

## Article

# Assessing the Transformative Potential of Food Banks: The Case Study of Magazzini Sociali (Italy)

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**Abstract:** Food poverty and/or food insecurity have become a substantial problem in the advanced capitalist world, with growing portions of people struggling to eat healthy food every day. At the same time, just in the European Union (EU), around 88 million tonnes of food waste are generated annually. We call this paradox the “food paradox”. The question is, how to tackle food paradox? Food banks are usually presented as a win–win solution to tackle the food paradox, despite being quite controversial. Indeed, food banks are highly contested because, according to critics, they do not aim to address the structural causes, but rather they only intervene on the effects of the food paradox. This paper develops the PAHS conceptual framework, the acronym of prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability, which provides the four categories through which to explore the transformative potential of food surplus redistribution initiatives. The PAHS is adopted to investigate the case study of Magazzini Sociali, a food bank project developed by IoPotentino, a not-for-profit organization operating in Potenza. The results show a good transformative potential of the organization and provide an example of social innovation that can be replicated in other contexts.

**Keywords:** transformative potential; food banks; food waste; food donation



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## 1. Introduction

Food poverty and food insecurity are two terms interchangeably adopted to describe the condition that occurs when individuals and households do not have regular access to a supply of healthy and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs [1]. Food poverty and/or food insecurity have become a substantial problem in the advanced capitalist world, with growing portions of people struggling to eat healthy food every day [2]. At the same time, just in the European Union (EU), around 88 million tonnes of food waste are generated annually, with associated costs estimated at 143 billion euros [3]. The combination of food poverty and food waste, what we call the “food paradox”, is a form of the broader paradox of “scarcity within abundance” [4,5] characterizing advanced capitalist societies and one of the most ethically unacceptable of our times [6]. Notwithstanding food poverty and food waste are a common global issue, they present sharp geographical differences in terms of the dimensions of the problems, characteristics, and interventions. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the debate on the food paradox in high-income countries and, more precisely, in Europe. In the recent years, with the widespread growth of food poverty in the EU caused by the 2007 and 2012 financial and economic crises [6,7], the food paradox has gained growing interest in the political realm and, owing to the emergence of COVID-19, it has reached main prominence in the political agenda. In Italy, for example, during the months of COVID-19 crisis, Banco Alimentare, the most important national food bank, usually assisting about 300,000 people every month, assisted about 450,000 per month [8].

The question is, how to tackle food paradox? Food surplus redistribution to people in need is usually presented as a win-win solution to tackle the food paradox, despite being controversial [9]. Indeed, according to the well-known “food waste management hierarchy” [10], food re-distribution/re-use (through donation) for human consumption for people affected by food poverty follows prevention as the top priority in food waste management. Despite that food re-distribution to people in need (food assistance) through charity (food charity) is presented by policy makers at different institutional levels as a key mechanism for combatting the food paradox, in most European countries, the food surplus re-distribution system is not state-driven. As welfare-state has gradually devolved its capacity and responsibility to societal actors [4] the contrast to food poverty is driven by charitable food aid led by civil society organizations. Indeed, in high-income countries where public assistance fails to meet community need, food aid services have been established by civil society organisations to bridge the food security gap. At the centre of emergency food aid efforts are food Banks, which are presented as the most widespread and best-organised food assistance system [11,12].

This paper is about surplus food redistribution to people in need as a response to the food paradox, and it explores the transformative potential of food banks to contribute to the transition to sustainable and just food systems. Among others, we consider food banks as “community-led grassroots innovations” emerging from civil society to cope with the food paradox, owing to the state and market failures. To solve this issue from the causes, some scholars call for a self-organizing community-led initiative, discursively and experimentally alternative to the market and state. While recognizing the structural and operational limits of food banks, other scholars argue that food banks have the potential for more substantial transformation towards food security and sustainability over time, by building momentum through “small wins” [11] and, as we suggest in this paper, through their scaling-up. This is what the authors of [13] call “interstitial transformations”. In this paper, we firstly introduce the food paradox by exploring in detail the characteristics of both food poverty and food waste at both a global and the EU-27 level, and we identify the causes. Then, building on literature critics on food banks and identifying alternative models, this paper develops a pragmatic conceptual framework to understand the food redistribution initiatives in general and in food banks more specifically, in particular to understand their transformative potential. This conceptual framework is built on the concepts of prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability. In the next section, the paper presents the methodology and the analytical tool (SWOT analysis) adopted to investigate the case study of Magazzini Sociali, a food bank project developed by IoPotentino, a not-for-profit organization operating in Potenza, a small municipality of the Southern Italian Region of Basilicata; a short introduction section of the context is provided. Afterwards, the paper discusses results and, by the end, the conclusions briefly recap the contents developed in the previous sections and make some closing observations.

## 2. The Two Sides of the Food Paradox and Its Causes

The first side of the food paradox is food waste. According to FUSIONS, food waste is any food, and inedible parts of food, removed from the food supply chain to be recovered or disposed [3]. Despite the great heterogeneity of the existing data [14], in the EU-27, the overall food waste per capita is estimated to be 92 kg per person per year, including all stages of the food supply chain and the consumer’s waste [3], with household food waste playing an important role (about 30%). Just a few countries have run national assessments based on reliable methodologies [15], such as the United Kingdom [16], Finland [17], Italy [18], and Germany [19]. In Italy, the household food waste only accounts for about 27 kg per person of edible food per year [18]; it corresponds to 117.2 g per pupil per day in school canteens [20] and about 2.9 kg per person per year at the retail stage [21,22].

In the recent years, especially with the widespread growth of food poverty in the EU caused by the 2007–2008 financial and economic crises [6,7], as well as due to the dramatic socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 in the last year, the food paradox has gained

prominence in the political agenda through the promotion of a specific agenda addressed to reduce food waste and providing food to people in need. In 2018, the Directive (EU) 2018/851 [23] required Member States to incentivize donations to people in need; in the Farm to Fork strategy (2020) [24], the Commission aims to halve food waste by proposing legally binding targets across the EU by 2023. Yet, in 2011, Italy developed a National Plan for Food Waste Prevention (PINPAS) [25], while in 2016, it approved the so-called Gadda law against food waste [26]. Gadda law, despite being controversial [27] as it is fully inspired to the rhetoric of “educating the consumer” (indeed, implicitly blaming it as highlighted by [28]), has the clear advantage of easing the donation process by filling some gaps existing in the previous norm (“Buon Samaritano”), thus potentially increasing the pool of donors. Moreover, an important role has been given to municipalities, as they are in charge of promoting the practice of doggy bags in restaurants and they have the ability to grant a discount policy on waste tax to retailers who donate. So, from the national to the local level, the food waste policy agenda involves all the levels of government in Italy.

