare provision.

This article reports the case of a network of local organisations of different backgrounds, which created a community fund to collect donations and provide emergency aid to the most deprived inhabitants during the first lockdown in Milan. As the Covid-19 crisis rapidly turned into a social crisis, these actors mobilised in response to the exclusionary institutional support measures, setting up a platform for exchanging knowledge, resources and information, which enabled them to experiment with a new organisational form for welfare provision in the neighbourhood.

Given the ambiguity of the network-shaped relationships between public institutions and private organisations (Swyngedouw 2018) in the framework of the Italian welfare system (Bifulco 2015), and the effects of "destitution" (Keßler and Schöpf 2010) contained within it, the article aims to contribute to the academic debate on direct social action (DSA) (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) as a form of collective action adopted to contrast exclusionary welfare policies generated at the local level within the retrenchment of public welfare in the neoliberal era (Zamponi 2019).

In particular, the article questions the role of community-based DSAs in innovating welfare policies and addressing social and territorial inequalities, looking at network-shaped forms of cooperation among third sector organisations. The pandemic offered a group of local organisations of very different identities the opportunity to strengthen their relationships, developing a common – albeit informal – networking platform to cope with the emergency. Which organisations participated – or not – in the collective action? Which discourses and frameworks legitimised the collective action? How did different actors manage to cooperate? How did they relate to local institutions? What were the territorial effects of the initiative?

The article aims to answer these questions, updating the results of the author's doctoral research in regional planning, conducted between 2017 and 2020, on the forms of community-based networking in marginal urban areas. The pandemic highlighted the development of a hyperlocal hybrid and adaptive system of welfare provision that has innovated local actors' practices while boosting a process of re-politicising those of third sector organisations in the light of divisive social citizenship. The research has been conducted through a mix of qualitative methodologies. It used Network Analysis to study the development, over time, of the formal inter-organisational relationships in the neighbourhood (Greenberg et al. 2017), mapping organisations, initiatives, projects, and policies that have structured the collaboration among the third sector organisations, public and private institutions since the early 2000s. The network analysis highlighted the most central and connected organisations, the clusters, and the variations in the connections during the time. Then, it used in-depth interviews with the representatives of local organisations and group meetings' transcriptions to explore the meanings of collective action in the individuals' and organisations' perspectives.[1] These texts were analysed through a qualitative data-driven coding process to understand the shared cultural frameworks generated within collective mobilisation. The research focused on collective learning

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[1] The article is based on 24 interviews with local actors (on 46) and 18 meeting reports (on 43) collected from January 2017 to July 2019.

processes, crossing the organisations' specific identities, and shaping the local network as a transformative environment both for the identity of individuals and for the organisations' goals, with significant effects on the forms of collective territorial action. The research has also adopted ethnographic methods, including participant observation whereby the author engaged as a volunteer in the Giambellino-Lorenteggio community network. The author has participated in the development of the community fund, joining the steering committee meetings, contacting inhabitants by phone, interviewing them and registering their data, producing quantitative reports of the resources mobilised and the number of people supported through the initiative. All these immersive research activities reinforced the findings illustrated in the article.

The first section presents the debate on DSA in light of the transformations of the Italian welfare regime, focusing on the issue of territorial networking within the literature; the second section focuses on the relationships between public and private actors in the field of welfare provision in Milan. The third section describes how Milan's Municipality organised an emergency food aid system during the first lockdown; then, it focuses on the Giambellino Lorenteggio network and the Emergency Community Fund initiative, highlighting which populations and needs it addressed. The fourth section highlights the constitution of a new organisational structure via direct action within the experience of the community fund. In conclusion, the article reflects on DSA as a tool to re-politicise local welfare provision and third sector territorial action.

2. Network-shaped welfare systems between innovation and destitution

The new forms of poverty and exclusion produced by the reorganisation of economic and labour systems at the global scale, together with the increase in international migration flows particular affected urban areas. National welfare states crumbled under the growing pressure of these socio-demographic and economic changes, leading to a paradigmatic transition in welfare provision. National welfare states shifted from centralised policy systems to localised and network-shaped forms of organisation (Kramer, Lorentzen, Melief, and Pasquinelli 1993; Rhodes 1997; Wagner 2000) to achieve better efficacy, adequacy, and economic sustainability.

Two dynamics were crucial in this transition. Firstly, the rescaling of institutional jurisdiction according to the governance principle has given ampler powers to lower administrative levels, such as Region and Municipalities, over national regulation (Brenner et al. 2004). Secondly, the territorialisation of public policies promoted by the European Union has aimed to develop interventions tailored to the specificity of each context and more sensitive to local needs.

The Italian welfare system was reorganised according to the mix of actors' competences and resources (Ascoli and Ranci 2002), the collaboration between providers and beneficiaries, and the emphasis on the spatial dimension of policies (Bifulco and Vitale 2003). According to the principle of subsidiarity, the competence for public welfare provision switched from the State to a plurality of actors (Kazepov 2008) through partnerships between public and private actors. Within this framework, the network has become the leading metaphor of the reorganisation of the post-Fordist welfare state (Fosti 2013) and the dominant paradigm of territorial development (Briata, Bricocoli, and Tedesco 2009), supporting the transition from sectorial to an integrated approach to policymaking.

