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Evaluating local food security policy: what is the impact?

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This is very preliminary
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1. Introduction

Food poverty is an urgent issue impacting countless individuals and families worldwide. In 2023, nearly 30% of the global population, equivalent to 2.4 billion people, did not have constant access to food, with around 900 million individuals facing severe food insecurity (World Economic Forum, 2023¹). The global pandemic, coupled with conflicts and climate-related crises, further exacerbated these conditions, pushing an additional 122 million people into hunger since 2019 (WHO, 2023²). This situation is a call to action. It underscores the insufficiencies of current welfare systems in addressing food poverty and the need for more comprehensive and innovative solutions.

This paper performs a realist review of food banks managing markets where people in need can freely decide what products to get. With respect to the more traditional delivery of pre-packaged food parcels, market-like food banks are thought to increase dignity and autonomy, and better align food provision with beneficiaries' dietary needs and preferences (Holweg & Lienbacher, 2011). Since they mainly source surplus food from manufacturers and supermarkets, these programmes are also praised with reducing food waste (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). The aim of the paper is to elaborate a programme theory showing why and how these food aid programmes can work. It does so through a review of the literature and a preliminary case study of a market-like food distribution programme in Italy.

The article proceeds as follows. After presenting the methodology, the third section briefly reviews the literature on food bank programmes, providing a background on the transition from traditional food package delivery to evolved models such as social supermarkets. The section also presents the case of Solidarity Emporiums in Italy. The fourth section reviews how food bank programmes have been evaluated in the literature. The review focuses on key outcomes such as food security, the overall well-being of beneficiaries, social impacts and food bank operations. The fifth section delves into the development of a programme theory; it outlines three causal pathways that lead to food security, social inclusion and non-food needs. The section discusses design and context conditions affecting these three causal processes. Finally, the conclusions elaborate on how to use this programme theory to inform the design and evaluation of these programmes.

2. Materials and method

This study aims to build a preliminary programme theory to inform the future impact and process evaluation of Italian emporiums. The research combines a 'realist review' and one in-depth case study.

The realist review is a technique for collecting and synthesizing secondary evidence with an explanatory focus; it aims at exploring, testing, and refining the underlying mechanisms explaining why and how an intervention is supposed to work and building a multi-step theory of the programme ((Pawson, 2002; Pawson et al., 2004)). This technique is part of the theory-driven approach to policy evaluation ((Chen & Rossi, 1983; Weiss, 1997)) and has previously been applied to food policy interventions ((Busetti, 2019)). The programme theory typically takes the form of a chain of decision points, a causal process going from interventions to results: 'If we implement a food pantry, then subject x will respond like this, subject y will do this given condition z, and this will ultimately bring about outcome O'. At each stage, the intervention could work as expected or 'misfire,' depending on the reaction of the subjects involved and the contextual features of its

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/08/food-security-hunger-global/>

² <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-07-2023-122-million-more-people-pushed-into-hunger-since-2019-due-to-multiple-crises--reveals-un-report>

implementation. The realist review will 'populate' this programme theory with empirical findings from existing studies and evaluate 'what works for whom, in what circumstances, in what respects, and how' ((Pawson et al., 2004)).

The review draws from a diverse range of sources: academic literature, legislative statutes, press releases, reports from third-sector associations, statements from relevant actors, and emporium websites. A breakdown of the process of data collection for the academic literature is provided in Figure 1. Scopus and Google Scholar were used as search engines to conduct the search using the following words: 'food bank', 'food pantry', 'social supermarket', and 'emporiums', combining the search with 'policy' and 'impact'. In the end, 63 articles were read in full.

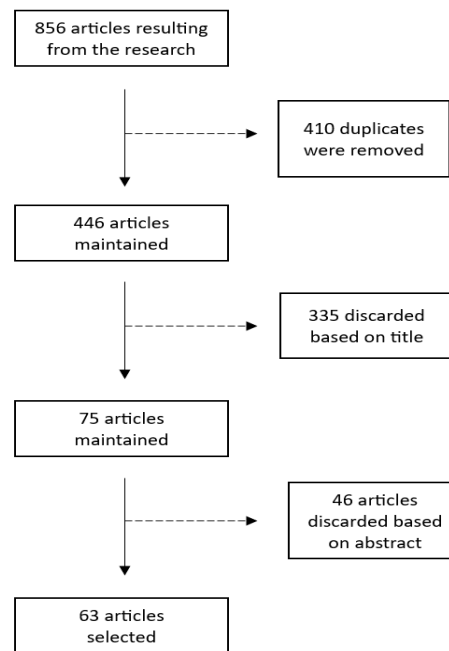


Figure 1 Literature review process

The second source of data comes from an in-depth case study of one emporium in the Abruzzo region, in central Italy. This part of the research is in progress; we have conducted the first four interviews with programme managers and volunteers and we will proceed by collecting existing data on beneficiaries, data on food distribution, and (possibly) surveying the beneficiaries. The case study is not necessary to conduct a realist review, but these interviews were used to complement the synthesis of secondary sources with primary data about informal procedures, contextual factors and actual implementation processes. The interviews were also used to make the emporium managers discuss the hypothesised programme theory. The interviews were conducted both in person and online and lasted an average of one hour. The interviews were semi-structured based on the outline reported in Appendix A; they were recorded, transcribed and analysed by all three authors independently.

In practice, we proceeded by working iteratively from hypotheses to data collection. First, we conducted a preliminary review of food bank design features (section 3) and their impacts (see section 4) and then proceeded by formulating hypotheses of how, why and under what conditions, food banks can produce the purported impacts. Then, we reviewed secondary evidence and conduct the interviews, discussing design and implementation details and barriers, qualifications to the hypotheses, and contextual conditions.

3. From food banks to social supermarkets

Food banks are charitable organisations that collect and distribute food to individuals and families facing economic hardship. They operate by sourcing food from a variety of donors, including supermarkets, agricultural producers, food manufacturers, and private individuals. This food is then distributed directly to beneficiaries or through partner organisations such as soup kitchens and shelters. Access to food banks is typically based on certain eligibility criteria, often requiring proof of low income or other forms of social assistance ((V. Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005)). This targeted approach helps ensure that benefits are directed towards those who need them most (Holweg & Lienbacher, 2011).

The distribution methods used by food banks can vary. Many provide pre-packaged food parcels containing staple items like pasta, rice, beans, dairy products, and canned goods, designed to last for a specified period. In some instances, food banks also offer prepared meals, especially through associated soup kitchens or meal distribution programmes. These pre-packaged parcels ensure a standardized supply of basic nutritional needs to all recipients (Riches, 2018), but they do not give beneficiaries a choice of what they prefer. This often runs into challenges of ethnicity, specific nutritional exigencies, food intolerances, and taste, highlighting the complexity of meeting diverse dietary needs.

In response to these limitations, some food banks have adopted a more flexible model, allowing beneficiaries to select their own food items from a variety of available options. This innovative approach not only enhances the dignity and autonomy of the beneficiaries but also helps reduce food waste by ensuring that individuals take only what they need and will use (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). This shift marks an evolution towards a more personalised and holistic approach to food assistance.