The other side of the food paradox is food poverty. According to Dowler [29], food poverty is “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (p. 709). Eurostat [30] defines food poverty as the incapability of eating a meal based on meat/fish proteins (or veg equivalents) for more than two consecutive days. Food poverty is not the same as poverty, but the two phenomena are strictly related [31]. As shown by Loopstra et al. [32], food poverty started rising again after 2010 in the EU, due to the economic crisis of 2008–2009. In 2018 (last available data), 5.8% of the EU population were severely materially deprived, corresponding to 24 million European citizens in material deprivation [33]. According to Eurostat [30], in 2019, 27.3% of population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Italy. Indeed, Italy, although being a G8 economy, is a country affected by an absolute poverty rate of 6.4% [34], as well as increasing inequalities [35,36] and development gap between the north and south [37]. COVID-19 is already producing a meaningful impact on the economy, as the GDP growth rate was –13% in the second quarter of 2020 [38], increasing food poverty. Relying on these considerations, we are expecting an exacerbation of the food poverty issue along with new poverties due to COVID-19. Indeed, the most important food bank in Italy, Banco Alimentare, which usually assists about 300,000 people in need with food donation every month, declared to have assisted about 450,000 per month during COVID-19 quarantine (March–June 2020) [8]. In the EU and in Italy, there is enough food surplus to face the food poverty COVID-19 emergency; the issue is to understand whether the system of the myriad of food collection and redistribution organisations is reliable in terms of the number of organisations, organizational capacity, and geographical distribution.

In the literature, the food paradox is presented as consequence of two distinct, but interconnected issues: on one side, as a “market failure” connected with the rising of the global agro-industrial food systems [39]; and, on the other side, as a “state failure” related to the neo-liberal dismantling of the welfare state [6]. The “market failure” refers to both the issues of overproduction and unequal distribution of food, which are intrinsic to the neo-liberal global agro-industrial food regime [40]. The failure of “markets” as an institution regulating the food system is widely and deeply explained by Bliss [41], according to who markets create distributive injustice. The state failure refers to what Harvey [42] calls the creative destruction of neoliberal hegemonic culture that has led to the deconstruction of public assets including the welfare state services arranged according to the ideal of universalism. The neo-liberal welfare reform publicly funded social safety nets were being dismantled and government obligations to ensure the adequacy of social benefits were increasingly neglected [6]. Food poverty has been de-politicized, and the failure of policies to reach and respond effectively to the most vulnerable actors in the food systems is one of the reasons explaining the emergence and increasing importance of civil-society-driven food assistance initiatives [11].

### 3. The Response to the Food Paradox in Italy: The Food Banks System

In response to the state and market failures, a landscape of different citizen-led food redistribution initiatives has emerged and expanded from the cities all around the world to provide solutions to the food paradox [43]. According to the literature, at the centre of emergency food aid efforts are “food banks” [44], which generally are community-centred physical [45] or virtual places [46] led by non-profit organizations based on volunteering [47], where surplus food from local producers, food industry, and small and big retail food canteens, and recently also from individuals and families, is solicited, collected, stored, and redistributed to people in need [48], avoiding any food waste or misuse [47]. In the literature, food banks are highly contested because they do not aim to address the structural causes, but rather they only intervene on the effects of the food paradox [11]. The presence of a food bank in a geographical area guarantees better access to food for those who are pushed out from food provision for economic reasons, so it undoubtedly has a beneficial impact [49]. Nourishing people in need with negative externalities of the market (surplus and waste food) is indicative of a specific political choice, which aims at solving structural problems of the economy with individualistic solutions [50,51], thus not questioning the justice issue in the system, but supporting the system in place [52,53]. In other words, it is a very effective short-term solution that cures the symptom rather than the causes [27,54] and, at the same time, enhances the neoliberal agenda in the food system [11].

In Italy, in addition to Banco Alimentare, which, along with Caritas and Last-Minute Market, are the major and oldest entities dealing with food recovery and redistribution, a certain number of bottom-up initiatives have flourished in the last years, at the local and national level. Banco Alimentare is a food bank as defined by [45], namely it offers physical places to which one can bring and store food to be distributed later on. In other words, food is collected, transported, and stored in food hubs, and only then redistributed, typically to associations in direct contact with beneficiaries. In the North of Italy, the experience of Last-Minute Market became mainstream as well. The difference between the two models is relevant, as Last-Minute Market does not provide food hubs to store the collected food, but it creates direct relations and enables both the donors and recipients to be independent, by offering them capacity-building activities and organizational support to work together without middle stages. Last-Minute Market clearly intends to overcome the step where food is transported, stored, and then transported to beneficiaries, for environmental reasons; the rationale behind this choice is that food recovery needs to be both ethically and environmentally sustainable. The organization is consistent with the food bank definition provided by [46], who understand that a food bank is a non-profit organization of social solidarity that distributes food through a wide variety of non-profit institutions of social solidarity, which feed low-income people. Other local urban experiences of social innovations in food redistribution have developed in the last years, such as Avanzi Popolo [55], but, being recently born, their sustainability over time and scalability need to be verified. Moreover, these initiatives are especially most often located in urban areas and not homogeneously at national level, thus showing again that areas characterized by higher rates of marginality and poverty may be left behind.

### 4. The Transformative Potential of Food Redistribution Initiatives: A Conceptual Framework

#### 4.1. The Theoretical Background

The theoretical background from which we have developed our PAHS (prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability) conceptual framework for exploring the transformative potential of redistribution initiatives and, more specifically, food banks, relies on different theorization streams: first, on grassroot sociotechnical innovation theory [56] and, secondly, on four different theorizations of food redistribution, including a self-organising food community [57], urban food commons [58], and autonomous food space [59].