The concept of network contrasts with the hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation (Crozier 1969), whose rigid structure was increasingly unable to respond to rapid changes in contemporary society. The idea of networks refers, instead, to horizontal, open, and flexible systems in which actors interact on the basis of necessity, enhancing their capacity to adapt and learn from the context (Bifulco 2012). Rather than having fixed procedures and roles, the organisation develops around processes of knowledge production and exchange among autonomous actors. In public policies management, the idea of networks has promoted the collaboration between public institutions and

society and the convergence of different policy domains. The "local welfare system" has taken the shape of "dynamic processes in which the specific socioeconomic and cultural conditions determined different arrangements of actors" (Andreotti, Mingione, and Polizzi 2012, 1926) to develop innovative, adaptive and enabling public policies, aiming to enhance human and social capital, while reducing the risks of standardisation and dependency from social aid (De Leonardis 2002).

Private and non-profit organisations became increasingly involved in implementing public policies through contractual relationships with public institutions. The boundaries between the two sectors became blurred, and NPOs acquired a substitutive role in providing essential services (Ranci 1994), tackling the inefficiencies of the public sector. The outcome has been a highly fragmented welfare system depending on specific local combinations of competences and resources within which public actor has retreated from providing services to promote competitive relationships among actors in the "social market" (De Leonardis 2002).

At the same time, the emphasis on the concepts of participation and activation has supported the idea of a self-changing society which, as well as its empowering premises, conceals ambiguities in the definition of social citizenship: a "contractual" approach to public-private collaboration (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Bifulco and Vitale 2006); and a "private" vision of citizenship (Castel 2003) developed in the use of "conditions" in welfare provision (Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018).

As highlighted by critical scholars, this approach developed under the influence of neoliberalism. Within the "activation turn" in welfare provision (Kenworthy 2010), universal and unconditional social rights were replaced by the principle of conditionality, drawing social protection from a combination of requirements that make people eligible – or not – for social protection. Welfare assumes a preventive and promotional orientation with respect to the ability of people to assume responsibility for their own well-being. These definitions shape both individual and collective perceptions about adequacy and conformity, as well as their behaviours (Dardot and Laval 2009), undermining the collective notions of fairness and social cohesion (Sage 2012). This vision was introduced in a broadening range of welfare spheres, generating exclusionary policies based on people's status, needs, and personal conduct, limiting or differentiating their access to social aid (Tosi 2017).

The relationship between individuals and society set by the post-war welfare state is thus profoundly changed. Neoliberal ideology supports the development of a new discourse on welfare provision, combining solidarity and competitiveness, in order to achieve the goal of social cohesion (Brochmann and Dølvik 2019), meaning a non-conflictual arrangement of actors that aims to normalise social differences. Conceiving the welfare system as a network means that it works as a platform of exchanges instead of a field in which the divisions of contemporary society negotiate and rebalance (Donzelot 2008). The network metaphor opposes a new, horizontal order to the traditional, hierarchical vision of the relationship between the State and the society: a horizontal "flat space" (Sennett 2006) in which differences, as well as power, blur into a plurality of initiatives of cooperation between actors (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) to face the complexity and multidimensionality of contemporary social issues and the inevitable lack of comprehensive social protection. This vision justifies the growing investment in third sector organisations within the welfare provision, with the aim of switching costs and responsibility of social protection from State to society. Concerning this reorganisation, power becomes less recognisable as a target of social conflict, normalising both the uneven relationships and the public actor's retrenchment in dealing with them.

Within this critical framework, the forms of collective action have also changed. The strengthening of national migration policies has reinforced the exclusionary effect of welfare conditionality, preventing elements of the resident population from accessing both national and local social aid. The notion of "destitution", frequently describing those excluded from national aid

due to their juridical status, such as refugees and asylum seekers (Keßler and Schöpf 2010), today refers to the condition of many migrants and low-income populations living in urban areas. Together with other defective features, juridical misrecognition has become a common condition among most deprived groups, preventing their full access to welfare provision; therefore, destitution refers to a mix of conditions of extreme income or consumption poverty, together with "social marginalization, failures of collective rights, 'individualization' and being bereft of power" (Harriss-White 2005, 881).

Since the 2000s, there has been a significant expansion of civic and volunteering initiatives in Italy (Biorcio and Vitale 2016) to face this retrenchment of the welfare state. Both grassroots movements and third sector organisations throughout Europe have turned their repertoires of action into initiatives aimed at directly supporting the social and economic inclusion of the most disenfranchised populations (Moulaert, Swyngedouw, Martinelli, and Gonzalez 2010), as well as providing community facilities and services that are no longer supplied by the Public Administration (Evers and Ewert 2015). These collective initiatives promoted by different subjects have been studied from different perspectives – from local committees to voluntary groups, from grassroots movements to civic activism. All these studies refer to a new practice-based "cycle of participation" (Cognetti 2014), less characterised by contentious or deliberative practices and more by initiatives of "direct social action".

DSAs are forms of collective action that "do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders (…) but instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself" (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 369). It is thus a pragmatic form of collective mobilisation – less identity-based and strongly linked to everyday experiences of people and communities. As described by the Bang's "everyday maker" (Bang 2005), DSAs produce "project-oriented" identities, often refusing stable and explicit political affiliation to engage people – as well as organisations – in specific, time-limited initiatives, in response to the urgency to take charge of everyday issues.