Starting in the 2000s, social supermarkets (SSMs) represent a significant step in this evolution offering a supermarket-like experience to people in need. A social supermarket is a type of retail outlet designed to support individuals and families experiencing food insecurity by providing access to affordable or free food. Unlike traditional food banks, social supermarkets function like traditional grocery stores, where customers can choose and purchase products at significantly reduced prices, promoting self-reliance while preserving the dignity of individuals. In Austria, for instance, where this model originated, goods are sold at prices up to 70% lower than in conventional stores, significantly reducing the cost burden on financially disadvantaged households (Holweg et al., 2016; Schneider & Eriksson, 2020). This model helps preserve shoppers' dignity by fostering a sense of normalcy and autonomy in the shopping experience. Social supermarkets typically source products from donated surplus stock from traditional supermarkets, local producers, and farmers, thus also addressing the problem of food waste (Holweg & Lienbacher, 2011; Mulrooney et al., 2023; Stettin et al., 2022). Many social supermarkets extend beyond food retail, offering services such as job training, financial advice, and social work services, thereby functioning as community hubs that address various aspects of social exclusion (Mulrooney et al., 2023). Further, the business model often focuses on reducing waste and promoting sustainable consumption patterns, aligning with increasing consumer demand for sustainability. Social supermarkets play a crucial role in reducing food waste by redistributing high-quality surplus food that would otherwise be discarded. This model not only provides low-cost food for low-income families but also promotes sustainable consumption practices. By integrating additional services such as cooking classes and financial counselling, SSMs address food insecurity while educating consumers on resource management, contributing to a circular and sustainable economy (Berri & Toma, 2023).

The Italian model: Solidarity Emporiums

Italy has seen the emergence of a national model of food pantries with the diffusion of Solidarity Emporiums—a hybrid intervention between traditional food banks and SSMs. Emporiums are conceived as the evolution of former programmes of food pack distribution. With respect to these latter, they provide choice to beneficiaries, who can come to the emporium and shop for their preferred food from the ones in stock.

Emporiums are often established through collaborations with institutions and municipalities, which provide the necessary spaces for setting up the market. According to Caritas Italiana (2018), of the 177 emporiums surveyed in Italy, more than half (52%) are managed by associations (mostly volunteer organisations); 35% by religious organisations, and 10% are managed by social cooperatives. In some cases, public administrations have decided to step in and contribute to emporiums in a proper regional social policy. For instance, the Veneto Region, together with the management bodies of emporiums and the Regional Food Bank developed guidelines for managing and opening new solidarity emporiums. Further, the region established a central coordination unit and regular meetings, enhancing resource efficiency and best practice sharing. In 2017, a protocol with Federdistribuzione (the Italian Association of Food Distributors) boosted food surplus donations, improving supplies to the emporiums and reducing waste. This regional policy contributed to increasing the network from 7 emporiums in 2015 to 28 by 2021.³

Most social supermarkets rely primarily on donations and volunteers for their activities. In some exceptional cases, such as the Emporio Solidale of Cassino⁴, the social aspect is further emphasized by employing young people with disabilities. Although the reliance on volunteers underscores the community nature of these initiatives, operational capacity is often limited by the reduced number of volunteers and the limited number (if any) of full-time workers provided with specific professional capacities (Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018; Sedlmeier et al., 2019). As confirmed in the international literature (Filimonau & Gherbin, 2017; Holweg et al., 2010), equipment for storing and transporting food is equally limited, characterised by inadequate transportation and storage facilities, which hinders the capacity to effectively manage food quality and safety as well as reduce food waste.

Access to services is managed through various methods. Typically, emporiums are connected with municipal social services that refer potential beneficiaries depending on need and residence and track those who become users to prevent double-dipping from multiple associations. Emporiums can use income verification methods, such as the Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator (ISEE), manage access through public calls, and also use in-depth interviews. Some emporiums also require referrals from organisations like Caritas to ensure that aid reaches the most needy individuals. According to the Caritas report (2018), in most cases in Italy (in 164 emporiums, about 93% of respondents), the purchase of goods at emporiums is free, often facilitated through a points card that must be spent within a certain period. Only eight emporiums reported allowing for symbolic contributions, proportional to available income and/or related to the type of (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018).

Nearly all emporiums offer food and other basic necessities to their beneficiaries, such as personal hygiene items, baby products, and sometimes household products. To supply the emporiums of a varied stock, the involvement of businesses is essential, including large-scale retail, mini-markets, bakery networks, local market vendors, and tertiary sector companies collaborating in various ways (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018). Some more advanced

³ <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/sociale/rete-degli-empori-della-solidarieta>

⁴ <https://www.retsolidali.it/emporio-solidale-di-cassino-per-le-famiglie-in-difficolta/>

models, such as RATA.TU in Canavese⁵ and the Viterbo emporium⁶, offer fresh fruits and vegetables sourced from social garden initiatives. This integration ensures the availability of fresh produce, which is often lacking in typical food pantries.

Finally, solidarity emporiums also provide services such as educational and support services, including tax assistance, job search assistance, listening points, specialist medical visits, language courses, and support for minors.

4. What is the impact? A review

The impact of food banks has been assessed from various perspectives. Primarily, evaluators have focused on *food security* (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Gundersen et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2013; Rizvi et al., 2021; Sengul Orgut et al., 2016; V. Tarasuk et al., 2020), nutritional intake and the overall impact on dietary health (Bertmann et al., 2021; Campbell et al., 2009; Cotugna et al., 1994; Mulrooney et al., 2023; Oldroyd et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2018; Wetherill et al., 2019). Second, the *well-being* of beneficiaries in terms of their stigma, emotions, and appreciation have been examined (Middleton et al., 2018; van der Horst et al., 2014). Third, *Social impact assessments* were also performed (Ranuzzini & Gallo, 2020). Fourth, researchers have evaluated *food bank operations* to determine which models are most respondent to beneficiaries' needs (Capodistrias et al., 2022; Loopstra et al., 2019; V. Tarasuk et al., 2014; V. Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005), also looking at efficiency and effectiveness (González-Torre & Coque, 2016).

Food security

Food security is defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO (2009) *Declaration of Summit on Food Security*, s.d.). Martin and Colantonio (2013) studied the impact of the “Freshplace” food pantry intervention on *food security*, *self-sufficiency*, and *fruit and vegetable consumption* using a randomised controlled trial (one group attending a traditional food pantry and the other attending Freshplace). “Freshplace” provides a free choice of food and a monthly meeting with a project manager trained in motivational interviewing and targeted referrals to community services. The authors employed the validated USDA Food Security Module (18 questions assessing the household's experiences with food insufficiency), and the Block Food Frequency Screener (seven questions about the usual intake of fruits and vegetables). Results showed that after one year of trial, people attending Freshplace experienced a higher level of food security, and increased their perceived self-sufficiency and their fruit and vegetable intake. Based on these results, the authors suggested that “Freshplace” can be a model for other food pantries to promote food security rather than short-term assistance (providing food packs).

Similarly, the study by Bertmann et al. (2021) examined *fruit and vegetable consumption* during the COVID-19 pandemic based on a statewide survey (N=600). The study investigated variables such as fruit and vegetable intake among food-insecure households and the use of food banks during the pandemic period. The results indicate that food banks may support food access and fruit and vegetable intake for at-risk populations during emergencies.

Cotugna et al. (1994) assessed the *potential nutritional impact* of a food bank program. For one month, each food item available was evaluated based on the US Department of Agriculture's Food

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/p/Emporio-RataTu-100081771782215/>

⁶ <https://www.emporiosolidaleviterbo.it/>

Guide Pyramid. From this analysis, the authors calculated the number of people who could potentially be provided with the minimum recommended servings per day for each food group. The highest amount of food distributed was in the Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta Group; the food bank distributed the least amount of the Milk, Yogurt, and Cheese Group. With this study authors intended to provide an outcome evaluation measure to be used by food banks to demonstrate to contributors the potential impact of the program.

Mulrooney et al., (2023) evaluated two Social Supermarkets through questionnaires about healthy eating using Likert rating scales. They analyzed 111 questionnaires and held 25 interviews. Almost two-thirds of the respondents agreed that SSMs helped them prepare healthy meals including trying healthier food. Although the SSMs were perceived to enhance nutritional choice and dignity, the authors concluded that users are not fully reliant on SSMs for their household needs, since consistent food supply cannot be guaranteed.