Building on the work of [56], in this paper, we frame food redistribution initiatives as “social innovations” and, more specifically, as community-led grassroots socio-technical

innovation, which can be defined as “networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved” (p. 585). These innovations are oriented to two main goals [60]: on the one hand, to find immediate solutions to satisfy needs or address socio-environmental issues and, on the other side, to develop a new narrative alternative to the mainstream hegemonic regime, which includes re-framing and re-ordering of social values. In this paper, to explore food redistribution initiatives, we combine the social and the technical dimensions of innovation. In the community-based food assistance initiatives, the social dimension of innovation of connectivity between people and places prevails on the technological one, but these initiatives also stress the role of ICT as an important technology enabling horizontal connectivity and bottom-up participation [60,61].

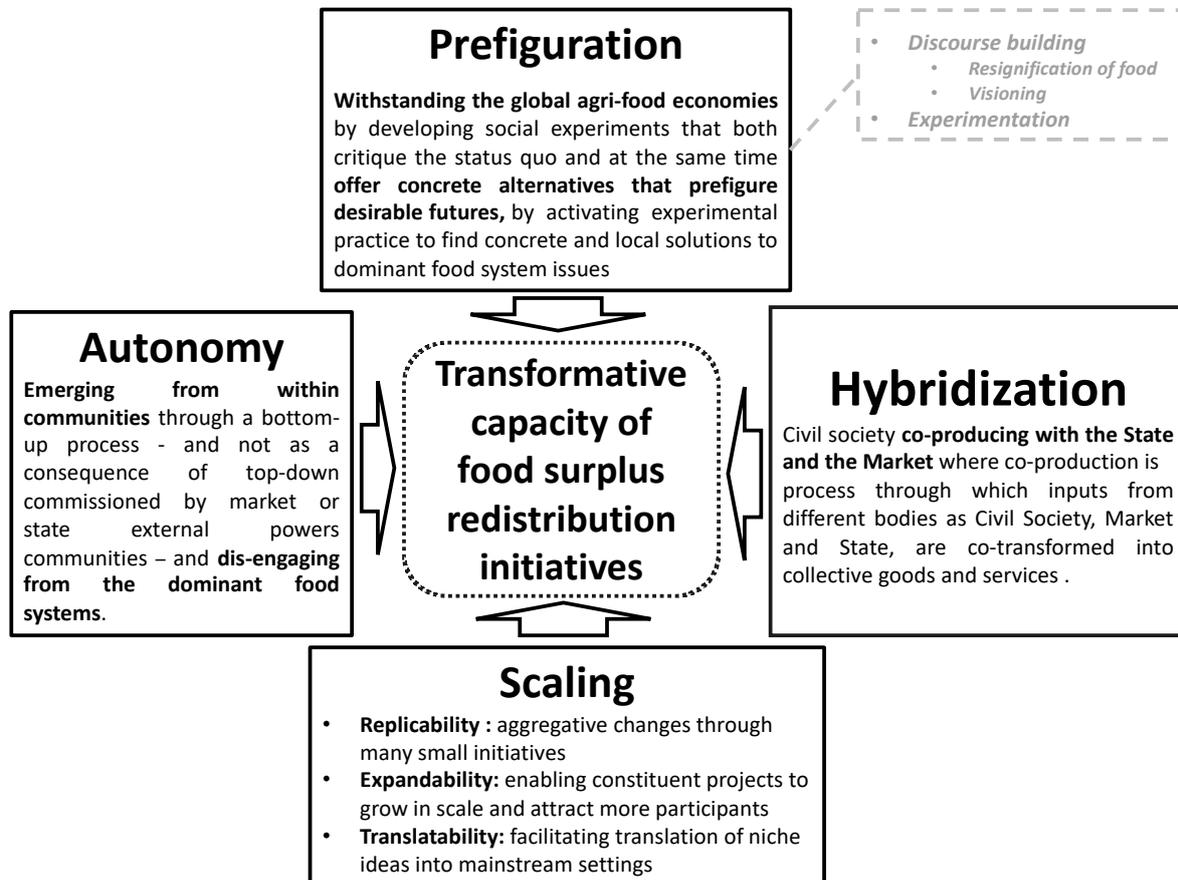
As argued by Harvey [42], the transformative capacity of food redistribution means structurally addressing the overproduction and the unequal distribution of food, which represent the two sides causing the “food paradox”. Therefore, food redistribution contributes to sustainability transition only if it challenges the way the global food system is organised. According to the authors, this requires food movements acting alternatively to the dominant food regime along two distinct, but inextricable dimensions: discursively, by contesting the food regime, and operationally, by coordinating efforts to find concrete and local solutions to food system problems. Not all the redistribution initiatives possess a transformative capacity, which appears to be promised by self-organisation. In building our conceptual framework, in this paper, we refer to two key concepts that are constitutive of self-organisation: autonomy and expansion. Autonomy is about self-organizations emerging bottom-up from within communities, and not as something top-down commissioned by market or state external powers. Autonomy is about being positioned outside the industrial regimes, including incumbent institutional arrangements. Notwithstanding, the authors of [57] recognise that self-organisation is never wholly alternative to, and separate from, dominant socio-technical structures, and social innovation often follows a dialectical process in which transformative moments and capture alternate. Expansion requires relationships and coordination at a broader scale; it also requires development platform and infrastructure investments that may allow for standardization, co-optation, and subordination to the conventional food system. The risk of expansion is that it may compromise the autonomy and overall orientation of the self-organized community-led food redistribution initiatives.

To explore the potential for food to be a site and subject of social transformation, Wilson [59] has developed the concept of “autonomous food space”, which refers to socio-economic spaces of imagination and experimentation where people seek to further ‘non-capitalist’ forms of the political, social, and economic organisation of food systems. The theorization of autonomous food spaces is built on the concept of “autonomy”. As stressed by [59], the concept of “autonomy” “brings considerations of power relations and equity to the forefront and situates food within the broader context of non-capitalist communities seeking to build relationships of mutual aid and non-market exchanges” (p. 9). In defining “autonomous food spaces”, the word “autonomy” does not mean that they have rid themselves of capitalism. Autonomous food spaces are not positioned outside the dominant regime, but rather they have a commitment to disengage from the conventional neoliberal food system, and this commitment operates through imagination and experimentation of new social and economic realities based on different values such as freedom, self-organization mutual aid, and solidarity. Autonomy, therefore, is not a static model or set of relationships, but rather a process of disengagement that comes through affirming different values and materializes through community self-organisations.

