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A resilient response to the social-economic implications of coronavirus. The case of *Snodi Solidali* in Turin

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Abstract

The emergency created by the COVID-19 has shattered the world, with impacts in all countries. The restrictions introduced to reduce and contain the virus' spread have changed lifestyles, illustrating the inequalities of our societies. Cities had to find rapid solutions to limit the socio-economic consequences, relying on their ability to react and adapt. This paper describes a local project that guaranteed food access to the most vulnerable population during the lockdown phase. *Snodi solidali* constituted a fast and responsive way for the local authority and the third sector's network to offer an immediate reaction to an urgent need.

Geolocation information:

Turin, Italy

Italy was one of the European countries strongly hit by the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the northern part of the country has been deeply affected with thousands of cases¹. In order to contain the spread of the virus, the national government imposed a total lockdown of the population in the whole country for more than 2 months. This decision was unprecedented and is mainly related to the issue of avoiding and containing the virus's spread in urban areas with a high population density.

The cities had to attend not only to safety and surveillance, but also to the most pressing needs of the vulnerable citizens. Families and individuals that lost their daily income, cannot afford their basic needs (like food and housing costs), cannot purchase food, homeless without the chance to access any public services, etc. The social and economic crisis associated with the pandemic has increased the pressures on food access, revealing the fragilities of a large amount of population in our cities. On the other side, during this extreme scenario the local governance system was at the front lines in dealing with these increasing needs.

Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to provide a critical understanding of the local short-term response to the social-economic implications of coronavirus on vulnerable people. It does so by exploring the case of the city of Turin (Italy) through the lens of resilience. Resilience refers to a system's ability to quickly deal with shocks and crisis by involving institutional structures, human resources and community networks (Coaffee & Lee, 2016; Davoudi, 2013).

The resilience concept was born in the 1970s in the ecological field and indicates the ability of socio-ecological systems to adapt to disturbances by finding a new acceptable equilibrium and taking advantage from the learning generated from the crisis process (Folke et al., 2002; Holling, 1973; Walker et al., 2004). Its application into urban studies is much more recent and implies the ability of urban systems to cope with different types of stress, including natural disasters, economic and health crises, climate change and terrorist attacks. Urban systems can be conceived as systems that follow evolutionary trajectories determined by the mutual influence of various variables (social, economic, political, and environmental). Such trajectories can encounter moments of crisis in which the reaction of the system and its components highlights its resilience ability to cope, adapt and transform. A number of researchers have defined various attributes of system resilience according to the area of application (Berkes, 2007; Davoudi, 2013; Folke et al., 2002; Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Olsson & Galaz, 2010; Ostrom, 2000; Walker et al., 2004). The most prevalent are: diversity and redundancy, which involve having excess capacity and back-up systems; adaptability and flexibility, which imply the possibility to adapt to new circumstances finding new routes and approaches; preparedness and learning capacity, which mean the ability to mobilize quickly in the face of crises and to learn from past events; connectivity and self-organization, which highlights the networks of the system and the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization; and transformability, which means the ability to reorient to a new trajectory after the crisis.

The city of Turin, in the North-West of Italy and with a population of around 900.000, in the aftermath of the implementation of the lockdown measure decided to implement a new initiative, called *Torino Solidale* (Responsible Turin), in order to provide free food and primary goods to the most vulnerable people. The project was implemented thanks to a public-private network of actors that had been already working together in other solidarity projects. The paper explores the project *Torino Solidale* through the resilience lens, and it identifies the challenges in the long term.

The paper is based on qualitative data. The authors have conducted four interviews to people working in the project and collected information from secondary sources (newspapers, websites, etc.).

1. Torino Solidale

The project *Torino Solidale* was created during April 2020 in order to offer supply and delivery of free food and primary goods to the most disadvantaged citizens of Turin. The project dealt with the most difficult phase of the health emergency: the lockdown period. The free food delivery service is part of a broader framework of actions implemented by the city in order to respond to the COVID-19 emergency, which also includes a psychological support helpline for single people (with special attention to ethnic minorities), and a help service for the elderly and disabled. A complex public-private system was organized in order to deal with the

¹ From March till the end of July 2020, in Italy, around 247.000 people were infected by the virus (source: Italian Ministry of Health).

epidemiological emergency, which saw the interaction between different departments of the City of Turin (Civil Protection, Environment and Green Division, Social Services Division), third sector organizations and private actors.

The project was instigated by the local city council and involved a number of third sector organizations, which took part in the daily activities and the role of which was fundamental to establish the network that encompassed all Turin's neighbourhoods. Each organization could count on the work of many volunteers (a total of 300 people), who were recruited partly by the city through a local campaign, partly by the organizations thanks to their contacts. The city of Turin established an Operations Centre in order to manage and coordinate the activities of 12 third sector organizations willing to cooperate in food delivery. Their venues became the *Hubs* of the project, used to supply and deliver the food packages to people in need all around the city. The 12 Hubs operated according their capabilities in an autonomous way: they sought to maximise the efficiency of food supply, conducted fundraising campaigns at the neighbourhood level in order to increase the resources, and relied on their network of relations.

