Building networks for sustainability?
Food surplus redistribution, non-profit organisations and neoliberalism in Turin, Italy

Maria Vasile | PhD candidate, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University; Researcher, Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment, Pisa University

ABSTRACT: Based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Turin between 2019 and 2020, this article critically analyses the reorganisation of non-profit organisations engaged in the collection and redistribution of food surplus into a network. It specifically addresses the following questions: why are these non-profit organisations forming a network? What skills do the workers of these organisations have to mobilise in response? What does such reconfiguration denote in terms of the meaning of sustainability in the context of neoliberalism and welfare reform? I discuss the case of Food Pride – standing for Participation Recuperation Inclusion Distribution Education – a network that came into being in 2019. I explain their activities and the ways in which transforming into a network became a funding requirement and governance repertoire, but also translated into the need for new communication and liaison skills to be taken up by non-profit workers. I argue that the development of this network sheds light onto the ways in which neoliberal urban governance and notions of sustainability can be interconnected: I show how the network becomes a way of "making into value" (Elyachar 2005) specific practices and skills, fosters moral ideals of self-governance and naturalises the progressive increase of public responsibilities taken up by non-profit organisations.

Keywords: food surplus; non-profit organisations; skills; sustainability; neoliberalism; Italy

Introduction

In November 2019, the municipality of Turin won the national award “Living with Zero Waste” (“Vivere a Spreco Zero”). This prize was created in 2013 as part of a countrywide awareness raising campaign on the theme of food surplus. The campaign aimed at promoting good practices for the prevention of food waste, the advancement of a circular economy and sustainable development (Premio Vivere a Spreco Zero 2021). As reported in local news:

The city of Turin was awarded for its articulated and consolidated efforts to support initiatives for the prevention and reduction of food waste: a widespread set of projects which is grounded in practices of active citizenship, supported by the municipality; [practices] which give substance to visions of sustainability and solidarity. [These initiatives vary] from the good practices of the Food Priders to the project 'Ecomori,' to the Ristorante Solidale and other best practices which have been carried out over the years. (Torino Click 2019, author’s translation)
The food waste reduction initiatives mentioned in this article were developed in Turin during recent years, most often by non-profit organisations. Adding to the work of more traditional food banks, faith-based charities as well as grassroots social movements, these projects attempt to simultaneously address food waste reduction, food assistance, and social inclusion, reaching out to and involving different people through a set of actions at open air food markets (see Toldo 2017). Their work, mainly entailing the collection of food surplus and its free redistribution or reuse in cooking activities, can be contextualised as part of the issues of food poverty and insecurity in Italy – as per 2017 data, around 22.3 per cent of the population is at risk of food poverty (Marchetti and Secondi 2022) – and the central role of local organisations in attempting to respond to the needs of the food insecure (Maino et al. 2016). Between 2019 and 2020, thanks to the endorsement of the municipality and the financial contribution of the private sector, in Turin, these initiatives were growing and the non-profit organisations in charge were increasingly interweaving their actions and forming a network.

While the results of these initiatives were publicly lauded as innovative and sustainable by the local administration, media, and scholarly debate (e.g., Pettenati et al. 2019), little was said about their operations and relation to the neoliberal urban governance framework within which non-profit organisations exist. The notion of sustainability was mentioned with regard to the (quantitative) achievements of these groups (e.g., amount of food that was saved) and rarely problematised in terms of who was involved, held responsible, with what resources and through which organisation of labour. Moreover, as these initiatives scaled up and were structured into networks, little was said about how the skills needed and passed on by the people in these organisations were transformed.

Literature investigating non-profit organisations in Italy has critically analysed their growing significance as part of welfare transformations and its neoliberal restructuring, generally characterised by welfare state dismantlement, public outsourcing, and privatisation (e.g., Caselli 2015; Busso 2018). Scholars have also underlined the ambiguous role of non-profit organisations in urban renewal (e.g., see Bolzoni 2019 about the case of Turin), and critically inquired into their organisation of labour (Busso and Lanunziata 2016) and entanglement with the development of a ‘post-welfarist public morality’ (Muehlebach 2012: 7) which accompanies neoliberal reforms. Some of these scholars (e.g., Muehlebach 2012; Porcellana 2018; Bolzoni 2019) examined these aspects from an ethnographic perspective and, through their direct observation, raised new questions on how neoliberal processes reconfigure the ways of working within non-profit organisations and vice versa. In the fields of sustainable food and food security, researchers have long debated the impacts of charitable food donation (e.g., Riches and Silvasti 2014; Cloke et al. 2017). Several analysts have discussed these as embedded in processes of depoliticisation of poverty and austerity (e.g., Poppendieck 1999; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015; Dickinson 2016) as well as underlined the limitations of using food surplus as charitable provision (Kenny and Sage 2019). This scholarship enquires into the meanings of sustainable food systems and also calls for new analysis of the processes through which food charity organisations become embedded into neoliberal urban governance and how this affects their way of working.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article critically analyses the meanings and consequences of the reorganisation of non-profit organisations engaged in the collection
and redistribution of food surplus into a network. While the development of networks of non-profit organisations can be beneficial, for example, in terms of exchange of knowledge, avoiding redundancies, and economies of scale (e.g., see Kapucu 2007; Lombardi and Costantino 2020), my analysis focuses on the critical interlinkage between the construction of a network, neoliberal governance, the transformation of work and skills within these organisations and the meanings of sustainability. The article particularly addresses the following questions: why are these non-profit organisations forming a network? What skills do the workers of these organisations have to mobilise in response? What does such reconfiguration denote in terms of the meaning of sustainability in the context of neoliberalism and welfare reform? To answer these questions, I discuss the case of the network Food Pride – standing for Participation Recuperation Inclusion Distribution Education (Partecipazione Recupero Inclusione Distribuzione Educazione) - which was initiated in 2019.