During periods of economic crisis and political distrust, as seen in recent decades, the diffusion of DSAs has marked a new phase of participation. The practical experience becomes central in redefining the forms of collaboration and mobilisation (Vitale 2007) and territorial membership (Pacchi 2020). From the perspective of social movements, DSA has become a strategic tool to challenge the enduring processes of social disintegration within the neoliberal transformation of the economy and reactivating political participation in a phase of movement latency (Zamponi 2019). At the same time, DSA has been employed by a wider set of actors than by those with only a background in protest: NGOs, third sector organisations, and local committees well-rooted in local contexts have engaged in DSAs to provide essential services to the inhabitants, transform public or collective spaces, or promote alternative practices of urban life. These emerging urban actors develop "productive modes of activation" (Vitale 2007), in the sense that they produce "public goods and social goods from below" (Donolo 2005), weaving multiple relationships and contributing to the enlargement of the public sphere (Pacchi 2020). When dealing with ineffectiveness and exclusionary outcomes of public policies, these collective actions conform as processes of micro-political participation (Cefai 2007), enacted to influence local policies and institutions, making the power visible and addressable (Melucci 1985).

These collective initiatives also express a constitutive link with the territory, such as the neighbourhood, through which they redefine the meanings and the forms of the collective action (Mannarini 2004; Pacchi 2020). They define new, broader practice-based and territorially-placed identities (Zamponi 2019), which merge personal relationships with the formation of interest groups (Fareri 2009). After years of locality and territorial membership seeming to have lost its consistency (Rainie and Wellman 2012), these practices have reaffirmed the importance of the networks of relationships intersecting in proximity, defining multiple individual and collective drives to action (Cellamare and Cognetti 2007).

Third sector organisations engaging in DSAs have assumed a relevant role in welfare reorganisation, shifting the territorial development from long term objectives of community empowerment to short term issue-based initiatives (Gilchrist 2004). These initiatives stand in the ambiguity of the network-shaped forms of local welfare provision, developing "blended" forms of collective actions (Bakker, Denters, Oude Vrielink, and Klok 2012) in which non-profit organisations, citizens and public authorities cooperate and exchange resources.

The pandemic highlighted DSAs regarding the many responses developed by civil society during the emergency (Rodriguez 2020; South, Stansfield, Amlôt, and Weston 2020). This debate once again confirms the efficiency of the "ephemeral organisations" (Lanzara 1993) emerging from DSAs, regarding the limits of the institutional initiative, as well as their political value as actions dealing with significant, social inequalities from the local level (Moulaert *et al*. 2010). However, many of these bottom-up initiatives stopped with the easing of the restrictions. As the participation of social actors in the development of the welfare state should strengthen the capacity of local governments to know and effectively respond to citizens' needs, it is worth questioning DSAs as forms of intermediation with public institutions developed in a hybrid domain between participation and representation.

3. The emergency food provision in Milan between institutional initiatives and civic action

In Milan, network-shaped forms of governance have developed more than anywhere else in Italy. The city government has historically enhanced experimenting with practices more than imposing models of action (Pais, Vitale, and Polizzi 2019), with a particular focus on civil society. This approach to welfare provision is rooted in the tradition of solidarity developed in the city since the beginning of the twentieth century (Tognetti Bordogna and Sironi 2013). This political and cultural environment has facilitated the professionalisation of the many voluntaristic experiences of social assistance born since the 1970s (Biorcio and Vitale 2016), including them increasingly in the management of the local welfare system. During the 1990s, the centre-right wing administrations promoted an intense devolution to private actors, enlarging all the organisations entitled to the provision of local services. At the same time, Fondazione Cariplo[2] has keenly supported the substitutive role of the third sector in welfare provision, encouraging non-profit actors to develop an entrepreneurial approach in the light of progressively retrenching public resources. Hence, the city of Milan has become a pioneering experience in Italy in outsourcing public services (Benassi 2019).

In the last decade, the Municipality of Milan has given more space to the participation of local actors in all levels of urban government (Pasqui 2018), also addressing the many initiatives of civic activism autonomously developed in the previous years. This new interest in the activation of civil society has emerged together with a new idea of networking in marginal, urban areas (Urbanit 2017). While the city has registered positive growth in competitiveness in recent years, social polarisation has also increased. Therefore, the city has encouraged a new wave of territorial civic action to redefine the approaches and the tools for dealing with socio-spatial inequalities.