#### 4.2. The PAHS Model

In this paper, we consider food redistribution initiatives as grassroot socio-technical innovations whose transformative potential is explored through an analytical framework

built around four dimensions: prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability (PAHS) (Figure 1). These are the elements that determine the transformational potential of this initiative, which is framed within the idea of “interstitial transformation” [13].



**Figure 1.** PAHS (prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability) conceptual model.

**Prefiguration.** Wilson [59] conceptualises autonomous food spaces as spaces of imagination and experimentation. The combination of these two concepts represents at best the notion of prefiguration, which is considered the distinctive feature of what have been called “new social movements” [62], and particularly of the food movement [63]. The food movement is prefigurative because it withstands the global agri-food economies by developing social experiments that both critique the status quo and at the same time offer concrete alternatives that prefigure desirable futures. As stressed by Spring and Biddulph [57], redistributive initiatives can be considered transformative if they contextually contest the global food regime and they activate practice to find concrete and local solutions to food system issues; in other words, if they are prefigurative. In the case of redistributive initiatives, contestation does not refer to mass political protest along the streets, but rather in framing and discourse building and visioning. The first discursive step to develop a transformative initiative is the resignification of food from “commodity” to food as “commons”. Food markets and food economies are traditionally considered as their own type because they link nature and society, and food is a human physiological necessity, without which we do not exist [41,64]. The commodification of food describes the process through which food as an essential element of life has been transformed into a private, mono-dimensional commodity for mass consumption in a globalized market [65]. As a commodity and a private good—rival and excludable—food is exchange in the market for its “exchange value”—its economic value—while neglecting all the other social and environmental values. The allocation of food thus depends on short-run profitability expressed in terms of monetary

value, and not on what is socially desirable as meeting human nutritional needs [41]. The de-commodification and commoning of food start with the re-conceptualization of food as “essential to the satisfaction of a human need (nutrition + culture + community), with justice, democracy, and the inherent recognition of the ecological limits and moral obligations as pivotal elements [65]. The second discursive step to develop a transformative initiative is defining visions of preferable futures built around different values such as mutual aid, reciprocity, social justice, solidarity, and cooperation, all of them alternative from those imposed by neoliberal capitalism. These visions of preferable futures are thus translated into community experimentations, whose transformative potential depends on their autonomy and hybridization. Finally, these social experiments need to be scaled to influence the dominant food regimes.

**Autonomy.** Transformative redistribution initiatives rise from self-organized communities. Indeed, autonomy is the foundational feature of self-organising food communities [57], urban food commons [58], and autonomous food spaces [41]. Autonomy means that redistributive initiatives emerge from within communities through a bottom-up process and not as a consequence of top-down commission by the market or communities of state external powers [57]. Self-organisation is never wholly alternative to, and separate from, dominant socio-technical structures; therefore, autonomy refers to the process of disengagement from the dominant food systems.

**Hybridization.** Directly connected with the concept of autonomy is hybridization. In this paper, we consider the “mutual aid” and the “charity food” models suggested by [57] as Weberian ideal types. Although abstract distinctions between the two models can be made, the reality is always more complex than the conceptual categories; there are no clear boundaries between them and hybridity is the natural state of both types of model. Furthermore, “territorial autonomy” [57] acknowledges the realities of compromise and contingency. Food commons is understood by [58] as a self-organized system with minimal or no reliance on the market or state. In the critical literature, initiatives supporting food redistribution have most often been viewed as symbiotic to the state. According to [13], symbiotic transformations are those where social movements methodically engage the state to advance their objectives and they do not challenge the dominant power structures. While the concept of autonomy in [62] is built on “alterity”, in this paper, we suggest to link autonomy to the concept of hybridization, which stresses the potential of co-production with the state and the market. The concept of co-production, which is defined as a “process through which inputs from individuals who are not “in” the same organization are transformed into goods and services” [66] (p. 1073), has been developed by Elinor Ostrom to bridge what she calls the “great divide” among state, market, and civil society. According to [66], this “great divide” is a “conceptual trap arising from overly rigid disciplinary walls surrounding the study of human institutions” (p. 1073). From a co-production perspective, food redistributive initiatives, such as urban food commoning, can be self-organized, but their transformative potential can be enhanced by a co-production between the state and civil society. Indeed, as stressed by Ostrom, the co-production of commons by government agencies and citizens organized into polycentric systems (decentralized and democratic) is crucial for achieving higher levels of welfare. The concepts of co-production and hybridization can also serve to describe the potentially transformative relationship between civil society and the market. New forms of economy can emerge from the co-production between civil society and the market such as the “food solidarity economy” [67] and the “community economies” [68]. This occurs when the market as a form of exchange is re-embedded in communities and re-configured through ethics around a plurality of social values, like social solidarity, which in this paper, is considered a transformative force. Indeed, in food redistribution, social solidarity is not only a reaction to the “food paradox”, but, as stressed by Bernaschi [69], it is also as a strategic tool for boosting collective empowerment and social transformation [70,71].

**Scalability.** In this paper, we refer to the idea of “interstitial transformation”, developed by [13], which “envisions transformation largely as a process of metamorphosis in which

relatively small transformations cumulatively generate a qualitative shift in the dynamics and logic of a social system” [13]. Indeed, innovation niches need to scale (up and out) to influence dominant regimes, and this occurs through the following:

- Enabling replication of projects within the niche, bringing about aggregative changes through many small initiatives;
- Enabling constituent projects to *grow in scale* and attract more participants;
- Facilitating translation of niche ideas into mainstream settings.