The case of Food Pride and its member organisations is part of contemporary transformations of post-industrial Turin, its structural crisis and attempts to reconfigure its economy, development pathways and image (Belligni and Ravazzi 2012). At the time of my fieldwork, the city administration was led by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star movement M5S) and the mayor Chiara Appendino, who was elected in 2016 after contesting the traditional party structure and promising a rupture with previous administrations. Over the years, the M5S significantly rescoped their approach and programme and continued structures and policies that it had previously stood against (Biancalana 2019). From a social policy viewpoint, in line with the previous administrations, M5S worked closely with the non-profit sector, publicly recognising its fundamental support in forwarding important services and praising its role on many occasions.

Conceptual framework

In this article, neoliberalism has been approached as a process of change, which takes different local shapes (Gledhill 2004). Changes in the relation between government and citizenship in service delivery and welfare and particularly “neoliberalism as a technology of governing” (Ong 2006) are the focus of this study. Researchers investigating the growing role of non-profit organisations, also discussed in the literature and in the field as the third sector, have pointed to its relation to neoliberal governance in the form of the progressive dismantlement of welfare state and provision of public service. Among others, Alexander sheds light onto the current shapes of neoliberalism by discussing the British third sector, considering it “a product of both market failure and state failure” (2009: 224). Researchers such as Muehlebach (2012) and Hyatt (1997) discuss the role of non-profit organisations in the development of moral ideals of the good citizen, which they see as a central component of neoliberal governance: they highlight the importance given to self-governance, the celebration of voluntary work and the model of active citizenship developed in response to welfare state retrenchment. Muehlebach unpacks the centrality of morality in neoliberalism, which, from this perspective, can be regarded as “a force that can contain its negation – the vision of a decommodified, disinterested life, and of a moral community of human relationality and solidarity that stands opposed to alienation” (2012: 25).

1 Neoliberalism is generally defined as “a political approach that favours free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending” (Oxford Languages). For a summary of anthropological scholarship’s contribution to and debate around the notion of neoliberalism refer to Ganti (2014).
As non-profit organisations take over an increasing amount of welfare responsibilities, their workers and volunteers navigate between rising demands for aid, limited resources and bureaucratisation, developing new understandings and ways of working around an absent state and persistent inequalities (Pusceddu 2020; Koch 2021). Similarly, to the workers analysed by Molé (2010), the situation of precarity which characterises their working situation (Busso and Lanunziata 2016) as well, as their sector more generally, puts them in a situation of structural instability and anticipation. New solutions have to be found regularly, resulting, also in this context, in an “experiential apprehension of neoliberal change […] which, in turn, shapes practices, knowledge claims, and moral orders” (Molé 2010: 40).

Particularly relevant to my analysis are Elyachar (2005) and Urcuoli (2008), who discuss the connections between neoliberalism, the development of networks and the reorganisation of labour and skills, respectively. Based on her ethnographic research in Cairo, Elyachar (2005) discusses how specific networks and social practices have been incorporated into the market through a process of dispossession encouraged by neoliberal policies. The author includes in her analysis non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which she sees as important actors of such processes “of extracting new economic value by transforming culture into value” and presenting it as an “ethical imperative” (ibid.: 9). These processes often correspond to a formalisation of previously existing practices and collaborations, a way of expanding and “making [them] into value” (ibid.).

Urciuoli (2008) examines how transformations of work and workers’ skills gain meaning when analysed as part of the broader context of capitalism and neoliberal reform. She explores how skills have been increasingly regarded as “‘things’ that can be acquired and measured and that possess an inherent capacity to bring about desired outcomes, outcomes that can be measured in dollars” (ibid.: 212). Two elements of Urciuoli’s work are particularly salient for this study of non-profit organisations: first, the idea that skills, discourses and the formation of new registers create alignment between different actors, and second, the fact that some skills become naturalised while reflecting a very specific working culture initiated within the corporate world. At the workplace, Urciuoli argues, soft skills – such as communication, team building, and leadership skills – become internalised, a way of being, while these are functional to a precise organisation of labour. Building on these insights, I focus on skills as an entry point to look into (transforming) ways of working within non-profit organisations and in the social sector more generally. In addition, following the invitation of Gillette and Grasseni (this issue), I regard skills and forms of (re)enskilment as an opportunity to ask about the meanings of sustainability, starting from its practices, and thus contribute to critical discussions on how to achieve sustainable food systems.