Well-being

Thompson et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study on the *health and well-being challenges* associated with food poverty and food banking through an ethnographic investigation. They explored the perspectives of food bank workers and users, investigating how the food banking system intersects with state agencies. According to the authors, the well-being challenges lived by those who experience food poverty are both direct and indirect. Direct challenges are linked with the capacity to maintain a good diet and the prolonged conditions of food choice restriction. Indirect challenges stem from personal vulnerability and worsening health conditions.

An ethnographic approach was also conducted in the study of van der Horst et al., (2014). The authors addressed how food, social status as well as interactions at the food bank induce *emotions* in receivers, such as shame, gratitude and anger. The paper is based on a qualitative study at a food bank in the Netherlands and includes in-depth interviews with 17 receivers of food assistance, direct observations and interviews with volunteers. Of all the emotions that were expressed during the interviews, shame appeared as the most prominent.

Social impact

Ranuzzini & Gallo (2020) analyzed the Italian Emporium of Solidarity model, both regarding food poverty and the social conditions of beneficiaries and whether it generates wider social benefits. Regarding this latter, they develop a cost-benefit model. They consider benefits to the target group of poor recipients, to volunteers, donors and other charities involved in the programme; they then evaluate whether these benefits exceed both financial and societal costs (the price of goods, public funding, administrative costs, private donations, volunteers' costs, recipients' costs, other costs). Results are based on survey data collected by the authors and existing administrative data. Results suggest that benefits are at least equal to cost, in terms of resource usage, determining a positive return to the actors involved. In one estimation, one euro invested in the emporium had a more than double return in the same year.

In their analysis, Ranuzzini & Gallo (2020) consider the benefit of the emporium higher if all food distributed is recovered from waste. Food waste recovery is typically stressed in evaluating the social benefit of food banks and social supermarkets (Lambie-Mumford, 2013).

Food bank operations

Loopstra et al. (2019) used descriptive statistics to analyze how often and when food banks are open to the public. They examined the relationships between operational characteristics and the volume of use through regression analyses. Where food banks had fewer distribution centres and operating hours, the volume of food bank usage was lower. Disability and unemployment rates were all

associated with higher volume of usage; however, the relationship between disability and food bank use was modified by the accessibility of food banks and the number of operating hours.

Tarasuk et al. (2014) studied food bank characteristics, including the presence of paid staff, the number of volunteers, the proportion of food distributed that was donated, and whether the food bank had funding or engaged in fundraising activities. These features were related to efforts to meet needs, assessed in terms of the number of people helped per month, the frequency of aid to individual clients, whether client needs were considered in scheduling services, and whether assistance was provided on demand. The authors conducted telephone interviews with charities. They concluded that food banks only achieved equilibrium between supply and demand when they contained demand through restrictions on client access. When access to assistance was less restricted, the likelihood of food banks running out of food and implementing measures to ration remaining supplies and restrict access increased significantly. In another study, Tarasuk et al. (2005) examined the food bank's dependency on the retail system through an ethnographic study using a "critical realist" perspective (Danermark et al., 2019). Findings suggested that reliance on industry donations equates food assistance with what the corporate sector cannot retail. Moreover, the intertwining of food bank work with corporate needs may hamper more effective responses to problems of hunger and food insecurity. Food bank practitioners are suggested to diversify their food supplies and develop ways of deciding which food to accept and which not, linking the decision to the real interests of the final beneficiaries.

Finally, Capodistrias et al. (2022) analyzed how the COVID-19 crisis impacted the functioning of European food banks. Compared to 2019, in 2020 food banks were able to redistribute a significantly higher amount of food despite numerous social restrictions and other challenges associated with the pandemic. Operational innovations and new relations with other firms and/or public organizations proved to be particularly important, enabling food banks to respond quickly and effectively to the emergency. The authors conclude that food banks should not only rely on the donation of surplus food but also actively pursue new collaborations to ensure access to a diverse and stable supply of food.

5. A programme theory for Solidarity Emporiums

This section presents the emporium's programme theory and discusses the main results of the review. Figure 2 represents how emporiums could work; each box is analysed in a dedicated subsection (5.1-5.6). This is part of the product of the review and case study, but we put it here at the start to guide readers into the discussion.

The programme theory starts with people accessing the emporium for aid (5.1). Then, we traced three paths for helping beneficiaries. First, the emporium can attend to the basic function of providing enough healthy food in a dignified way (Outcome 1). This entails that managers ensure an adequate supply of food (5.2) and that beneficiaries have a quality shopping experience (5.3). Second, the emporium can be a tool for social inclusion (Outcome 2). With respect to just delivering food parcels, the emporium is a physical place and can offer beneficiaries an opportunity for social encounters (5.4). Finally, the emporium can also provide people with more comprehensive help beyond food security (Outcome 3). Being a physical place where beneficiaries come repeatedly, the staff can work as a radar for further needs (5.5.) and the emporium provides a platform for referring people to further services or developing new interventions (5.6).

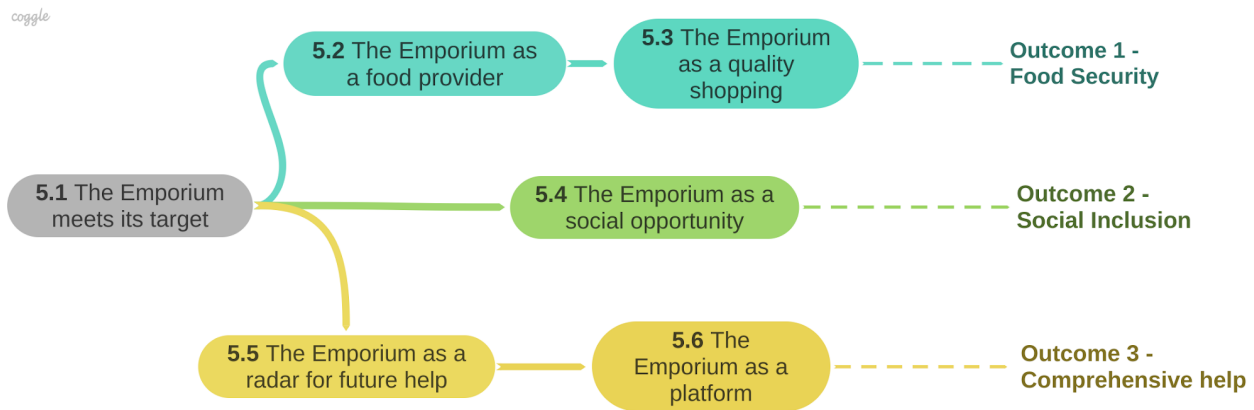


Figure 2 A programme theory for Solidarity Emporiums

5.1. The emporium meets its target

The ability of emporiums to capture and meet potential demand is possibly a significant strength with respect to other systems of food aid.

In Italy, beneficiaries are commonly identified and referred by municipalities and social workers, who then forward the referral to the emporium for further assistance. In some cases, beneficiaries can go directly to the emporium for help, and volunteers will report to the municipal social services and help the person get the necessary papers. This organisation is unique with respect to other forms of food aid, such as charity canteens, which require no connection with public service, leaving the beneficiary unknown to social services. This link also avoids redundancy in help (i.e. beneficiaries going to several emporiums) and may lay the basis for integrating food aid into a more comprehensive system of social support (see M2 and M3).

Having a physical place where people can go for help can also offer another advantage in terms of visibility, integration in the neighbourhood and reaching potential beneficiaries. In Austria and Germany, food pantries are often open for a few hours a week or continuously, and people can enter and ask for information, potentially becoming beneficiaries of the service (Schneider et al., 2015). The dissemination of services is also facilitated by word-of-mouth and community outreach initiatives. Volunteers and community leaders play an essential role in spreading awareness about the availability and benefits of the pantry, ensuring that the information reaches those who need it most. This grassroots approach is effective in building trust and encouraging individuals to seek help without feeling ashamed (Greenaway, 2023).