In this framework of sound integration between public administration and civil society, several initiatives of social support developed during the first wave of the Covid-19 emergency (February-May 2020). As the emergency unfolded, the national government and the local institutions launched initiatives of economic support in favour of the population. However, many citizens suffered from

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[2] Fondazione Cariplo is one of the most important bank foundations in Italy. It is mainly active in the territory of the Lombardy Region.

economic difficulties related to the loss of income and the delays in government payments, as well as for struggling to access local health centres and other public services via online platforms. Despite the institutional packages, many cities in Italy registered an increasing demand for food emergency solutions both from people in poverty and from non-self-sufficient individuals, such as elderly people (Tarra, Mazzocchi, and Marino 2020). From March to May 2020, the Municipality of Milan organised a massive door-to-door system of food provision to support the most vulnerable inhabitants. Before the emergency, food aids were managed by voluntary organisations and charities through soup kitchens and by local parishes distributing food parcels to people in poverty coming to the churches. Only a minority of citizens receive food at home from public and private organisations providing home-care services. In order to limit the diffusion of Covid-19, in winter 2020, all the voluntary services of meals and food distribution closed, leaving many people without a daily food supply. In order to guarantee access to food aid during the lockdown, the public administration, supported by Fondazione Cariplo, organised a temporary food distribution system around the whole city. This system was managed by the Municipal Food Policy Office, the Department of Social Services, and the collaboration of local non-profit organisations.

The distribution started in March. The Department of Social Services selected the recipients through its own lists of the beneficiaries of public social assistance services. At the same time, citizens in need could contact the Coronavirus Operative Centre, a call centre helping people to receive home assistance. Moreover, the Municipality invited non-profit organisations and charities involved in food provision or in community-based services throughout the city to indicate other people to include in the emergency food aid list. Since March16th 2020, food, mainly collected by the Red Cross, was stored in food hubs opened in the nine suburban districts of the city. Non-profit organisations also engaged in this food distribution with their employees and volunteers due to the collaboration between the Municipality and Fondazione Cariplo. In 2018, Fondazione Cariplo, collaborating with other private foundations and the Municipality of Milan, had launched a funding programme called "QuBì"[3] to support disadvantaged families living in 23 deprived neighbourhoods of Milan. This initiative funded services and actions to tackle urban poverty through the activation of community-based networks. Within this programme, a focal point was the accessibility to food. Therefore, when the pandemic struck, Fondazione Cariplo allowed local organisations engaging in the QuBì programme to participate in municipal food distribution, using the resources allocated by the foundation. Numerous volunteers, social workers, and municipal employees packed and delivered weekly food parcels to hundreds of people from March to May 2020.

Despite the broad network of organisations involved in the initiatives, the Municipality did not establish any tool of co-management and co-monitoring in this phase. When the food supply was running low in May, the Municipality reduced the distribution to a two-week basis. Moreover, it decided to stop home delivery: only non-autonomous people could benefit from home delivery, while the majority of the families had to come to the food hubs by themselves, sometimes far from their homes. The municipal distribution stopped on May 25th, even though many people were still suffering from the lockdown's economic effects and without any prospect of income during the summer. Despite the intense collaboration, the dialogue between the public administration and the non-profit sector was almost defunct, and local organisations were left alone in facing the increasing demand for assistance. After the lockdown phase, the Municipality concentrated its efforts on allocating shopping tickets through online requests submitted directly by citizens themselves. However, many people could not benefit from this measure either because there were insufficient tickets or because of the access requirements, which excluded, for example, those lacking a residence permit in the city. In this way, the most vulnerable populations remained invisible to the institutional action.

At the same time, private organisations promoted different support initiatives: Caritas Ambrosiana – the local catholic organisation – promoted its own fund to support regular workers without

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[3] https://ricettaqubi.it

compensation;[4] a group of NGOs collaborated with grassroots organisations in delivering food parcels in agreement with the Municipality; community-based initiatives spread throughout the city. These different food assistance circuits developed with very little or no coordination between the actors.

4. Direct social action to face the pandemic. The Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund

Giambellino Lorenteggio is a historic working-class neighbourhood on the southwestern border of Milan, of about 45,000 inhabitants, with a high percentage of immigrants concentrated in the public housing stock. Due to recent urban transformations, the population has been changing, and the district is now rather fragmented, with middle-class families and professionals living in private blocks and low-income, very fragile households living in the public buildings. The public estate suffers from strong decay. Many apartments were left empty for a long time, and they became occupied by families in need, thus further increasing the deprivation and stigmatisation of this part of the neighbourhood. Due to its conditions, the public housing blocks have been the main target of civil society's actions and claims.

The neighbourhood contains several organisations active in supporting the inhabitants with very different identities and competences. Most are social cooperatives that have solid relationships with the Municipality, providing the majority of the neighbourhood services as administration's contractors. Among them, there are some pioneering initiatives in the field of education and inclusion of marginal groups, such as those promoted by Comunità del Giambellino, one of the most relevant actors in the neighbourhood and the only cooperative in Milan that has developed all its projects and services within the same neighbourhood. Over the decades, the many initiatives and projects promoted by this network have produced a recognisable approach to social assistance based on the principles of community development and organising. This approach has deeply encouraged cooperation among the different organisations of the neighbourhood, and the development of a broad and active network of volunteers and inhabitants supporting professional social work. The Catholic organisations are also well rooted in the area. Four parishes support the elderly living alone and the families through educational activities and facilities open to the whole community. Recently, all these organisations have addressed mainly the needs of migrant families and second-generation youths, without losing their reference to the established tradition of community social work, but also influencing the practices and narratives of the newly established actors in the neighbourhood, including some cultural associations. Moreover, critical living conditions and the rise of poverty after the economic crisis of 2008 have pushed organisations of national and international relevance to establish initiatives (such as the NGOs Save the Children and Emergency and the Pellegrini foundation that opened a canteen for people in need) to counter the economic deprivation of inhabitants.