Methods and data collection

This article is based on 16 months of fieldwork conducted in Turin, Italy between 2019 and 2020. I conducted longitudinal and multimodal ethnography, following the methodological framework of the “Food Citizens?” project. The main research method I used was participant observation, which allowed me to follow closely and, in most cases, become part (as a participant, volunteer or collaborator) of 11 collective food procurement networks ranging from community gardens to foodbanks.

This research is part of the project “Food citizens? Collective Food Procurement in European Cities: Solidarity and Diversity, Skills and Scale.” For more information on the project and its methodological approach see: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/dissemination/public-resources.
from food markets to food aid initiatives and urban gardens (see also Grasseni 2018). In addition to fieldwork notes, this research included 75 semi-structured interviews, mostly audio-recorded, as well as the (co)production of audio-visual material such as five cultural maps, video footages, and photos. Written informed consent was received from all research participants.3

This article focuses on data collected through participant observation within the Food Pride network, which included regular participation in food collection and redistribution at open-air food markets, five cooking workshops, and four network meetings and public events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 workers and volunteers from the network’s organisations as well as four experts on Turin local (food) governance – two civil servants, an academic, and an activist. These interviews were transcribed and coded. Central themes were defined by reflecting on recurring issues ascertained from my fieldwork notes and interviews and, in particular, two Food Pride network meetings. I then put these materials in dialogue with questions raised by Gillette and Grasseni (this issue) on skills and enskilment for sustainable food.

In addition to these ethnographic materials, this article also uses material created by Food Pride (such as the network’s map reported below) as well as official public documentation of the Turin administration and Food Pride’s main founder, namely the Compagnia di San Paolo banking foundation. My analysis also benefitted from the juxtaposition of this information with that collected within food surplus redistribution grassroots collectives such as Food not Bombs4. By taking part in two forms of networks, I could see more clearly their different approaches to a similar activity and ways of communicating about it. Finally, informal conversations with the workers and volunteers of Food Pride member organisations, as well with other research participants, friends, and acquaintances in Turin, also inform this study. My data collection and analysis are conditioned by my relations with these research participants, the outlook I developed through our exchanges, and by my viewpoints on these themes. In line with recent literature on Turin and the objectives of public ethnography (Capello and Semi 2018; see also Fassin 2013), I aim to shed light on urban dynamics that are silenced by hegemonic representations (e.g., of sustainability, non-profit work, and volunteerism) and contribute to critical scholarly and public debate.

The network as members

I was first introduced to the Food Pride network by Sonia Migliore, who was one of its coordinators in November 2019. Not without difficulties, I listened to her complex description of Food Pride’s member organisations, their different practices, relation to the local administration, funding agents, and various challenges (see Table 1). Eufemia was the network’s leading organisation: its work focused on different themes (e.g., food, youth work, social arts) and it gathered 50 remunerated collaborators (employees and, more frequently, occasional and autonomous workers) and 40 regular volunteers, 12 of whom were within

---

3 In this article, some research participants are anonymized others are not. I have anonymized only the participants whom explicitly asked for it in the informed consent forms and the ones whom I decided not to expose in relation to potentially sensitive comments.

4 Food not Bombs is a worldwide grassroot social movement for food collection and free redistribution. It is composed of hundreds of autonomous groups located in various countries organising different types of action. These groups are generally inspired by anarchist principles of mutual aid and solidarity.
the Food Pride project (Eufemia 2020a). Eufemia had been involved in the free redistribution of food surplus collected at a few open-air food markets in Turin and nearby municipalities since 2012. Its work also included the organisation of cooking workshops – using the food surplus collected – targeted to specific population groups such as the homeless and people affected by mental disorders.

Eco dalle Città was another central member of the network. Born as part of a news website on the urban environment and ecology, this association since 2009 developed awareness raising initiatives (Eco dalle Città 2021). In 2016, Eco dalle Città had also started to collect food surplus and redistribute it at the market of Porta Palazzo, the largest open-air food market in Europe (see also Black 2012), and then extended their activities with new projects at different markets. This organisation collaborated with around 25 people (based on my observations, though difficult to define because of the high turnover), including workers and volunteers, and was famous for involving refugees and asylum seekers in their food collection activities.