Investigating the transformative capacity of redistributive initiatives means to explore the scaling potential and, therefore, the replicability, expandability, and translatability of these initiatives [60] (p. 384). The scaling process is facilitated by networking and learning. Networking activities support niches when they embrace many different stakeholders, bringing more resources to support the niche’s growth. Learning processes can support niche growth more effectively when it contributes not only to “first-order learning”, where people acquire everyday knowledge and expertise, but also to ‘second-order learning’, where people question the assumptions of regime systems [60]. The expansion of self-organizing community is also risky. The risk of expansion is that it may compromise the autonomy, overall orientation, and democracy of community-led initiatives. Self-organisation is not about absence of central control, but rather democratic accountability, distribution of power, flexibility, and capacity to learn, which can be compromised by expansion processes.

## 5. Methodology

The initiative was examined through a qualitative approach based on the intrinsic case study of [72], structured in two phases. The association was approached in the event of a national meeting of a network (“Politiche locali del cibo”) in 2019, where they had illustrated their project, which sounded immediately of interest for the reflection on the transformative power of food banks. In their speech, they highlighted their “bottom up” nature and autonomy both from religious and state agencies; moreover, they were born in a territory where the social capital is very low and such initiatives are not frequent, to the best of our knowledge (this peculiarity was confirmed later on, see par Section 6.1).

During the first literature review phase, criteria for assessing the transformative capacity of surplus food redistribution initiative were identified, namely, prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability (PAHS). Furthermore, questionnaires were developed based on previous studies.

The second phase was based on four rounds of structured and semi-structured interviews to coordinators, founders, and volunteers (8 people on the whole; 5 volunteers of the collection/delivery and 3 specific-tasks volunteers). The methodology was revised because of COVID-19 restrictions in June 2020.

The research plan was structured as follows:

1. A literature review phase, where the most appropriate questionnaire was selected and adapted to the needs of our case and the material for the creation of an analytical framework aimed at assessing the transformative potential of the initiative was detected;
2. A phase dedicated to delivery of the first questionnaire (June 2020) and the first semi-structured interviews (August 2020);
3. A writing and reflection phase: the case study was drafted according to the initial plan, then results were elaborated according to a SWOT analysis and discussed with the volunteers in a second semi-structured interview (September 2020) based on our analytical framework;
4. Two final deep interviews to the president and vice president of the association in November 2020.

We decided to use unstructured and semi-structured interviews as the main methods after a short, preliminary questionnaire, as the latter implies pre-determined foci and

concepts [73] that we wanted openly avoid. The questionnaire was inspired by the one of [47] (pp. 98–99) for the first round; then, an original semi-structured interview was used for the second round, aimed at clarifying some issues that emerged after the first analysis. Third, an interview was based on SWOT analysis for the third round, where participants were openly asked to list the pros and cons and threats and opportunities of their experience, and they were discussed against a preliminary elaboration made by the authors; in the fourth round, the vision, misión, and values of the founders, along with their motivations, were enquired in order to classify the whole approach according to the PAHS scheme. All the interviews were run between June and November 2020 via online platforms (Skype), because of COVID-19 restrictions.

## 6. Results and Discussion

### 6.1. The Social Context

Basilicata is a region of South Italy, counting only two big municipalities (Matera and Potenza) and 553,254 inhabitants, with a constant decreasing rate since 2002 (with the exception of the years 2003 and 2013) [74]. The negative rate is mostly due to a low new born rate, while a positive death and migration rate has been recorded since 2015. The unemployment rate is 10%, against the 17% average of Southern Italy (2018) [74]. The absolute poverty rate is 17.9%, against the national average of 11.8% (2018) [74]. Low per capita income and low consumption standards, of both food and non-food goods, and a weak attitude to housing mobility concur to draw an anthropogeographic identity defined as “frugal by nature” [75].

According to our respondents, when the association IoPotentino started with its activity of food recovery and donation, no food banks were available in the municipality of Potenza, not even Banco Alimentare, which is the older and most widespread distribution organization in Italy. Food banks’ presence depends, first, on the presence of responsive and committed retailers; and secondly on a pool of volunteers, indeed by an active and involved community, usually measured through the social capital [76] indexes. Based on the social capital indexes created by [77] and [78], and whose relationship with food waste is discussed in [78], Potenza is characterised by a social capital lower than the average. According to the definition of [76] of social capital, trust is also an important component to be considered; [74] reports about a lower rate of social trust in the Region Basilicata as well. Indeed, social trust for the year 2019, measured as a dichotomous variable [74], is reported as 19.4% (most people deserve to be trusted) against 79.3% (we need to be careful of other people), whereas the national average is 23.9–74.6%. On the contrary, the number of people involved in volunteering activities in 2018 in Basilicata Region was about 12%, against an average in the southern regions of 9% [74]. However, these measures are provided with reference to region only and not to the municipality.

### 6.2. The Story and Activity of Magazzini Sociali

Magazzini Sociali is a project of IoPotentino, a cultural organisation born in Potenza in 2010. From 2010 to 2014, IoPotentino was focused on organizing cultural events promoting local identity and cultural resources, including local food products. At the time, in addition to cultural events, the organisation was also involved in social initiatives, by supporting other local organisations. They distribute money from fund raising to other local organisations involved in social projects and they supported CARITAS, an international organisation of the Catholic Church, during “food collection” campaigns. To make their solidarity initiative very transparent, they develop by themselves a management and information application software for tracing donations. This application software allows donors to know in real time the beneficiary of their donations. Only afterwards did they realize that they had created an operational tool that could have been used for surplus food collection and for the fight against food waste through solidarity redistribution. IoPotentino started initiatives of food surplus redistribution in 2015 with the project Avanzi Grazie, which evolved and became, together with other small projects and initiatives, Magazzini Sociali.