In recent years, cries for the regeneration of the public housing stock have profoundly influenced the forms of collective action in the neighbourhood, as well as the structure of the relationships between local organisations. Since 2009, the historical network of social cooperatives has started a community development process to respond to the lack of public intervention. This initiative, supported by private funding, led to the constitution of the community-based association "Laboratorio di Quartiere Giambellino Lorenteggio". The association, activated in the neighbourhood mainly through social and cultural activities promoting the direct participation of the inhabitants in their management, aimed to develop their skills and reinforce the relationships with the most marginalised social segments of the neighbourhood, such as immigrants, young people, and the inhabitants of precarious dwellings. In recent years, the association has gathered together a broad network of local

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[4] www.fondofamiglialavoro.it

organisations and informal groups, contributing to the development of this project. Moreover, thanks to the presence of many volunteers that were - and are - also professional social workers in local non-profit organisations, the association has been recognised as a mediator between inhabitants, private organisations, and public institutions.

In 2014, a collective mobilisation against the demolition of the public housing estate marked a change in the structure of the local network, as well as in the relationships with public institutions. After the collaboration with the Municipality in defining the guidelines of the regeneration plan for the estate, local organisations remained excluded from its management (Ranzini 2018). Together with the local trade unions, some gathered around the Laboratorio di Quartiere and developed a more critical attitude towards the Municipality and its policies and a more contentious repertoire of actions to defend the interests of its inhabitants. Others retracted into a fully subsidiary role without questioning public decisions and distancing themselves. Despite this conflict, in 2018 Laboratorio di Quartiere has assumed the role of coordinator in the QuBì programme by Fondazione Cariplo, representing the whole neighbourhood network.

When the pandemic emerged, approximately 600 households were included in the municipal food distribution,[5] suffering from the dramatic side-effects of the lockdown and isolated through a lack of access to the internet and to devices to communicate with local public services. However, there were still several people in extreme deprivation who were not in receipt of any institutional aid: after a few weeks of earning no money, these families used up all their savings, and were unable to buy essential supplies. These families had lived in complete isolation and informality, often in very precarious conditions, and had no knowledge of how and where to ask for help. Facing this situation, the community-based association Laboratorio di Quartiere launched its campaign "Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund", to collect donations for buying and distributing food, medicines, technological devices, and childcare supplies for those excluded from the institutional measures.

Even though the participation in the QuBì programme and in the municipal food aid policy has marked a step towards the reconstruction of the network, the previous conflicts and the different cultures of the organisations deeply affected the territorial relationship; not all the local organisations supported the community fund: some doubted the success of the initiative, while others criticised its autonomist position. At the same time, the sense of urgency in activating against the emergency pushed the involvement of new organisations, which had remained more peripheral in the local network in previous years. Eventually, the campaign was joined by one of the four parishes; three well-established social cooperatives providing educational and social assistance to families; two cultural associations run by active inhabitants; the two local tenant unions; and the local trade union.[6]

As the crowdfunding campaign began, the Community Fund was publicised in the neighbourhood and via social networks, mailing lists and phone chats. In a matter of days, not only did the donations increase but so did the requests for economic support. Inhabitants in need contacted the association via its Facebook page, mainly asking for food aids. This initiative revealed the presence, in the neighbourhood, of a very disadvantaged population also living in the private estates and surviving in complete informality. It included people – mainly from the Philippines – working as housekeepers in private houses and offices often without a work contract. During the lockdown, the majority of these families lost their income, but they could not access any aid from the national government or the local authority because of their irregular juridical status, the lack of regular work contracts, or because they

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[5] Source: semestral monitoring of QuBì project in Giambellino Lorenteggio, July 2020.

[6] The promoters of the fund are: Parrocchia San Leonardo Murialdo (local parish), Comunità Nuova (non-profit organisation), Comunità del Giambellino (non-profit organisation), Azione Solidale (non-profit organisation), Dynamoscopio (cultural association), Istituto Pedagogico della Resistenza (cultural association), Sunia Giambellino (tenants union), Sicet Giambellino (tenants union) and CGIL Giambellino (trade union).

did not have legal residence in the city. They lived in private buildings, sharing the apartments with other families, sometimes without even knowing them, and operating without formal rent contracts or residency. These people never had contact with the local community or the neighbourhood services before the pandemic, even if they were in need. Unlike the low-income families living in the public housing stock, who were already involved in education and food aid services, and well known to local social workers, these families in private buildings had always relied on their ethnic networks when in difficulty. Lacking social ties and connections with local aid groups, these isolated people found only online social networks as a tool to ask for help from their neighbours.

From March to July 2020, the Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund collected €116,591, mainly from private donors and partners' direct contributions. The organisations used most of this money (€99,120) to purchase shopping tickets to buy food and supplies at the supermarket or buy laptops and tablets for children to participate in online lessons (€13,658). The rest of the money was used to buy medicines and pay utility bills.[7] No money was used to pay the for work of the professionals involved. This money supported 554 households (more than 2,000 inhabitants)[8]: 87% were families with an average of two or three children. Of these, 15% were single parents with two or more children. 83% of the families receiving economic support were of foreign origin.[9]None were entitled to access institutional support. These data have shown the existence in the neighbourhood of a "new underclass" (Ranci 2012), with an evident ethnic connotation and high levels of spatial segregation, whose already precarious living conditions were shocked by the Covid-19 emergency. Despite their long-term presence in the city, these people remained invisible through their economic condition. Even those who owned a regular residence permit were forced into a condition of informality by their low income, which deeply affected their agency, preventing them from being recognised as full citizens even during the emergency.