The third key actor of the network was the organisation RE.TE, comprising six employees and around ten volunteers; the organisation was involved in local urban gardening and educational projects around food and sustainability in northern Turin. RE.TE started to locally collect and redistribute food surplus only after the development of the network. Finally, to a minor extent, Food Pride’s collaborators also included an environmental NGO, several neighbourhood organisations and social cooperatives. The network received the endorsement of the municipality of Turin and other local municipalities and financial support from private foundations (Food Pride 2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eufemia</th>
<th>Eco dalle Città</th>
<th>RE.TE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food collectors</strong></td>
<td>Volunteers and recipients</td>
<td>Workers and volunteers, mainly refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food recipients</strong></td>
<td>Families in difficult socio-economic conditions willing to engaged in the food collection process</td>
<td>Anyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main characteristics</strong></td>
<td>Involving recipients in broader “activation journeys”</td>
<td>Facilitating waste management at open air markets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Food Pride Network Summary

Table 1 summarises basic information about the food collectors, recipients, and main characteristics of Food Pride central member organisations in the 2019-2020 period. Highlighting their differences such as their various ways of defining food recipients and multiple approaches to their work around food waste as described as their main characteristics, reveals how visions of sustainability can intermesh differently with ideas of solidarity and citizenship, which implied distinct modus operandi. While the organisations put their activities under the same umbrella, they also kept their own shapes and characteristics. For example, RE.TE used their activities to develop citizens educational campaigns, while Eco
dalle Città worked on improving waste sorting and recycling beyond food through their collaborations.

**The network as ensemble of practices**

As I regularly partook in the food collection and redistribution activities of Food Pride, I was able to observe these practices in detail. The first time that I participated in a Food Pride food collection and redistribution was in October 2019 at the market of Via Porpora, situated in the northern working-class neighbourhood of Barriera di Milano. I was welcomed by an intern, who said, “you will see: this market is small, vendors are nice, the food they give away is less damaged [than in other markets]. But we should start now.” We crossed the street and quickly found ourselves in the middle of the market stalls. By the intern’s side, I discovered how to ask vendors for their surplus – food that they would not be able to sell anymore because it was overripe or damaged – and carried it back to the meeting point, where we selected, rearranged, and weighed food, and interacted with recipients.

As observed at Via Porpora, as well as during other Food Pride activities at different markets, this work on the ground never occurred exactly in the same way, despite a shared goal and common steps. As presented above, on a general level this was due to the different approach of each organisation; in practice however, this related to the everyday interactions, people who were present, and amount and quality of food. Importantly, this work on the ground required a series of skills linked to the relations established throughout the activity. Developing a good, friendly relation with the vendors was key to obtaining their recognition and fostering their collaboration in the food collection process. Establishing a relationship with recipients required the ability to socialise with a diversity of people, several of whom were finding themselves in critical socio-economic conditions. Food Pride workers and volunteers often tried to make recipients feel at ease through conversations and normalising the use of food surplus. For example, this included changing the organisation of food distribution from putting the food surplus on the ground to using a market stand, and from putting everything together to developing food boxes that aimed at a more equal division (Omar Sillah, worker at Eco dalle Città, interview, 28/02/20).

The specific skills needed to work and interact with others at the market were not necessarily thought about or discussed internally by the organisations, but would emerge in practice, through daily exchanges between workers, volunteers, and recipients. From this point of view, the work of these organisations was similar to the approach of other informal groups involved in the collection and redistribution of food surplus such as Food not Bombs, where such relational skills were passed on and experimented during their activities. In the context of Via Porpora, the development of these relational skills was made possible by the regular presence of some recipients who grew joking relations with the rest of the group. Similarly, during the cooking workshops, the relational skills of Chiara, a worker for Eufemia, were central to making people feel at ease. According to her, the development of a friendly environment was key to fostering the educational and transformative power of the cooking experience (Chiara Fiore, interview, 12/12/19).

The network’s activities around food waste also required the development of gleaning skills, namely the ability to search for and select food to be collected and donated. This was done quite differently by people in the various organisations, and engaging in gleaning was an opportunity for sharing knowledge and opinions. Food selection entailed a high degree of discretion, despite the shared Food Pride standard of “dignifying food,” which meant that
surplus food should not make people feel worst about their situations. In practice, gleaning also varied according to the availability of food and the number of food recipients. In the case of on-site distribution, such as Eco dalle Città’s stand at the market of Porta Palazzo, the food recipients sometimes also operated a second round of selection based on their own skills and preferences.

Looking into the details of different Food Pride practices allowed me to note similarities in their general approach to work. On the ground activities at the markets mostly relied on the work of precarious workers and volunteers. "Precarious" refers here to various short-term contracts such as internships and occasional collaborations which did not include any form of welfare benefits such as paid leave or social security payments. In most of my exchanges with network participants around the themes of labour and remuneration, precarity was naturalised, seen as a common feature of working in this sector in Italy, despite creating challenges such as delayed remuneration, unremunerated extra working hours, low pay, short-term contracts, and high reliance on the presence of volunteers. These conditions hinted at mechanisms that were common to these organisations, calling for a better understanding of the broader organisation of the network.