Depending on the specific set-up (especially, how much it resembles a standard supermarket) a pantry model mimicking supermarkets can reach individuals who might not engage with traditional food banks due to stigma or other barriers (Ranta et al., 2024). In our case study, having the emporium also offering non-food aid services can be an additional path to reaching out to beneficiaries: fragile people come for a course or other services and discover they are entitled to accessing food aid. This is the case, for instance, of a national project by the Italian Red Cross to support people paying their bills: beneficiaries came to the emporium for their bills and then became beneficiaries, asking municipalities for their emporium card (see also below in 5.2).

Finally, a fundamental mismatch between the rationale of the service and its target population is worth mentioning. In principle, food banks, pantries and SSMs are thought to provide emergency aid for a limited time. Food aid cannot by itself help people become autonomous and come out of their situation of need. It is necessarily an emergency aid that supports people to fulfil their right to

food. In the case of Italy, the connection with social services restricts access to a period (from 6 months to one year), precisely with the assumption that they are supposed to get out of the situation of need. In reality, most beneficiaries are chronic users, such as elderly people with minimum pensions who clearly cannot afford their routine expenses (e.g. rent and bills) and who will never raise their income. Black et al. (2020) analyzed clustered data on the frequency, duration and consistency of service usage of food banks in Canada from 1992 to 2017 and highlighted that 9% of members engaged in longer-term episodic or ongoing usage over several years, accounting for 65% of all visits. This completely changes the ratio of the intervention from emergency support to a stable public service, although offered by voluntary associations.

On the other hand, temporary users—for example, those who are employable and normally self-sufficient but are leaving a temporary crisis, such as having lost their job—are the best bet for food pantries; they are the ones for whom the emporium can provide the service as intended. However, in our interviews, these subjects are also the ones more subject to reactions of stigma from contacting and using the emporium.

5.2. The emporium as a food provider

Food banks, social supermarkets, and food pantries play a critical role in ensuring that families, particularly the vulnerable ones, have access to nutritious meals despite financial constraints (Munialo & Mellor, 2024). However, substantial evidence highlights the limitations of these systems in fulfilling the right to food and their excessive reliance on a charity-based approach (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Loopstra et al., 2019). Food banks often fail to meet the actual needs of those facing food insecurity, as demonstrated by studies showing high rates of severe food insecurity among users, even with regular access, such as the study by Tarasuk and Beaton (V. S. Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999). Other research indicates that the quantity and quality of distributed food often do not meet nutritional standards (Simmet et al., 2018).

These problems are inherent in a charitable system of food aid that is mostly dependent on donations and food surplus. In 2019, associates of the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA) recovered food from the following sources: 70% from food donations, 17% from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, 7% from national and EU market withdrawals and 6% from food drives (FEBA 2020⁷). Similarly, in Italy, the supply system for Solidarity Emporiums primarily relies on three sources: food stocks from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), donations from retailers and producers, and food drives in supermarkets. The centrality of food surplus and donations necessarily reverses standard market interactions. While supermarkets adjust their food supply and buy food in response to consumers' demands, food pantries cannot properly determine what to have on their shelves. They are highly constrained by the variability of these sources—what is available as donation and surplus food at a particular moment. In this respect, maintaining enough food of a sufficient variety and good nutritional quality requires a notable management effort, balancing the relative gaps of different supply streams. Let us consider their pros and cons in turn as summarized in Table 1.

The FEAD supports EU countries' actions to provide food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived. This includes food, clothing and other essential items for personal use. In 2014-2020 FEAD amounted to 3.8 billion euros, then increased because of COVID-19⁸. FEAD support in Italy amounted to €988,312,100, significantly impacting the total goods distributed under Measures 1 (food poverty) and 4 (material deprivation of the homeless and other fragile people), with

⁷ https://www.eurofoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/IT_FEBA_FEAD_Implementation_Report_PRINT.pdf

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1089>

percentages of 51.4% and 48%, respectively (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022⁹). FEAD food derives from special food purchases and is generally limited to a few categories of staple food, such as pasta, rice, flour, canned products (fish, vegetables, fruits), oil, tea or coffee (FEBA 2022¹⁰).

Table 1 Supply streams: Pros and Cons

SUPPLY STREAMS	PROS	CONS
FEAD	- Large quantities - Supply of staple food	- Tight reporting regulations - Stigmatizing packaging
DONATIONS	- Large quantities - Common packaging - Tailored donation of deficient products	- Limited shelf-life - Donation dumping
FOOD DRIVES	- Common packaging - Tailored donation of deficient products - Organized directly by the pantry	- Items are individually registered - Different items on the shelves - Product imbalance in quantities - Low cost-effectiveness

FEAD products can provide the food bank with a basic supply of food products, coming in large batches with equal shelf life. However, the administrative burden of managing FEAD products according to EU rules can be substantial and not possible for individual SSMs based only on the help of volunteers. In addition, even when produced by renowned brands, FEAD products have special packaging and are visibly marked with EU symbols and labels such as ‘free food-aid’ and ‘not marketable’, which can reduce the perceived value of this food and stigmatize beneficiaries in social settings. More importantly, although relatively stable, FEAD can be subject to significant disruption. In our conversation with the Emporium manager, he declared that 70% of their food supply comes from FEAD products. In this context, they recently experienced an unexpected three-month stop of supplies due to administrative reasons. With 447 users relying on the emporium, this disruption produced a notable emergency and required an incredible effort to ensure alternative sources of food supply covering what is normally the largest stock of food available at the emporium.

Food donations from producers and retailers are crucial for ensuring a steady supply to the pantry. A 2018 study by Caritas in Italy found that 123 social pantries sourced products from both large and small channels, and 140 collaborated with private producers. Third-sector entities, including food banks, were involved in 176 pantries. About 1,200 businesses participate in pantry activities, showing significant engagement in these initiatives (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018). In the UK, food primarily comes from Fareshare, leading to seasonal and weekly variations in the quantity and selection of food (Ranta et al., 2024). These networks provide better service than basic food packages and help offset FEAD deficiencies.

Donations to the emporium depend highly on contextual conditions, in particular on the ability of managers to maintain relationships with local donors or be part of a network of national donations

⁹ <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/europa-e-fondi-europei/fead-relazione-di-attuazione-2022>

¹⁰ https://www.eurofoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2022_Implementation_Report_FEAD_REACT_ESF_interactive.pdf

(this latter situation is relevant for recovering national and EU market withdrawals). Donations can be an important resource since managers may directly ask producers and retailers to donate specific products that the emporium hardly finds elsewhere. In this respect, contributions from small local merchants are known to be vital for maintaining product availability for SSMs (Holweg & Lienbacher, 2011). As a further advantage, donations come from brands one would normally find in standard supermarkets. However, they can also be hard to manage; they typically entail large quantities of the same products and often have a limited shelf-life. Indeed, donation dumping—receiving so much or weird products that sorting and delivering capacity is overloaded—can impose major management costs on the pantry, even shifting disposal costs from donors to the food bank. In our case study, the interviewees recalled receiving large batches of nearly-expired products from a soft drink brand and an impractical donation of 59 megaphones (!) from a digital warehouse, which hardly met beneficiaries' needs and could not be sold given donation regulations.