5. From direct social action to network organisation: a hybrid and adaptive system of welfare provision

Besides its relevant outputs – i.e. the high number of people assisted and the considerable amount of money collected in a very short time – the Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund constitutes an interesting case study of direct social action that developed into a new organisational form. It has linked political action and territorial membership, allowing a group of third sector organisations to experiment with a new way of activating in the neighbourhood.

The recognition of the exclusionary effects of the public aid system in a time of global emergency constituted the precondition to engaging in a common initiative of direct solidarity boosting the capacity of actors to cooperate in a very different way from the institutional governance of the public welfare provision. The pandemic reinforced the urgency to act and amplified their perception of the divisive effects of a public welfare system in which they were engaged as contractors of the public administration. Within these premises, the organisations broke their professional routines, redefining their action protocols and experiencing organisational innovations (Lanzara 1993).

Firstly, the money collected was formally donated to the association Laboratorio di Quartiere, which was assigned as the administrative manager of the fund. This choice avoided the creation of a new management structure, which would have taken time to be implemented, but, at the same time,

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[7] Detailed data are available at: www.laboratoriodiquartieregiambellinolorenteggio.org (website in Italian).

[8] Author's elaboration on personal data extracted by the database of Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund, on November 7th 2020.

[9] The data refers to families with at least one non-Italian parent.

the organisations agreed to gather under the identity of the Laboratorio di Quartiere taking a step back from their own.[10] This collective identity enabled all the organisations to be representatives of the inhabitants.

However, all the partners actively participated in the development of the fund, composing and subscribing to a common regulation to spend the money. It formalised the shared responsibility and public accountability of the initiative, defining the ethical principles, the specific goals, the fields of intervention, and the target beneficiaries of the donations: people living in the neighbourhood and not accessing any institutional aid. The regulation did not refer to specific requirements or conditions to access the fund. It established a common set of values that framed and justified the legitimacy of the initiative. At the same time, it allowed the procedure of the inhabitants' engagement to adapt to the specificity of each case in order to avoid the risk of conditionality and develop a more responsive system in the emergency.

Secondly, the agreement on the principles (rather than the procedures) enhanced the autonomy of the organisations. Each partner was in charge of engaging its own members to contact as many people as possible, using the same digital form to register applicants' personal data – the family size, current income, juridical status, working and housing conditions – and their difficulties during the pandemic –the presence of Covid-19 or other health issues, lack of internet access or devices, debts. After making a preliminary evaluation of the general condition of each family and its needs, the interviewers transmitted the information to the organisation responsible for the specific support. The local trade union assisted people for free in their requests for unemployment benefits or other institutional subsidies; the two tenant unions assisted those with difficulties in paying the housing rent, seeking public contributions; and local volunteers and inhabitants supported other families in their search for new household appliances and furniture. Three members of different organisations were delegated to grant the donations of food and supplies to each family.

The partners integrated the fund management into their ordinary activities of social assistance and support, thus producing a very detailed case management system never before witnessed in the neighbourhood. Therefore, the minute network of relationships involving every partner became the strategic resource of the system to contact inhabitants and evaluate their specific situations. At the same time, the fund connected with a broader network of private initiatives of emergency aid, such as the QuBì programme, providing childcare supplies and devices for online schooling and other local initiatives for food distribution and economic support. Through these multiple interactions, the community fund became the centre of a territorial solidarity network coordinating the different support initiatives during the emergency, developing a "blended" form of action (Bakker *et al.* 2012) capable of recomposing the fragmentation of the private and public initiatives.

Then, the organisations facilitated the direct communication and participation of all the people involved in the management of the cases, without distinction between professional and volunteering organisations. Volunteers and social workers contacted the claimants in the same way, telephoning the people individually and examining their social and economic situation through in-depth interviews. In doing so, they had the opportunity to deepen their relationship with the inhabitants, becoming more conscious of the multiple depriving effects of the pandemic in the neighbourhood. In this way, the relationship between social workers and beneficiaries developed as a process of mutual exchange of knowledge in which beneficiaries were actively involved. This exchange boosted new "learning loops" (Argyris and Schön 1996) in the organisations questioning the relationship between them and the environment (Weick 1995) and providing new ingredients to understand it.

This form of collective organisation highlighted the development of a collective mobilisation that assumed the characteristics of "network organization" (Butera 1999): a horizontal structure in which all the partners were autonomous in dealing with beneficiaries while delegating some functions to others, on the basis of their specific competences. At the same time, they agreed on a common set of

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[10] It is also worth noting that the project was publicised principally through the association's website and Facebook page.

values and principles that allowed them to develop mutual trust and reciprocity and share information and resources to support marginalised people in a comprehensive and non-specialised way, enhancing the social and relational capital of the people involved. Even if every organisation was free to interact with the others without fixed governance, they recognised themselves as a collective entity committed to the same territory.