The network as requirement

As part of my participant observation at official meetings and events, in December 2019, I joined Sonia and other Food Pride workers at a monitoring and evaluation session organised by the main funder of the network for 2019, namely the banking foundation Compagnia di San Paolo (CSP). Food Pride had won a one-year financial contribution of 70,000 euros through a call for projects “Fatto per Bene” or “For Good” (CSP 2018a). The session was an end-of-year evaluation guided by expert facilitators. Its objective was to evaluate the process of network building and systematisation of different initiatives. As explained by one of the Food Pride coordinators, the development of a network had been a clear requirement of CSP’s call and accessing such funds was an important reason that the organisations decided to work under the same umbrella:

The call for projects of Compagnia di San Paolo was very much oriented toward “networks.” I mean exactly towards identifying systems, it spoke of “systems of recuperation and reuse of food surplus.” As a matter of fact, of the – I don’t remember how many – projects presented, not many got funded. Precisely because not all of them presented this strength of the network, of the systems of recuperation and so on. So, we thought that this could be a winning strategy and in fact it was. (Giulia Farfoglia, worker at Eufemia, interview, 03/03/2020)

As I discovered during research within other groups financed by CSP, such as the network of community centres (Rete delle Case del Quartiere) and the network of urban gardens network (Or.Me. Torinesi), and through a review of CSP’s public documentation, sponsoring the development of local networks was a general objective of the foundation. Its main strategy was formation of and being part of existing networks; also, building a narrative around regional development and sustainability, which highlighted the importance of transforming service delivery and promoting the self-organisation of local actors. According to the CSP’s report for 2016-2019, the foundation increasingly directed funds towards medium to large-
scale projects (from 50 to 500,000 euros). This resulted in a higher concentration of its spending, while, the report underlines, such big projects often represented ensembles of ‘coordinated actions’ (CSP 2020: 24).

Reflecting on the role of CSP – one of the largest banking foundations in Italy with a long history of operations in Turin – in shaping the functioning of these non-profit organisations revealed some of the ways in which financing mechanisms can influence the post-welfarist restructuring of interventions in social, cultural, environmental, public health, and research realms. This influence was well known among my interlocutors, who recurrently presented CSP as one of the city’s most influential players. CSP’s financial contributions were most often perceived as the main way forward for the city’s non-profit sector and service delivery, even if its omnipresence was not uncriticised (e.g., for its power and connections to the city administration).

Non-profit organisations’ reliance on temporary funding (such as the call from CSP) also played an important role in the (re)definition of their work. For instance, applying for yearly funding in the case of Food Pride meant regularly refocusing and presenting differently its activities to be able to participate in new calls for proposals. To request funding for 2020 and 2021, for example, the network had to give a new focus to its work. It decided to prioritise and expand the cooking workshops aimed at social inclusion of vulnerable groups through the project “Food Pride Kitchen Lab” and extend the collection of food surplus to new markets through the project Food Pride XL.

The network as repertoire

While attending the Food Pride monitoring and evaluation session, I noticed that specific terms and keywords were used recurrently, both by the facilitators and the organisations’ representatives. These included expressions such as “building networks” (fare rete), “systematising” (mettere a sistema), and “collaborative platforms” (piattaforme collaborative), which called for a new understanding of the work of local organisations and their reorganisation in the name of sustainability. This repertoire was widely used, recurrent in conversations with non-profit workers and during following meetings. At the same time, the actual meaning of these terms needed to be developed and integrated into the work of the organisations in terms of new practices. As explained by Alessia Toldo, scholar of the University of Turin and facilitator of Food Pride meetings:

We [facilitators] were involved to help these organisations to scale up (salto di scala), so not to reason as single entities, but as a system, so we were asked to fill with content general terms such as network, system and so on. So [building] organisational skills linked to networking, to identifying resources, local opportunities, needs and try to systematise these (mettere a sistema) instead of thinking in individual terms. […] At the same time, we tried to provide analytical skills to break down terms such as systems into its components so networks of actors, resources and so on. (Alessia Toldo, interview, 15/07/2020)

While elaborating on the actual meaning given to this networking repertoire, such as “identifying resources” and common “local opportunities”, Alessia also hinted at the new skills that concurrently had to become part of these practitioners’ way of working. These
corresponded to analytical skills but also to communication and collaboration skills.

The network as communication skills

“I am now used to cameras, the other day I was even on TV!” said John (pseudonym), laughing, while we were walking through the market carrying boxes full of fruits and vegetables in our arms. He worked every day at two markets for Eco dalle Città and had recently been interviewed as part of a local TV reportage presenting food surplus collection as a model of urban sustainability. As he said, amused, public appearances had become quite a recurrent thing. During my participation at Food Pride activities, I often saw journalists and local coordinators collecting images and figures related to the food surplus from network participants, which they used to communicate about the efforts of the organisations and the network. Great importance was given to reporting on and communicating about what was being done, and this had to become a practice and a skill for workers and volunteers at all markets. For example, the daily food collected was weighed and amounts were listed in a notebook. This process usually involved two people, who put the boxes containing the food collected on a scale, subtracted the approximate weight of the boxes, and made a record (see Figure 1).