In addition, the SSM can also directly organize food drives in local supermarkets. Food drives are charity initiatives in which volunteers stay outside supermarkets and ask shoppers to buy and then donate non-perishable food items. Food drives are highly labour-intensive for the pantry. Each item is different: different brand, size, and shelf life. This means that not only the donated food must be transported and stored, but it also needs to be registered individually item by item. Normally, the pantry provides shoppers with a list of the items needed; in this respect, it can be a fundamental tool for complementing other supply streams and stocking items that are difficult to get by other means. As testified in our interviews, however, at the end of the day, there can be a great disparity in the amounts collected for the different items in the buying list, making it crucial to rely on the goodwill of supermarkets for exchanging the most numerous items for those less numerous. Further, since items are individually shopped, the same product will be from different brands, creating a variety on the shelves that does not communicate a supermarket layout. Finally, as an overall remark, consider that food drives entail shoppers buying at consumers' prices; had they donated in money instead of in kind, the pantry could have bought food at retail prices and precisely the food they are in need of.

Finally, a special difficulty regards perishable food. Emporiums typically manage to provide fresh products, fruits and vegetables, cooked foods, and frozen items (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018), but this kind of food requires significant equipment, special logistics and professional management that are more suitable for retailer-led SSMs (Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018) and large-scale retail (Risso, 2012). On the other hand, establishing relationships with local producers can overcome logistical challenges by sourcing surplus produce from local farmers and allotments or collaborating with local gleaning networks (Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018). In Italy, handling perishable products requires compliance with hygiene protocols such as cold chain regulations, which are highly demanding for food pantries, which normally lack the necessary equipment, resources and staff. In this respect, public funding to support logistics activities is needed. Accordingly, for instance, the Emilia Romagna Region partly funded the regional network of solidarity emporiums by supporting several functions, including logistics, communication and partnerships with large-scale organized distribution aimed at sourcing goods for distribution (DGR no. 11952/2018) (Empori Solidali Emilia Romagna, 2024¹¹).

Further, the Italian law against food waste (law 166/2016, or Gadda Law) states that food sector operators can freely donate food even after the minimum durability (i.e., the "best before" date). This law is meant to support activities like food pantries which could virtually access a greater stock of food and distribute it even past the best-before date. However, in our interviews, the Emporium

¹¹ <https://www.emporisolidaliemiliaromagna.it/>

managers declared that there is great ambiguity on how long after the best-before date the food can be distributed, creating a mismatch between national regulations against food waste and local sanitary controls. Consequently, food past the best-before date is normally discarded for fear of inspections by NAS—a police unit tasked with food adulteration and hygiene regulation.

This discussion of the different streams clarifies that supply is the main driver of food provision. The different supply streams are highly constrained by factors that have little to do with the main goals of food pantries: providing enough, nutritious, varied and healthy food to be freely chosen by people in need. Instead, food available at the moment and its shelf-life drive what is on offer in the pantry. There is a huge management effort on the part of pantry managers to balance these supply streams, overcome their limits, and achieve the best possible aid for fragile people. In Italian emporiums, food does not have a price in euros but a value expressed by points. In theory, beneficiaries can freely shop and can virtually use all the points they have as they feel like it, even to buy multiple items of the same product. However, for several products, there are limits to how many items you can take, and this limit directly depends on availability. As recollected in our interviews, sometimes the pantry completely lacks some products; other times it only has a limited quantity and needs to restrict the number of items to ensure everybody can have some; still, other times the pantry has just received a big donation with short shelf-life and it not only removes the limits but even incentivises taking more items by either lowering the value in points or directly giving items for free. As put by one emporium manager, in these situations: ‘avoiding waste is a priority over beneficiaries’ choice’.

5.3. *The Emporium as a quality shop*

This section provides preliminary data to be complemented with a future survey of beneficiaries. We investigate the use of the emporium and its outcomes: whether shopping is an effective aid and if using the emporium is easy and non-stigmatising.

Beneficiaries access the emporiums using cards charged with a number of points based on household members. In our case study, the aid is only an integration of the monthly need for food. For instance, using all points for 5 people provides an equivalent of 124€ or 70 equivalent meals, which corresponds to about 25% of their monthly needs.¹²

Further, in our case study, the emporium relies heavily on FEAD products; the shopping is significantly limited to staple non-perishable food, such as rice, pasta, canned vegetables, and tuna.

Being an integrative aid both in quantity and quality, beneficiaries need to balance what to shop at the emporium and what to buy elsewhere. According to our interviews, the point system complicates these calculations. On the one hand, having ‘prices’ expressed in points makes it hard to understand the value of the food on the shelves. On the other, as mentioned in the previous section, food prices are highly variable depending on their availability. One week a cheap item can cost many points because the emporium is in shortage and it would be comparatively much cheaper to buy it in a standard supermarket. At the same time, a costly product (such as olive oil or Parmigiano Reggiano) can be on offer with items given for free. These subtleties require help from the emporium staff, who—in our case study—welcome beneficiaries and assist them in choosing their groceries and managing their credit. Granted, this support by volunteers allows people to make

$$|Equivalent\ meals| = \frac{\sum products' kcal}{n. of products} \bigg/ Average\ meal\ kcal^*$$

the most out of the emporium by shopping for the most convenient food. However, it significantly reduces the control people have over their shopping.

In some cases, this effort to guide beneficiaries also aims to ensure healthy diets. The literature testifies that access to affordable food does not automatically lead to healthy eating for a nutritious diet (Ver Ploeg, 2010). Depending on the specificity of the service, emporiums also include education on proper food consumption, also by defining discounts and promotions to encourage the consumption of legumes, vegetables and healthy food among the available goods (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018). These incentives can help mitigate the impact of limited income by diverting shopping towards cheaper but healthier food: "...the social supermarket helped me be a bit more healthy again by sort of ... they've got beans, sort of vegetables, it helps me gain the ideas of cooking more vegetarian meals which are obviously cheaper because that's what they provide and sometimes recipes and things as well" (Louise, divorced, two dependents, working, struggling with household costs) (Mulrooney et al., 2023).

Social shame and stigma represent one of the most significant issues in food aid interventions. Stigma can decrease overall well-being, create discomfort and—as testified in our interviews—produce adverse reactions when shopping at the emporium. There are two ways to reduce stigma: the first is to make the pantry look like a regular supermarket, and the second is to minimise the exposure of beneficiaries.

In the first strategy, efforts are made to make the emporium less stigmatising. The possibility of choosing what food to shop for and a physical layout and interactions similar to a standard supermarket may help improve beneficiaries' experience. In the literature, social supermarkets are described as allowing for a dignified retail experience (Booth et al., 2018; Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018). In this context, the user is treated as a customer rather than a "recipient" of a food bank. In a study conducted by Ranta et al. (2024), those who transitioned from a traditional food bank to an SSM praised the friendly atmosphere and the attitude of the staff and volunteers, the social aspects of the experience, the ability to sit and chat, the choice of desired items, and the opportunity to contribute. In striving for a standard shopping experience, in the UK, a form of payment, albeit symbolic, has also been experimented with. This formula offers the opportunity to maintain dignity by avoiding the one-sided nature of support and reducing the stigma arising from charity and donation (Ranta et al., 2024).

Table 2 A checklist for food bank stigma

Supermarket layout	☐	Warehouse layout	☐
Open to all people	☐	Restricted access	☐
Free shopping	☐	Shopping with staff	☐
Variety of food	☐	Staple food only	☐
Common brands/packaging	☐	Special brands / packaging	☐
Discounted price	☐	Free food	☐

Overall, stigma can be higher or lower depending on the specific model of pantry implemented (see Table 2). Although all emporiums offer the possibility of choosing food on the shelves, they can be placed on a continuum from minimal stigma (physically similar to a supermarket, open to all people, free shopping experience, variety of food, common brands and packaging, discounted prices) to

maximum stigma (similar to a warehouse, social service referral, shopping together with staff, limited variety, special brands and packaging, free food).