This process developed a rapid and effective response during the lockdown, overcoming the conditionality of the public welfare provision. At the same time, it established new rules for inter-organisational collaboration and networking, based on mutual trust, cooperation and reciprocity, instead of competitiveness and individuality. While addressing the emergency, this experience of collective activation developed into a new – though informal – organisational structure that questioned the consolidated forms of networking among third sector organisations.

Therefore, collective mobilisation is the outcome of a cultural process (Melucci 1985), in the sense that the Emergency Community Fund ignited a collective "process of sensemaking" (Weick 1995), which transformed the work of people and organisations in the neighbourhood. The governance of the fund facilitated the autonomous activation of the organisations, enhancing their sensitivity towards the environment. The experience of the social workers and volunteers in participating in community fund management shaped their perceptions. Within the process of collective mobilisation, the partners had the opportunity to exchange directly with the beneficiaries; then, discussing what they were learning during the action itself, they "negotiated" (Weick 1995) both the meanings of their action and the expectations towards the future of this initiative.

These common learnings represented the organising process (Schein 1985) that did not exist before the action but emerged during the collective mobilisation, shaping practices, discourses and public narratives. Although these learnings are partially tacit (Wenger 2006), through direct action organisations with very different backgrounds realised a common initiative overcoming the divisive effects of networking, which often affect the relationships between third sector organisations. Conversely, they cooperated in this process despite their differences – from churches to radical left-wing trade unions, from volunteer associations to professional non-profit organisations – using the same tools, information, knowledge, and economic and human resources. They developed an open network where different competencies and sensitivities could interact and recognise themselves as part of a common ground. They engaged in a "common learning of [neighbourhood] membership" (Crosta 1998) which has not only informed the perceptions and actions of organisations and people but also represented a legacy of this collective activation. The collaboration between professional organisations and those with a manifest political engagement in the neighbourhood – such as tenants unions and voluntary associations – developed a "hybrid" (Minkoff 2002) network organisation that jointly pursues advocacy and action through a very adaptive system of case management. This hybrid adaptive network organisation developed based on deep mutual trust between the organisations and agreement on their political commitment in the neighbourhood, established by participating in the development of the common regulation of the fund.

6. Conclusions. Direct social action in welfare provision between organisational learning and political mobilisation

Today, urban peripheries face profound exclusion because of a twofold thrust produced in the dismantling of the post-war welfare state. On one side is the decay of the built environment, as well as the community facilities of the "welfare space" (Tosi and Munarin 2014); on the other side is the process of social segregation determined by directly and indirectly discriminatory policies (Oberti and Préteceille 2017). Together with the broadening of conditionality in welfare provision, these

spatial dynamics strongly affect the deprived people's capacity for self-activation within the local welfare system, making them "invisible".

As the welfare provision has become increasingly privatised, sectorial, and conditional, third sector organisations often develop competitive relationships with each other, in order to engage with public institutions, at the expense of the quality and inclusiveness of their services. Therefore, even when they cooperate, third sector organisations and social workers risk missing a shared vision about the territory and its development.

During the first lockdown in Milan, a network of different organisations active in the Giambellino Lorenteggio neighbourhood engaged in a collective initiative to directly contrast the exclusionary effects of public welfare policies during the pandemic. Through the constitution of a community fund, they developed a comprehensive and inclusive system of social support, promoting the exchange of knowledge between the organisations and the territory. This initiative was shaped as an emerging network organisation that enhanced the territorial social capital of the partners as a strategic resource for the success of the initiative. As the beneficiaries expressed different needs and problems caused by the exclusion from public aids, volunteers and social workers dealt with people's situations holistically, regardless of the specific competence of the organisation they belonged to. This experience questioned local welfare from a very close perspective, assessing its inclusiveness and generating a collective reflection on social justice. The participation in the community fund boosted a process of collective learning that had an impact both on the procedures of welfare provision and the actors' perceptions and action frames regarding the constraints of the local welfare system in which they were engaged.

In conclusion, this case highlights some specific directions for research on direct social action concerning third sector organisations in light of the retrenchment of public welfare provision.

Firstly, within the reorganisation of public welfare, local communities have assumed a strategic role in providing services of a different kind (Bakker *et al.* 2012). However, the process of "subsidiarization" (Kazepov 2008) at the local level has, in many cases, reduced networking to formal procedures of exchanges rather than substantive processes of knowledge production and cooperation for policy innovation. This process has intensively weakened the capacity of third sector organisations to foster the innovation of policies from the local perspective. At the same time, DSAs, while allowing unrecognised segments of citizens access to social aid, are at risk of remaining "irrelevant" (Pacchi 2020) or of developing residual systems of social support in which the most marginalised members of society are restricted, validating, instead of contrasting, a divisive approach to social citizenship (Tosi 2017).