Similarly, during the Food Pride cooking workshops, pictures were taken by Chiara. In addition to preparing and conducting the workshop, Chiara photographed the participants at each step: as they cleaned and prepared the ingredients, made the dishes, and ate together. She then created Facebook posts to share insights about the activities. When I asked about the need for such systematic communication, most workers answered that this was part of the job. Some spoke of simple compliance with the instructions given by the coordinators while others explained the importance of providing visibility to the initiative for advocacy purposes and for its possible upscaling. Eco dalle Città, for example, used its records of collected food surplus as an advocacy tool in their information campaigns, hoping to draw attention to the importance of the continuation of their project and prove the economic advantages of putting into place an accurate waste management system (raccolta differenziata) at open-air food markets.

By contrast, photos were also taken by other grassroots groups such as Food Not Bombs,
but for different purposes. While some images were also uploaded on their Facebook page, mostly they circulated only within the group through the internal WhatsApp chat used to keep participants informed about what was being done. Unlike *Food Pride*, *Food Not Bombs* was not interested in advertising their work or applying for funding. They also had the general ethical rule of not photographing food distribution to avoid the possibility of generating a feeling of discomfort among the recipients. As explained by Maurizio (pseudonym), who moved across both grassroots and institutional projects:

> Why do these projects need to spend money on communication, Facebook, flyers and all this stuff? Why do they need these big events to present themselves? This is what scares me about institutional projects and why I try to dissociate myself from this excess of communication and narrative. Also, in *Food Not Bombs* people do send pictures but this is not about showing off or making oneself attractive for a funding, it is more about saying this happened, this was a nice moment. (Maurizio, interview, 12/02/2020)

In the context of the *Food Pride* network, numbers were a way of proving the network’s positive impacts and the scope of its achievements. For example, in this speech Sonia used such figures to report on the successes of the network:

> By joining forces, we have extended our activities to eight markets, 400 beneficiaries per week, 28 volunteers. From February to September 2019 we have collected 80 tons of food. This food was redistributed, used to organise cooking classes, informal gatherings (*aperitivi*), conferences: to create a new community. (Speech during the *Food Pride* Kitchen Lab event, 07/11/2019)

Numbers were also associated with the development of ‘a new community’ which was part of the changing vision of these organisations, which portrayed their actions as increasingly interconnected.

**The network as liaison skills**

During network workshops and exercises gathering representatives of the organisations, workers learnt to see each other as interconnected through the actual circulation of resources and information. One of the exercises was the creation of the map below (see Figure 2), where participants had to represent the relations between the different members of the network and other local actors in terms of transactions, such as the giving and taking of food, allocation of finances, beneficiaries of the organisations’ actions, dissemination of information, and development of skills.

This work of liaison was not entirely a new task, as the organisations were already used to less formalised but regular and direct coordination and cooperation with many local actors, whenever this was needed to,
for example, move food or involve new volunteers. With the development of the network, however, this function was brought to another level, as the organisations officially functioned as connection points, facilitating cooperation among actors with whom they were in contact, and going beyond their immediate scope of action. In terms of the collection of food surplus, such official linkages allowed for people and resources to circulate across different markets. For example, when bigger markets had an excess of food surplus, this was gathered and distributed where it was most needed, such as to the canteens of homeless dormitories.

Non-profit organisations generally were conferred the title of “actors on the ground” (attori del territorio) and “antennas” (antenne) by local administrators, who regarded them as the groups that were most in contact with the city’s inhabitants and so most aware of their needs. For local administrators, non-profit organisations could work as liaison agents between the administration and the city inhabitants (Luca Deri, president of the city district 7, interview, 06/08/2020). Networks such as Food Pride, therefore, represented information reservoirs in terms of assessing and investigating local needs. The discussion around the so-called Gadda law (law n. 166/2016), which incentivises the donation of food surplus by guaranteeing tax reliefs to vendors who donate their surpluses instead of generating food waste, provides one example. One of the main concerns in relation to this measure was the lack of knowledge about the law on the side of the vendors, and the population more generally. In response, Food Pride conducted a small investigation based on their everyday contact with the market vendors (Scacchetti 2020). Such work around the Gadda law exemplified how aforementioned concerns became a responsibility attributed to non-profit organisations, which had to find the time and skills to investigate and raise awareness around this law throughout their activities and relationships of trust established at markets.