A different (complementary) strategy to reduce stigma is to limit the exposure of beneficiaries to both other users and people in the neighbourhood. These cautions try to limit social interactions to a minimum. Instead of having free entrance as in a supermarket, the pantry schedules individual appointments, having the beneficiaries do their shopping alone with the aid of staff. Additionally, efforts are made to prevent passersby from knowing who is inside the social supermarket by placing the entrance on a side street or in a secluded location (Ranta et al., 2024).

Finally, we investigate the user experience in terms of how easy it is to go shopping at the emporium. Although offering some flexibility, access to emporium services is often not continuous, neither in Italy nor in other countries. According to a report by Caritas in 2018, solidarity emporiums in Italy are mainly open on weekdays, with few openings on Saturdays. Most emporiums are open between Tuesday and Friday, and about 60% are open only 2 or 3 days a week. The emporiums provide a total of 1,860 hours of weekly opening, with nearly half of them open between 3 and 6 hours a week. This allows for greater flexibility than food package delivery and can enable better management of the food supplies available to beneficiaries (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018). However, it is still far away from a free shopping supermarket model.

Together with opening hours, one should consider whether beneficiaries are scheduled at specific times or can freely come to the emporium. If access is restricted, it can create logistic burdens on beneficiaries. In our case study, for instance, people access the emporium once a month. This schedule requires monthly heavy shopping which can be a burden for users, who are often without private cars. In both cases, opening hours and appointment schedules are again 'supply-driven': they depend on the limited capacity of a voluntary system that necessarily has limited staff and resources.

Finally, we inquired about the accessibility of the location of the pantry. SSMs are predominantly located in suburban areas, which are often characterised by lower population density and limited access to traditional retail outlets. This strategic placement is aimed at reaching those in need who reside in these less densely populated regions" (Holweg & Lienbacher, 2011, p. 410). In Italy, they normally serve multiple municipalities, hence logistics can be a barrier to users. Table 3 presents an accessibility indicator for a sample of 45 Italian emporiums located in regional capitals (or in the most populous or nearest cities when there is no emporium in the regional capital). N represents the number of emporiums in each respective city. The calculation is based on the Google Maps average travel time from the central train station to the various emporiums using public transport. The mean travel time to reach an emporium by public transportation is 24 minutes.

Table 3 Average time to reach emporiums from the central train station

Region	Cities	N. Emporiums	Average journey time (mins)
Abruzzo	Pescara & Teramo	2	20
Basilicata	Potenza	1	50 on foot*
Calabria	Reggio Calabria	1	22
Campania	Napoli	1	22
Emilia Romagna	Bologna	3	21
Friuli Venezia Giulia	Trieste	1	17
Lazio	Roma	6	28
Liguria	Genova	5	22
Lombardia	Milano	9	29
Marche	Ancona	1	20
Molise	Isernia	1	15
Piemonte	Torino	3	28
Puglia	Bari	1	35
Sardegna	Cagliari	1	20
Sicilia	Palermo	3	19
Toscana	Campi Bisenzio (FI)	1	45
Trentino Alto Adige	Tione di Trento (TN)	1	5
Umbria	Perugia	3	29
Valle d'Aosta	Aosta	1	21
Veneto	Venezia Mestre	1	14
Total		45	24 min

*no public transportation

5.4. The emporium as a social opportunity

Unlike simply receiving food packs, visiting the Emporium could serve as an incentive for self-activation. “Making their way to the Emporium means that people must wake up, take a shower, get dressed and come here. These actions by themselves presume a form of social activation!” (interview conducted with Emporium manager on May 22, 2024). Indeed, as the Emporium's manager reports, some people still do not come to the Emporium but prefer to receive food packs at home, either because of health problems or because they just prefer not to go out of their homes. Further, some beneficiaries come to the emporium but do not like to decide what to get and shop for; they would rather reduce interactions to a minimum and just collect their food pack (interview conducted with Emporium manager on May 22, 2024). These adverse reactions are typical of a target population mostly composed of subjects who are not employed, may have resistance to getting out of their homes and have long since reduced their social contacts. For these groups, such as elderly people, the Emporium could be a beneficial social opportunity and, in some cases, the only possible one. Building relationships, meeting new people, and spending time in a comfortable environment together can be effective means of empowering individuals.

However, in order to favour such social contacts, the food bank must evolve towards a comfortable and non-stigmatising place and include precise design features. We have already defined how pantries can induce less stigma (see Table 2); the less stigmatizing, the greater the possibility of experiencing the pantry as a place for social contact. Indeed, what should set the Emporium novelty apart from food packs is providing a space where individuals can establish social connections, not

necessarily limited to interactions with local volunteers. In this respect, models which overcome stigma by avoiding beneficiaries' exposure will limit the opportunity for social contact to staff only.

In some cases, dedicated areas and services for socialization are included to favour this process. Mulrooney et al (2023) reported that the opportunity to sit, have a hot drink and socialize with others was highly valued, for example, 76.6% and 77.5% respectively in their case studies agreed or strongly agreed that social elements of the social supermarket mattered to them. As one interviewed beneficiary effectively puts it: "I've been looking forward to going all week, not just because of the food you know it's, there's a couple of regulars there who I know ... [.] A couple of the staff always ask me how I'm doing and we have a chat. It's nice, it's friendly, so rather than dreading it, I actually look forward to it now, it's the only thing I've got to look forward to every week ... I've found that I've had very traumatic experiences with the foodbank in the past" (Daisy, SSM1; Single with disability and mental health problems, difficulty managing on benefits. Now volunteering with SSM) (Mulrooney et al., 2023). Accordingly, many interviewers from Emporiums in Italy report that they specifically favour socialization: "people do not come here only to shop food, but also to make friends". (Empori Solidali Emilia Romagna, 2024). Accordingly, in the emporiums in the Italian Region of Emilia Romagna, alongside the food market, most emporiums installed spaces for welcome, exchange, and mutual listening as essential relational assets for overcoming the loneliness often caused by various situations of poverty (Empori Solidali Emilia Romagna, 2024).

From these statements, we can identify a further design feature that is relevant for the Emporium as an opportunity for social contact: frequency of attendance. In the extract from Mulrooney et al. (2023), the interviewed woman states that going to the Emporium is the only thing she looks forward to every week, emphasizing that a certain frequency is necessary. As mentioned, in our case study, the frequency is set at only once a month, which is certainly not conducive to socializing. Other emporiums in Italy establish a freer shopping experience where people can come several times and do their shopping, mimicking what happens in a proper supermarket, although with limited opening times.

Concerning both frequency of attendance and the provision of a comfortable social setting, it is worth mentioning that—like what happens with food availability—supply and not demand is the main organizational driver. Emporiums can have more or less capacity in terms of funding and staff and then be more or less equipped to offer a social market that is less stigmatizing, socially comfortable, and everyday available.

Finally, in Italy, the staff is made primarily of volunteers and people in need can also be engaged in volunteering activities which can offer opportunities for social interaction and inclusion. 55% of the Emporia consulted by Caritas Italiana in its report (2018) states that they engage beneficiaries as volunteers. In three-quarters of cases, this involvement occurs within the facility, and in approximately 60% of cases, it also extends to other contexts. In addition to warehouse work, procurement of goods and setting up shelves, beneficiaries were involved in performing minor maintenance work or welcoming and assisting new beneficiaries (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018).

5.5. The emporium as a radar for further needs

Food pantries can work as a lookout for detecting social problems other than food insecurity. Two elements can help identify further needs of people coming to the pantry: welcome and data collection activities, and the capacity of staff to detect problems and build relationships in order to have users ask for additional help.