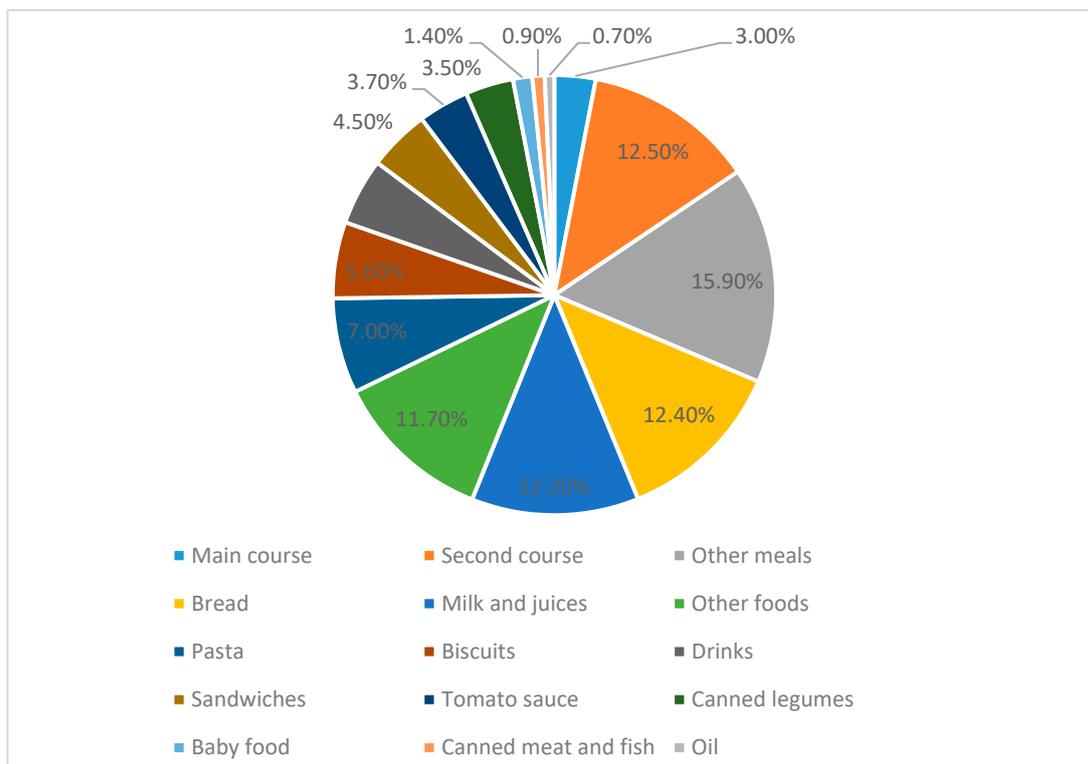
When they started with surplus food redistribution, the political, social, and institutional context was different from now: Gadda Law did not exist yet and none of the “national circuit” organisations specializing in food redistribution worked in the Municipality of Potenza. Food redistribution was provided by disarticulated and spontaneous actions organized by single parishes. In 2016, IoPotentino opened their food hub, which covers a surface of 88 sqm, composed of an office, a room for the dry food donations, and a room with fridges and refrigerators for fresh food items. The association relies on its online platform to manage the exchange and the stock of the material (both surplus food and the financial donations). One of the volunteers created the online platform, so the costs were limited to licensing and hosting of the server. In 2019, the online platform was improved through an application able to read the barcode, which allows detecting and recording the date of recovery and donation, the typology of food (fresh/dry), and the information about the specific food item, with the weight and the name of the operator who handled the product during the process. All the information collected through the scanning generates a new label, which is attached to the product.

Thirty volunteers run the weekly work of collection, portioning, and distribution of surplus food, with a scheduled work shift. The volunteers are people who have approached the project following specific time windows dedicated to recruitment. From January to September of each year, those who want to become a volunteer contact the association and follow a specific selection process, which consists firstly of a motivational interview and a training course, lasting four meetings. Each volunteer can decide to dedicate her/himself to a specific activity among those of the recovery of surplus or distribution and must guarantee an availability of at least 2 h per week, for an overall time of at least 80 h per year. After the first approach, only those who, in the interview phase, show strong motivation and a sense of responsibility can become operational. During the summer, a holiday plan is set up, useful for planning the activities to be carried out on a weekly basis in order to ensure the normal continuation of recoveries and distribution. The volunteers are not part of the beneficiary families, but it is in the intention of the project to follow up in this direction, in order to work also on the integration and reciprocity.

The training course of four classes includes the HACCP certification, issued by a food technologist who also deals with the drafting of the manual for correct hygiene and operational practices, in use for the food recovery and donation activities. The volunteers are all covered with a civil liability and accident insurance policy. All costs incurred for training, the HACCP certifications, and insurance are fully covered by the association.

Since 2014, Magazzini Sociali has collected 108,000 euros from voluntary donations. At the date of 30 June 2020, 39 tons of food had been collected, corresponding to 5800 donations and 4300 deliveries to families (Figure 2). The most frequently donated products are other meals bread, milk, and juices.

Cooked food is collected and donated as well if it has not been handled and served. The process foresees the portioning in single-trays, stored and transported in isothermal trays. The collection of cooked food is allowed only at 30 min or less from the food hub, and if the donations do not happen within the same day, it is immediately frozen. The donors are mostly retailers (medium and large), bakeries, fruits and veg shops, and restaurants. The recipients are 446 families who subscribed to the project and collect their food donation based on a calendar, in churches or associations. The organisation reported a sharp increase in new beneficiaries during the second wave of COVID-19, mainly people who did not know how to challenge the new poverty condition into which they had suddenly fallen. One of our interviewees tells about new donations made by retailers and restaurants only for marketing reasons, rigging up without the support of any association. Yet, also new associations are suddenly born, and it is not clear if they fully comply with the hygiene standards and requirements for food donation.



**Figure 2.** Food donations at 30 June 2020, Magazzini Sociali, Potenza (IT).

As a latest initiative, the association launched a beer (La166) produced using recovered bread, the revenues of which are used for fund raising activities.

Lately, in 2020, IoPotentino gained a regional project along with a large number of partners, including the University of Basilicata. IoPotentino has the role of leader and it is in charge of promoting a holistic food strategy for the entire region, based on the prototype of the Matera Food Atlas (“Atlante del Cibo di Matera”, [79]), developed by the university.

### 6.3. Interviews in SWOT Analysis According to the PAHS Model

The result of the analysis is also reported in the form of a SWOT analysis, which helps to understand not only the transformative potential of Magazzini Sociali, but also the limits and the threats that can hinder its transformation. The strengths and weaknesses (Table 1), opportunities, and threats (Table 2) were first classified by the authors on the basis of the first interviews, then questioned and discussed with the respondents, and finally integrated. The SWOT analysis was integrated into a matrix, which also includes the PAHS model.