The Hubs are quite heterogeneous: some of them are not-for-profit cultural and social associations of professionals, others are third sector organizations that provide services to disadvantaged people, while others are *Case del Quartiere* ('Neighbourhood Houses'), which constitute a network of public spaces where opportunities for participation, involvement and self-organisation with the aim of socio-cultural cohesion are offered².

All the organizations involved in *Torino Solidale* have a longstanding experience in the field of social inclusion and public participation. These actors were already working with the City Council in the "Social Inclusion Plan" of Turin. This plan has been developed and implemented since 2018 following a co-design process with the local third sector. The plan identifies different axes of intervention, such as community networks for social inclusion, solidarity networks for people in conditions of housing distress, territorial networks for the inclusion of citizens in conditions of serious marginalization.

Torino Solidale was funded with public resources (from the National Government, Piedmont Region and the City of Turin), association's funds and private donations. Moreover, the Municipality and the Hubs launched fundraising campaigns to support the supply of food. Several food donations have also been collected by the "Piedmont Food Bank" and the "Bank of Charity Works" that have worked in the field of food surpluses collection (from agricultural markets, food industries and large-scale distribution) and re-distribution to services and charity structures. Obviously, the whole system could not work without the voluntary work of local associations and the participation of a huge number of volunteers (about 350). Due to the lockdown restrictions, the packages were delivered to the house of each family by the volunteers.

Around 5.000 families were assisted between April and May 2020 (23.000 food packages deliveries overall) with approximately one food package every 7-10 days. In June 2020, when the most acute phase of the emergency was over, the service was reshaped and currently it includes monthly deliveries of free "solidarity baskets" serving about 9.000 families. The 12 Hubs are still providing the free food delivery service, despite each of them gradually returning to normal activities.

Anyone could request a package: "help requests" have been collected through a free-phone number managed by Civil Protection³ or by directly contacting the Municipal Social Services and the Hubs. Requests were accepted after a light check in order to understand the needs, the family composition and the food need. Almost all the people requesting it have been incorporated in the project, and families with children as priority. After acceptance, families or individuals were assigned to their closest Hub.

The volunteers and other Hubs' workers supported the families not only with the food delivery service, but also with other forms of assistance and support, such as maintaining contact with them and seeking to understand their troubles. Requests other than food were transferred to other associations able to offer free

² The "Case del Quartiere" are municipal property spaces (former public baths, industrial buildings, etc.) managed by not-for-profit organizations that provide facilities to citizens and associations in order to carry out socio-cultural initiatives, workshops, classes, conferences, and services for all the citizens. There are six Houses, progressively implemented during the early 2000s in order to develop a network to share ideas, good practices and resources.

³ It is a structure of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, ensuring assistance to the population in case of major emergencies.

assistance. The Municipality, together with other public and private actors (mainly third sector associations), coordinated the network and the work of volunteers.

2. A resilient response to the COVID-19's restrictions?

In the development and implementation of *Torino Solidale* project it is possible to recognize a number of key attributes of resilient systems (Davoudi et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2004). The first is *adaptability*: the 12 institutions transformed into Hubs have rapidly re-shaped their functions. The lockdown restrictions halted most of their ordinary activities in support of the local community, but the Hubs were flexible in finding new ways to provide aid to vulnerable people. Their venues have become points of supply and, in many cases, their users have been involved as volunteers. This leads to a second attribute: *self-organization*. At the city scale the Municipality and the other public institutions have mobilized different charity networks specialized in the food supply. Additionally, each Hub has activated its social networks in the neighbourhood in order to increase the amount of available resources and to distribute the food. In many cases, the community network helped to integrate other requests such as school supplies for children and psychological support.

A third attribute is *preparedness*. The quick response given by the urban governance system could count on a baggage of consolidated working relationships matured during the process that led to the drafting and implementation of the Social Inclusion Plan and on a huge range of services already carried out by a particularly dynamic associative network. Many of these networks and services were born and further developed over time, in particular after the global financial crisis of 2008 that strongly hit the city and its population.

However, the resilience of the system seems limited to the most critical phase of the emergency, while it is still unclear what the project will be in the future. Thus, the attribute of *transformability* seems to be missing. The strong involvement of the third sector in the provision of the food delivery service is undoubtedly an element of great innovation. The willingness to cooperate that the various organizations have shown on this occasion was also exceptional. The service provided through the citizens and not-for-profit associations was fundamental to overcome the most critical phase of the emergency. However, it is very likely that the fragilities highlighted in the acute phase will become structural in the months to come. An organizational system that is able to last over time cannot be based exclusively on the voluntary mobilisation of civil society. Therefore, the hope is that new ways of public-private collaboration will be found that can be more structural and less extemporaneous, for instance the definition of new funding mechanisms directed to the third sector. In fact, the work of the latter is often financed through a system of "calls for proposals" (issued by banking foundations or public institutions) that often dissipate the energies of not-for-profit organizations and create a climate of strong competition that is detrimental to the quality of the services provided.

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