In the case of Italy, since access is almost always limited to certain categories, the staff register users on their first arrival and collect data on their situation. The access system is a distinctive feature of the Emporium model, which is guaranteed in almost 90% of Italian Emporia (Caritas, 2018). As Sforzi et al. (2022) report, the referral scheme allows Emporium volunteers to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of the person and possibly build a tailored support programme for them. As put by a volunteer from an emporium in Emilia Romagna: “First of all, we welcome people who approach the Emporium, they find a place where they can talk and build a path of empowerment towards autonomy. (Empori Solidali Emilia Romagna, 2024).

The initial interview allows the staff to gather a varied set of information that is added to the reports made by the municipal social services, possibly providing the Emporium with a broad picture of those seeking help. For example, the Italian Red Cross has developed some indicators of inequality based on a form presented to users at their first entrance to the Emporium. This form collects information beyond the simple economic statements requested by social services, inquiring about material deprivation and its urgency based on qualitative questions about daily life (i.e., housing conditions, technological device gaps, food insecurity, and the inability to be economically resilient to unforeseen expenditures). Thanks to the initial interview, volunteers can identify needs other than food security, such as alcoholism or gambling addictions.

A special example of the value of the initial access scheme for emporiums is the experience of Ferrara. The emporium developed an experimental programme named “Corona project” during the COVID-19 lockdown to welcome all families in need, although they were not previous users of the Emporium and not referred by social services. According to the website, for the project to be successful, there must be a demonstrated willingness to take personal initiative in a process of personal improvement and a strong motivation to reach individual goals of recovery (Empori Solidali Emilia Romagna, 2024). Volunteers conducted long interviews by phone with families seeking access to the Emporium in order to understand their needs in depth and support them when applying to the service. Thanks to additional donations, the “Corona Project” welcomed 201 families to the Emporium, about 39% of which were previously unknown to the social services. Also, thanks to the welcoming and support process, 53 families decided to formally enter the emporium and sign up for access after the experimental period of the project¹³.

A second path to making additional needs emerge regards the capacity of staff to observe people shopping at the emporium, develop a relation of trust, and identify their needs. We only have limited data on this process. During our case study, all interviewees recalled observing people with specific needs coming to the emporium, such as addictions, domestic violence, elderly or disabled people requiring help with activities of daily living. Indeed, depending on the frequency of attendance, emporiums are places where people come repeatedly, and this offers multiple opportunities for encounters, possibly more than what happens with municipal social services. This situation can give emporiums a vantage point of observation that is worth further research by investigating the capacity of staff to work as antennas of beneficiaries’ needs and possibly training towards increasing these skills.

5.6. The emporium as a platform for scaling up the aid

Volunteers and staff work to develop programs that help individuals transition out of poverty (Sforzi et al., 2022). Emporiums can respond to beneficiaries’ needs in two ways: either by communicating

¹³ <https://www.ilmantelloferrara.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Verso-un-Bilancio-di-Sostenibilit%C3%A0-2020-II-Mantello-Ferrara-web.pdf>.

with other institutions, such as municipal social services or other third-sector associations or by offering directly additional services and activities.

The first strategy is quite obvious and heavily depends on the context: whether associations and social services manage to build networks and work together. Emporiums are often collaborative endeavours. In Italy, only 18 out of the 178 emporiums analyzed by Caritas (2018) are openly promoted and managed by a single entity, while nearly all others feature broad involvement from volunteer organizations, social cooperatives, and parishes; data from Caritas (2018) counts the involvement of over 600 other partners from the third sector and about 100 parishes. However, managing the emporium collaboratively is different from collaborating to provide further help. In our case study, the emporium worked with the social service of 14 municipalities and acknowledged high variability in the response and collaboration with these different bodies. Further, interviewees recalled a known problem in social policy in Italy: the high turnover of staff, both regarding voluntary associations and the companies providing social workers to municipalities. These problems make it difficult to build durable relationships and establish treatment protocols for helping people collaboratively.

The second strategy regards the design of further services. It stresses an obvious but fundamental feature of the emporium: being a physical place for service delivery. The physical location is a trigger for the organizational development of the entity managing the emporium. In fact, it can be the opportunity to incorporate new functions and services that need a physical place to be implemented. On the one hand, the managing association can design new services and projects, counting on having already a location to host them. On the other hand, the emporium managers may apply to all national funding for social programmes where a dedicated physical location is required for implementation. As a physical place, the emporium triggers a mechanism of organizational developments, promotes the entrepreneurial mindset of the staff, and allows for scaling up the aid from food assistance to additional social programmes.

In Italy, the growing need to respond to increasing demands for material assistance other than food provisioning is common in the stories collected from emporiums. In 2017 alone, the 129 emporiums capable of providing this information out of the 178 emporiums analyzed helped 30,500 families, totalling nearly 105,000 people (*Caritas Italiana, CSVnet, Empori Solidali in Italia. Primo Rapporto.*, 2018). About 10% of the 193 Solidarity Emporiums analyzed focussed on what is termed "secondary activities" (Sforzi et al., 2022). Basic reception and listening services are provided by almost 90% of emporiums, but about 74% also provide other services such as job search support, financial management counseling, family therapy, legal protection and initial medical care (Caritas, 2018). Also, in the UK, SSMs offer additional programmes, such as life planning, self-confidence, positive thinking, and relationship building, as well as specialized support based on individual goals for career planning and business startup support (Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018). The guiding idea is to use food aid as a tool to build strong and resilient communities equipped; these initiatives aim not only to distribute food but also to support individuals in becoming agents of positive change within their communities (Saxena & Tornaghi, 2018).

In our case study, such a mechanism of scaling up food aid could be observed in the making. The emporium is a very recent development of the former distribution of food packs, and at present (June 2024), it only offers food aid. However, having a physical place explicitly pushed the managing association towards finding new ways to use the location, and in particular, planning new services. For instance, they are now launching a cooking course with a local chef to teach how to cook the food in the emporium. This course is meant both as an educational project and a tool for increasing social interactions. In the meantime, the emporium has already participated in national funding applications which required it to have a physical place to deliver the funded project. One example

is the ACT project funded by Banco dell'Energia (a charity foundation fighting energy poverty) and implemented in partnership with the Italian Red Cross between 2022 and 2023. The project helped 537 households pay 1623 utility bills and was implemented in the six cities which responded to the national call. Clearly, managing a solidarity emporium was certainly not a necessary condition to implement the project, but—as testified by the emporium managers—having that location available was an incentive to participate since they already had a suitable space to implement the project.

6. Conclusions

Figure 3 represents the programme theory including the results discussed in the sections above: the conditions that can make the emporium work as expected or that can negatively affect its results. These conditions are categorised into context (not part of the programme and non-modifiable in the short term) and design (factors that can be purposely included in the programme, hence comprising implementation details).

To take only a couple of examples to explain the logic, in the case of 5.1, the population of different users determines how the emporium can work; for instance, whether it will work as an emergency intervention tailored to short-term users (as designed) or as the only available support for chronic users. Concerning the distinction between context and design, while, for instance, in the case of 5.2 there are clear contextual conditions which the emporium cannot change not even in the long-term (e.g., legal barriers), in the case of 5.3 all relevant conditions can potentially be designed into the programme.