The case discussed above highlights that when direct social action supports the encounter of collective, actors with different "styles of participation" (Lichterman 2006) and organisational cultures, it can lead to processes of sensemaking that impact on the procedures of social services provision, as well as the rationalities and cultures of organisations. In this case, direct social action has given rise to a hybrid network of organisations, in which the autonomy of the various subjects preserves their identities and repertoires of action, enhancing knowledge exchange and mutual learning. The outcome of this encounter has been "generative" (Lanzara 1993) of a new territorial action both in the direction of the beneficiaries – more empowering and effective – and towards public institutions – questioning consolidated relationships of exchange. The hybridisation of practices, allowing different ways of engaging in the same collective action, preserves the diversity and prevents them from reducing the exchange among third sector organisations to a contract, linking service provision and advocacy. At the same time, as welfare provision has become the new frontier of political mobilisation and activism (Moulaert *et al.* 2010), these emerging community-based networks suggest a strategic use of the third sector's professionality and territorial social capital to legitimise new political claims, facing the latency of political commitment of citizens and organisations. DSA

thus becomes the driver of a new political action for those organisations involved in institutional governance, providing them with a new space of autonomy.

DSA offers an interesting perspective for studying the outcomes and prospects of political mobilisations as emerging forms of organisation that develop in the proximity of territorial relations and redefine the actors' territorial membership. Concerning third sector actors, this perspective is particularly interesting for addressing the specific conditions in which territorial collaboration and collective action support the process of organisational innovation within the reorganisation of local welfare policies.

At the neighbourhood level, DSA assumes the role of a political process supporting cooperation among very different actors, leading to collective re-elaboration of contemporary social issues and giving new meanings to actors' territorial embedding. Due to the multiplicity of actors, resources, and specific goals, these hyperlocal initiatives of DSA often support the formation of "unexpected actors and subjects [arising] from the crisis of the Fordist society" (Bertell and De Vita 2013:45), whose forms of collaboration and networking among different organisations need to be further investigated in light of the complexity of local welfare regimes.

In this case, the sense of urgency generated by the pandemic has pushed forward this process, allowing professional organisations to activate out of the boundaries of their subsidiary role in the public welfare system and experience a more autonomous territorial action and a more inclusive approach to social aid. This process appears to be connected to a new awareness of the exclusionary effects of public welfare policies, which generated a "moral shock" (Cefai 2007) among the local actors, pushing them to affirm their commitment – as individuals and organisations – to the improvement of the social conditions of inhabitants; then, making their territorial engagement more political.

However, while it is "ephemeral" (Lanzara 1993), this process of collective action has marked a meaningful experience in the long history of this local network, and it could be a reference for future collective initiatives. Furthermore, while it has developed an efficient case management tool to monitor the conditions of the inhabitants, this experience has also consolidated new relationships and collaborative practices, which reflect a common history of mutual commitment between the partners. This network has shaped as a "community of practice" (Wenger 2006), a historical and social process of collaboration that gives new meaning to the membership of actors in the neighbourhood. These are "learnings" (Argyris and Schön 1996) for both the organisations and the local workers that will inform how they interact and address the neighbourhood issues in the future. Therefore, this experience should be considered a step in a longer process of the evolving network: after intense collaboration, the common learnings remain (Ripamonti 2018). Thanks to the results achieved, the Emergency Community Fund marked a meaningful experience that survived in different conditions and nurtured mutual trust and learning processes between different organisations. Refusing the "contractual" approach to networking, which forces non-profit organisations to compete in the "social market" of public welfare provision (De Leonardis 2002), this experience produced a diffuse sense of commitment towards the neighbourhood, as well as a sense of responsibility in maintaining the social infrastructure of mutual cooperation, nurturing a critical approach towards the limits of the public welfare provision. Engaging in such an experience could thus pave the way for new forms of inclusive organisational communities to affirm the value of the collective construction of the territory. In this sense, the Giambellino Lorenteggio Emergency Community Fund has validated a new shared "organisational culture" (Schein 1985) and, indirectly, a new organisations' positioning in the neighbourhood.

Secondly, while this process has enhanced the political role of a group of third sector organisations, it has also reinforced the local community bonds (Gilchrist 2004). In deprived contexts, such as urban

peripheries, inhabitants face social and economic exclusion and political misrecognition. Community networks mixing professional and voluntary work, direct action, and political claim replace the missing voice of those inhabitants not assumed as targets by public policies and removed by public narratives.

As this collective effort of adapting welfare provision is adequate and responsive to the needs of claimants, the relationship with the beneficiaries has become the engine of a new agency for marginalised subjects, reframing the concept of "activation" into a more empowering perspective of social aid. Community-based networking has been conceived not as an instrument of exchange between organisations and beneficiaries but as a political tool supporting collective mobilisation. All the people involved in the fund – from those managing the cases to delivering supplies, as well as the 300+ donors – have participated in the social and political recognition of those "destituted" by the public welfare system, claiming against the exclusionary effects of welfare policy as a public issue. These forms of representation pursued by third sector organisations via DSA, while supporting the transition from social to political activation (Bosi and Zamponi 2019), suggest a new and significant political role of the territory in the public welfare system. The neighbourhood is no longer a place in which public actors delegate to community solidarity the treatment of emerging social issues but a space in which social citizenship can be reshaped by the collective efforts of enlarging public welfare access. The case of the community fund highlights the network's capacity to directly provide emergency aids while combining different initiatives, resources, and actors facing the multiple divisive thrusts contained in the fragmentation of welfare provision.

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