**Discussion**

**Non-profit organisations between urban governance and precarity**

Similar to other recent literature on non-profit organisations in Italy (e.g., Bolzoni 2019; Busso and Gargiulo 2016), the case of Food Pride reveals how these are becoming increasingly important agents of urban governance. In Turin, as part of the administration’s urban renewal efforts, such organisations play a growing role, especially in terms of service delivery and poverty alleviation. Since the late 1990s, non-profit organisations became important interlocutors for public administration as demonstrated by the emphasis put on local organisations and community building within the municipal plans for the renewal of Turin urban peripheries (Periferie 1997-2005). Today, the work of non-profit organisations continues to be intrinsically interlinked with the delivery of public services, as austerity diminishes local governments’ ability to ensure these directly (Ravazzi 2016; Bolzoni 2019). As critically examined by Magda Bolzoni (2019), (some) non-profit organisations also came to play a function as part of broader urban governance in Turin, in particular through shared agendas with the local administration and private actors. This scholar problematises how the organisations included in these processes are aligned with the urban neoliberal agenda. To her insights, I add the observation that this neoliberal urban governance agenda reconfigures these organisations’ way of working, entailing shifts in their operations related to additional communication and liaison efforts and skills.
The case of Food Pride also speaks to the role of the private sector, in this case CSP, and its impact on urban governance, which has also been examined in the literature (Ravazzi 2015; 2016). In particular, Ravazzi discusses the influence of this foundation in terms of its financing of public-interest interventions and participation in local policymaking. As austerity impacts the ability of local governments to address public needs, such foundations have gained an increasingly important role in public administration (Ravazzi 2016). The development of an official network for food waste and food insecurity that I describe here can be analysed as an instantiation of such trends, as CSP contributed to the process and shaped Food Pride's repertoire. Few of such practical coordination tools were developed by the city administration. Over the last few years, the city of Turin has made several efforts to establish a framework to enhance the local food system but, at the time of my fieldwork, such activities still lacked a public “control room” or cabina di regia (Alessia Toldo, interview, 15/07/2020). Examples of these efforts include Turin's pathway toward a local food policy (Bottilgieri et al. 2016) and attempt to develop a Food Commission, which did not translate from political intentions and public analyses to long-lasting implementation and participatory processes (De Ciero 2019). In this context, I raise questions not about the value of networking in general, but about the premises and implications of networks such as Food Pride.

While exemplifying the growing role of non-profit organisations in the neoliberal urban context, the case of Food Pride also reveals how their operations remained precarious due to their temporary funding, which puts them in the position of constantly needing to secure resources such as labour with limited budgets. Building on Molé (2010), I argue that precarity influences these organisations’ way of working and pressures their workers—a point that is also underlined by Busso and Lanunziata (2016) who explain how the competitiveness of this sector is based on the extraction of value from labour (e.g., unremerated working hours in the name of socially relevant tasks). Temporary funding creates a situation of instability and apprehensiveness for workers not only in relation to their jobs but also the continuation of the overall projects, as temporary financing makes them unsure if and to what extent these will be sustained. Further effects can be seen in Food Pride's need to change priorities when applying for new funding calls. This in turn generated the need to attract an increasing number of volunteers, which can also be problematic in relation to issues of labour, social justice, and citizenship. As critically examined by Muehlebach (2012) in her analysis of the transformation of welfare, Italian neoliberalism is intrinsically linked with moral understandings of reciprocity and, in particular, volunteerism, which is at the core of the contemporary functioning of social services. Volunteerism (and its institutionalisation through a set of national laws) builds on an anchored catholic repertoire while transforming social welfare provision and the way of working in this sector by putting moral duty at the centre (ibid.). The case of Food Pride helps us connect volunteerism and its surrounding morality to non-profit organisations’ financial instability and precarious labour, namely, to view these as interlinked processes that characterise this sector.

It is also important to contextualise Food Pride in the history of Turin and its industrial past. The industrial crisis, which affected the city from the 1980s onwards, caused a progressive shift away from its industrial identity and resulted in attempts to reconfigure its economy, development pathways and image (Belligni and Ravazzi 2012). Construction of a new, post-industrial Turin entailed political efforts by local administrations to develop new models
of urban governance and development strategies that aligned with global neoliberalism: urban regeneration, a knowledge-based and service economy, cultural agendas and large-scale events (ibid.). The city was rebranded into an attractive, sustainable, cosmopolitan city, but such processes were – and still are – accompanied by political contradictions, social tensions and the emergence of new forms of urban deprivation (Vanolo 2008; Semi 2015; Capello and Semi 2018). In this context, non-profit organisations are asked to fill the void left by welfare state retrenchment – while, I add, they face increasing pressure to participate in new networking and regional coordination efforts. Such developments should be problematised in relation to the shift away from a food right-based approach (e.g., Riches and Silvasti 2014).

New repertoires and skills between productivity and sustainability

This analysis of Food Pride shows how “building networks” (fare rete) and “systematising action” (mettere a sistema) emerged as repertoires and new modus operandi for participating non-profit organisations. Forming a network reverberated into the organisations’ actual work, translating into a way for expanding activities but also requiring new tasks and skills for workers and volunteers. In addition to everyday working skills such as curating market relations and food selection, new skills such as liaising and communicating effectively became a priority. Building on Urciuoli (2008), I consider the diffusion of such skills as an important component of the development of new ways of defining and managing these non-profit organisations. For example, in the context of Food Pride, putting communication skills at the forefront of the organisations’ activities implied formalising their collaboration and enhancing their ‘social alignment’ (Urciuoli 2008: 214). “Social alignment” occurred through the development of shared terminology and interpretations of their work and challenges, which were discussed during joint workshops. Such shared interpretations serve as a vehicle for a shared meaning of governance and sustainability, as part of which the responsibility for systematising local actions was handed over to actors on the ground. This occurred during monitoring and evaluation sessions, during which the various organisations’ representatives were invited to discuss the achievements of the network and its long-term scope, namely extending the reach and range of the individual organisation’s actions.