**Table 1.** Strengths and weaknesses of the project within the PAHS (prefiguration, autonomy, hybridization, and scalability) analytical framework.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Prefiguration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The collaboration with the region, to set a holistic food policy strategy.</li> <li>- The nutritional gain of the community and of the beneficiaries.</li> <li>- The creation of solidarity ties between people and new connections.</li> <li>- The creation of ties with the local economy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sometimes, the context is still reluctant to accept the activity of the association and to recognize its legitimacy.</li> <li>- "Sometimes we feel we are approached with a patronizing approach from retailers, like if we were "occasional volunteers" [ND: retailers can't see our vision and mission].</li> </ul>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The bottom-up nature of the association, which leaves it free from political control and influences.</li> <li>- The ability to crow fund with success and in autonomy, which leaves it free from political control.</li> <li>- The positive attitude of many retailers, especially small-scale ones, which allows collecting food from 97 shops during a week (bakeries, fruits and veg shops, small supermarkets, medium and large retailers).</li> <li>- The effective delivery and impact monitoring of food donations, due to the direct contact with beneficiaries.</li> <li>- The small geographical extension of the urban area, which allows reaching all families and peripheries.</li> <li>- The motivation of the founders, which allowed a constant and increasing improvement and upscaling of the activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The volunteer work is burdening and time-consuming, especially for those who have a specific role within the association (human resource management, external relations and policy officer, IT).</li> <li>- Some beneficiaries depend on food donations for their daily food security.</li> <li>- New potential retailers who are contacted to enter in the program show interest, but then they ask the association to deal with the shelf management within the shop and to manage all the process (from the selection of products to the new order for what is left on the shelf). This is illegal; moreover, it would be logistically unsustainable if this process would be applied to all donors.</li> </ul>
Hybridization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The collaboration with the region.</li> <li>- The success of volunteer recruiting, which allows always having 30 persons actively working for the associations, with strong motivation and accountability.</li> <li>- The capillary widespread on the municipal territory, which allows reaching 446 families, regardless of their different degrees of integration within the municipal territory.</li> <li>- The positive attitude of the local administration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Retailers are not aware that, by recovering food, they can devote less money to waste management.</li> <li>- There are no incentives to promote the food donation at municipal level.</li> <li>- "Sometimes we feel that our real competitors are the waste management companies."</li> <li>- Retailers do not realize the advantages of being structurally involved in the program.</li> <li>- Lack of a food waste recovery culture and its importance.</li> </ul>
Scalability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The vision of becoming a regional hub of collection and redistribution of food surplus</li> <li>- Collaboration with the University through the researchers of the Food Atlas, used as a knowledge and management platform for the process.</li> <li>- Collaboration with universities to structure research agreements, training through internships and recruitment of volunteers among students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of a food waste recovery culture and its importance.</li> <li>- The volunteer work is burdening and time-consuming for those who have a specific role within the association (human resource management, external relations and policy officer, IT).</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Opportunities and threats of the project within the PAHS analytical framework.

	Opportunities	Threats
Prefiguration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The municipality of Potenza might result in a more sensitive city towards the SDG 12.3 of the Agenda 2030, if the work of the association is confirmed and enhanced over time.</li> <li>- Surrounding areas and municipalities may have a protocol to start similar activities, for the benefit of their population.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Becoming a simple “charity”, if the members of the association are not able to transfer their vision to new members and would leave the activities.</li> <li>- The risk of losing an ethical and political mission, in view of the grant of regional funding.</li> </ul>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The association is able to identify eligibility and solicit grants and other funding sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The absence of political ties also implies that our activity needs to always be recognized by new political actors; for instance, we fear that our activity might not be appreciated anymore every time we have new elections.</li> <li>- The political turnover puts risk over the interest that the region and the municipality have in the project.</li> </ul>
Hybridization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The project of Magazzini Sociali, now leading the construction of a physical food hub, will further institutionalize our activities and possibly increase the knowledge about the association and food waste.</li> <li>- As the association is the only one operating in the entire region (except CIBUS in the city of Matera), it is building an entire pillar of the regional policy strategy from the bottom for what concerns the food recovery, getting up to providing political advisory on how to implement and enhance donations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If the project does not succeed in finding a way to be institutionalized, at least partially, its sustainability over time is questionable as it depends exclusively on volunteer work that, in certain cases, is highly qualified (human resource management, external relations and policy officer, IT).</li> <li>- By collaborating with the public institutions, there is the risk to lose autonomy.</li> </ul>
Scalability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further funding may lead to further resources, which will likely allow the organization of new activities on food waste (works in schools, for instance).</li> <li>- The connections with public institutions and new actors allow a widespread knowledge about the activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decreased food donations from retailers and manufacturers (potential closings of collaborations due to change in local administrations).</li> <li>- External shocks (such as COVID 19) can always affect distribution activities, leaving those depending on food donations without food (in a state of food insecurity).</li> <li>- Competition with other non-profits for donations.</li> <li>- Many innovations are trying to do the same without proper organization and knowledge about health, hygienic, and sanitary issues.</li> </ul>

#### 6.4. Magazzini Sociali within the PAHS Theoretical Framework

##### 6.4.1. Prefiguration

Prefiguration is a combination of discourse and action. The discursive part of prefiguration is about re-signifying food and defining visions of preferable futures, which are built around values such as sustainability, social justice, solidarity, and cooperation, all of them alternative from those imposed by the neoliberal food system. On the website, the title of the text presenting Magazzini Sociali is as follows: “*Magazzini Sociali, when the city is food for all*”. During the interviews asking about the meaning of this phrase, it clearly emerged that, in Magazzini Sociali, food is not considered a “commodity”, but rather a citizenship right, a “moment of sharing”, as well as a commons. Indeed, they advertise on Facebook a “farmers direct to consumer store” approach to the project with a picture of a