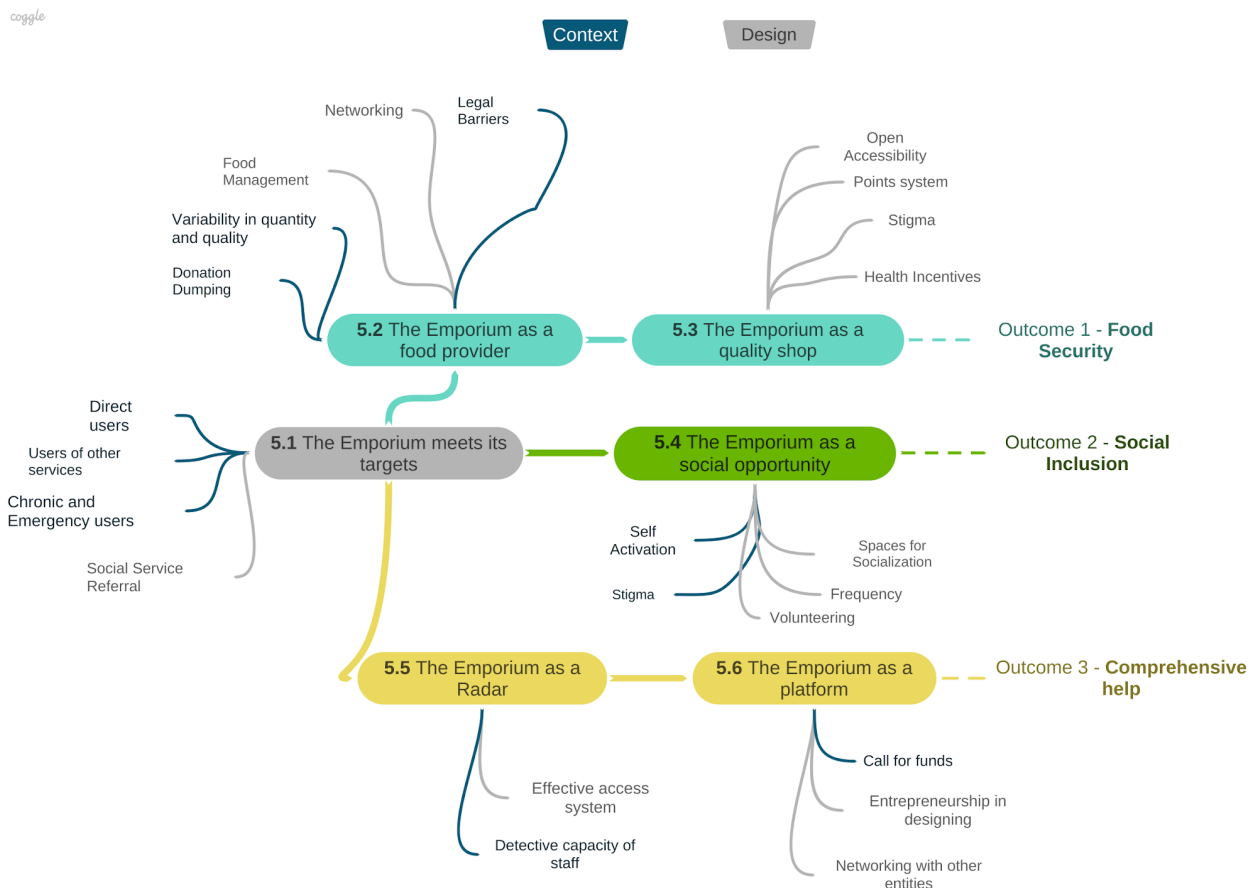


Figure 3 Design and context conditions for a working emporium

This representation of the programme theory is useful to understand more in-depth under what conditions the Emporium can work either as a food provider, a quality shop, a social opportunity, a radar or a platform. Further, it can be a tool for informing future evaluations and the design and implementation of market-like food aid.

The first point worth noticing is that, contrary to part of the literature on social impact, the programme theory does not consider food waste prevention as an outcome. Our analysis highlights the dependence of food charities on food waste. This dependency conflicts with the primary social aim of helping people in need. Food waste negatively affects the variety, quality, and shelf-life of food delivered and hampers the value of the aid. It is not a useful function but a constraint that makes social policy dependent on what is available for free as a subproduct of the food supply chain.

The second point is that the elaboration of the programme theory allowed us to highlight two additional outcomes of a market-like food bank (social inclusion and comprehensive help) which are not explicitly mentioned in the literature. These two highlight a fundamental comparative advantage with respect to other food-aid interventions such as food pack delivery or food stamps.

Further, by highlighting the context and design conditions underlying the working of the emporium, the programme theory also stresses relevant elements for monitoring and process evaluation. For instance, it suggests to monitor how points cards are used, and if they are used effectively by beneficiaries in terms of getting the most out of the programme. Further, it advises to check on the quality of donation to monitor possible donation dumping.

Finally, the programme theory can also be a useful tool for designers. It shows how certain features are relevant for establishing an emporium that can perform the functions highlighted in the Figure. To make only one example, the frequency of attendance is revealed as a fundamental feature for making the emporium work both as a social opportunity and as a radar to detect new needs. Further, the abstraction from design and context features to the underlying mechanisms (e.g. radar and social opportunity, etc.) drives the designer's attention to the very function to be reproduced when designing the intervention. Even when changes in contextual conditions require design and implementation variations (for instance, given a lack of resources, one cannot ensure a high frequency of attendance), the programme theory reminds designers to include details that can make the emporium work as a radar and social opportunity.

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Appendix 1: Interview protocol

Date	Interview
16/05/24	Officer for Governance and Association Development – Italian Red Cross, Abruzzo Regional Committee
22/05/24	Red Cross president of the local committee
22/05/24	Emporium Full Time Staff
22/05/24	Former Red Cross president of the local committee

Guiding Questions for Interviews

A) ESTABLISHING THE EMPORIUM:

What needs to be done to establish an emporium?

Why/how is the decision made to establish an emporium?

Which stakeholders/resources/agreements are involved?

What difficulties might be encountered?

How many CRI emporiums are there? Is it a coherent strategy? Since when? With what characteristics?

B) EMPORIUM OPERATIONS:

Who can access your social supermarkets?

How are these beneficiaries selected, if there is a selection process?

For enrollment, are you in contact with institutions and social services, or do you handle all the procedures yourselves?

Is there a maximum duration for which beneficiaries can stay in the program?

How do people access the emporium? Are there specific opening hours?

Is there any follow-up/monitoring during or after the period beneficiaries visit the emporium?

Do you have a monitoring system? What data do you collect, and how?

How is the food purchased? Is it discounted and paid for? Is there a rechargeable points card? Is the food free?

How are donations and surplus collections managed?

C) OBJECTIVES AND EFFECTIVENESS:

What is the mission of the emporium? What are the expected objectives and outcomes?

Which objective is the most difficult to achieve? Why?

What is not being achieved? Is there something that could be done if the emporium had more resources, different legal possibilities, different relationships, a different administrative, institutional, or associative context, etc.?

What is the evaluation compared to other policies (food parcels and food vouchers)? What is the added value of the emporium?

D) THEORY OF CHANGE:

Design:

Which of the activities carried out are the most important in achieving these objectives? Why? Are there any services/activities that are more difficult to manage? Are there any services/activities that you would like to add?

What are the characteristics (organizational, operational, etc.) of a successful emporium? What are the implementation problems?

Are there significant differences among the emporiums you know (context)? Do you expect or are you considering differences in the management of L'Aquila?

Implementation:

Who are the relevant stakeholders, public and private, for the operation of the emporium?
 What actions/behaviors of these stakeholders contribute/do not contribute to success?
 Are you part of a network of associations? What does it consist of?
 Are there problems in interacting with external CRI entities? What are they?

Mechanisms:

How does contact and frequenting the emporium have a transformative effect?

Context:

What type of people come to the emporium? Regardless of need, is there a specific profile of people who choose the emporium's help?

Are there easy and difficult subjects? Who are they? Why?

How do they come to the emporium? Are there individuals you fail to intercept? Takeup/potential demand coverage.

E) CLOSURE / SNOWBALL:

Who else could we interview to better understand the operation of the emporium?

Volunteers?

Suppliers?

Other emporiums? (Emilia Romagna and Veneto?)

Success stories among beneficiaries? Could we interview them?

Are there descriptive documents about the emporium?

Data available for sharing?