The development of the Food Pride network happened via communication and liaison efforts such as working toward a collective image, demonstrating results and expanding functions. I argue that such criteria reveal how these organisations become part of a business-like management culture of social and environmental realms. Put differently, and again following Urciuoli (2008), the paradigm of productivity become internalised and naturalised through such communication practices. Proving the network’s worth to external observers became an important way forward for the continuation of the project. This often corresponded to a formalisation of previously existing practices and collaborations, a way of expanding and “making [them] into value” (Elyachar 2005) – as was made visible in the map above. In the case of Turin, the ‘ethical imperative’ (Elyachar 2005: 9) of sustainability becomes intermeshed with self-management and adaptation to precarious present and future scenarios. Yet the comparison of Food Pride with other grassroots organisations involved in the collection of food surplus demonstrates that there is no predetermined way that food redistribution activities contribute to the neoliberal urban governance agenda (see also Parson 2014). These groups’ different ways of going about the institutionalisation of their
actions can be analysed as different ways of interpreting ‘do-it-yourself interventions in the public space’ (Spataro 2016: 185), which include citizens’ direct intervention or activities mediated by the non-profit sector. They indicate how some approaches (e.g., institutionalised vs. grassroots) end up being more valued than others, as sustainable cities are reimagined in the context of neoliberal urbanism.

Conclusion

In spring 2020, during the first period of lockdown related to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not partake in Food Pride activities. Instead, I followed the network online and through regular phone conversations with some of the workers and volunteers. Rising food insecurity and, in some periods, growing food waste due to the temporary closure of markets, made the activities of groups engaged in food surplus collection and redistribution even more central and publicly discussed (ActionAid 2020). Food Pride continued, when possible, with surplus food collection at markets, but the member organisations also started to implement different activities based on new regulations and needs. These included delivering the food collected to yet other local organisations – which, for example, would provide people particularly affected by the crisis with food aid packages – and cooking for homeless centres which were without other forms of external support. Overall, over the course of the 2020 pandemic, the different Food Pride members scaled up their work: they extended their actions to new markets, recruited more volunteers and invented new ways of distributing food when the markets were closed. When I joined them again at open air markets in mid-May 2020 and thereafter, the amount of food collected and the number of recipients had tripled. The crisis proved the ability of these organisations to adapt and confirmed their role in the city. As recurrently emphasised by public administration representatives, including the mayor, the activation of local organisations and volunteers had been crucial to the emergency response measures undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such declarations are on the one hand paradoxical – what about their role as public administration, their responsibilities, and ability to respond to the emergency? – but, on the other, in the context of Turin’s transforming welfare, this role for the non-profit sector and active volunteers has become normalised (and encouraged) as a natural continuation of the public administration.

Even so, the network configuration revealed its limitations. Food Pride organisations mobilised together, but also separately, and through individual collaborations with other local actors. As many more organisations started to cooperate, feeling the need to respond to the emergency, it was difficult to draw the line between what was done by the network, by individual organisations and through collaboration with other partners. Such differences became particularly relevant when new financing opportunities – such as calls for emergency projects by banking foundations and other private donors – became available. The new calls put the network’s members in competition, breaking down interpersonal trust and leaving some old partners out of new projects. As explained by some workers, these developments brought to light important questions: to what extent should the decision processes of individual organisations be discussed with other members of the network? Who owned ideas developed and shared in the network? On what occasions would the organisations cooperate with one another and when would they work with other partners? Put differently, the pandemic crisis revealed how the same urban apparatus that fostered the development of
local networks was simultaneously a system that set these organisations in competition with one another due to limited funding.

Critical analysis of projects such as Food Pride are important to unravel the complex dynamics that underlie and surround projects which are considered as sustainable and innovative practices in Turin – and perhaps in other cities – today. Looking at labour conditions and skills provides a useful vantage point on which to reflect on entanglements between neoliberal urban governance and initiatives envisioned as sustainable such as food surplus redistribution networks. The case of Food Pride shows how, while contributing to alleviate poverty and reduce food waste, its work (working frame and way of working) is just as importantly sustaining precarious labour as well as the erosion of the welfare state. In other words, such research reveals the limitations of these projects as they become co-opted into neoliberal governance arrangements and so increasingly disconnected from the possibility of challenging or transforming neoliberal societal configurations.

Acknowledgments
I would like to express my gratitude to Maris Gillette, Cristina Grasseni, Sonia Migliore, Damien Thompson, Alessia Toldo, and two anonymous reviewers for kritisk etnografi who helped me to improve earlier versions of this article. Many thanks to research participants in Turin, who helped me to gain a complex understanding of this city. Thank you to my friends in Aurora with whom I recurrently discussed the transformations and needs of our neighbourhood but also urban governance and the third sector. The research is part of the project “Food citizens? Collective Food Procurement in European Cities: Solidarity and Diversity, Skills and Scale.” The project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 724151, www.foodcitizens.eu).

References


Riches, G. and T. Silvasti. 2014. *First world hunger revisited: Food charity or the right to food?* Springer.