box of vegs and the following text: “the food is a commons”. Furthermore, in Magazzini Sociali, food surplus redistribution to people in need is not conceptualized as charity, but as “circular solidarity”. During the interview and talking about the involvement of people in need in Magazzini Sociali, the President of IoPontino argued that they approached these beneficiaries explaining that “*Magazzini Sociali is a project of circular and solidarity economy, not a charity, and that they [beneficiaries] are important because they contribute to the project and to society by avoiding the waste of food*”. Charity is top-down and unidirectional, where the providers have resources they dispense to those less fortunate. It is founded on a fundamental assumption that there are those who are above and those who are below and, therefore, it implies an unequal relationship and a division between “us” and “them”. Charity is not aimed at changing the social contradictions generating the need, but rather it accepts them, and it aims just to alleviate the consequences of these contradictions. On the contrary, solidarity acknowledges a problem of social justice with the system. It intervenes concretely to alleviate suffering, but, in a different frame, it requires the belief in a common interest, and the relationship between provider and beneficiaries is horizontal. As in the case of Magazzini Sociali, beneficiaries are not passive receivers, but as the donors, Magazzini Sociali and the other partners contribute to the social and environmental wellbeing of the city by avoiding food waste by consuming food surplus. Solidarity also means moving from “volunteering to social entrepreneurship” and is built, from the 166 beer experience, on what we can call the “166 solidarity economy”, where profits are re-invested in Magazzini Sociali. As described during the interviews, the concept of “circular solidarity” has three intertwined meanings. The first refers to the involvement of local actors as much as possible—the “circular solidarity” project involves 26 partners including the farmers organization. The second refers to the fact that food surplus is primarily directed to people in need, but the exceeding food surplus is for all the citizens of Potenza. The third refers to the “circular economy”, which describes “an economic system that is based on business models which replace the ‘end-of-life’ concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes [ . . . ] with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, which implies creating environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations” [80] (p. 225). In addition, to build a “circular solidarity economy”, the vision of Magazzini Sociali goes beyond the post-consumption, the last phase of the food supply chain, and includes the entire system, including production and distribution. This is the reason that one of the partners of circular solidarity is a regional farmers organization. As stressed by Valentina during the interview, “*I would be more than happy to talk about a political observatory on food waste and also a food policy for our city. That because we have all the conditions necessary for developing an inclusive process with food movements, food redistribution initiatives, also promoting sustainable model of production*”.

#### 6.4.2. Autonomy

Around Magazzini Sociali, IoPotentino has developed a self-organizing community trying to fix, to the extent of its possibility, what has been called the state failure. The self-organized community promoted by IoPotentino involves donors, other local organizations, and beneficiaries, and provides social welfare to people in need, independently from the state and the market. The autonomy of the organization has always been a priority in both financial and political terms. Since the beginning, IoPotentino has always self-financed its activities. The incomes derived from cultural events or initiatives were employed to finance the organization and, eventually, additional proceeds were invested in solidarity initiatives. Since the first steps in solidarity surplus food redistribution, IoPotentino self-financed all its activities: renting and equipping the space, buying transport for food collection and distribution. They received just 5000 euros per year from a local bank. The organization financed its activities through gadgets, the “I Love Pz” t-shirt, public events, small private local donations, and many other initiatives, as described above. In the last two years, through IoPotentino’s website, donations and  $5 \times 1000$  are also possible. From a political

perspective, the leaders of the organization stress the independence of IoPontino from politics. For the organization, institutionalization is not a priority. According to them, institutionalization could be a “*double edged weapon*”, with the risk of being politically exploited from political parties and losing their autonomy.

#### 6.4.3. Hybridity

The independence of IoPotentino from politics does not mean *not collaborating* with public institutions; on the contrary, they have been directly involved in drafting the Regional Law [81], their last “circular solidarity” project was financed by regional public funding, and the project’s partnership includes the municipality and other local institutions. Furthermore, they ask for regional and local “roundtables” that local actors involved in food assistance (public institutions and local associations) are called to attend, wherein they discuss issues and coordinate activities. The relationship between IoPotentino and public institutions can be considered as hybrid. Indeed, they maintain their autonomy from “politics”, but they collaborate with public institutions in co-construction and co-production of public policies [82]. Co-construction refers to the participation by stakeholders in the design of public policy, and IoPotentino has been involved in drafting the Regional Law. Co-production refers to participation by stakeholders from civil society and the market in the implementation of public policy and, in implementing the Regional Law, the region financed the “circular solidarity” project. Furthermore, as markets are a social construction and, at the same time, they are socially constructed, we can argue that IoPotentino has started developing a new local food surplus hybrid market. As described in the circular solidarity project document presented for regional funding, among others, the scope of the project is to shift from volunteering to social entrepreneurship and to build a social economy. The “166” beer is the first step; in 2021, a fruit jam will be launched under the tag of “166”; the final goal is to be able to offer a diversified full basket of foodstuff to be firstly redistributed to people in need and the redistribution surplus potentially sold to all the citizens of Potenza. The scope is to create “a kind of Solidarity-based Purchase Group [83,84] where food comes from surplus, the “ugly but good”. Indeed, the potential of the beer 166 initiative is to develop a new “hybrid food surplus market”. The neoliberal market is based on commercial purposes and short-term financial return, where individual competitors exchange products on the base of their economic exchange values. Instead of commercial purposes, the potential hybrid market of food surplus is oriented on long-run economic returns, and on social (peoples’ needs) and environmental (ecological sustainability) purposes. The relationships between actors involved in the economic exchange are not competitive, but rather cooperative, and the economic exchange value is reconfigured according to other values as sustainability, social justice, and solidarity. The construction of the hybrid food surplus market” deals with disengagement from the neoliberal conventional food market and its contribution to the transition towards a sustainable and just food system.

#### 6.4.4. Scalability

The scalability of a socio-technical grassroot innovation refers to its replicability, expandability, and translatability. Referring to the replicability, in the wake of Magazzini Sociali, other initiatives are blossoming around Potenza and Magazzini Sociali, supporting these initiatives: “*we are collaborating with local government of towns around Potenza, we are talking about town of 7,8 and also 10 thousand inhabitants and thus towns which are relatively important. They started small projects of food surplus collection and distribution and we support these initiatives also from the organizational perspective*”. Furthermore, as Magazzini Sociali is the only organization in the region experienced in food surplus redistribution, it is also supporting the other three projects financed by the Regional Law.

Magazzini Sociali has scaled out and up. It has grown at organizational level, from 10 volunteers in 2015 to 30 volunteers in 2020, and it has expanded the number of donors and the number of families in need, reaching a thousand beneficiaries. As a consequence of this expansion, Magazzini Sociali changed their distributive model. At the beginning,

the Magazzini Sociali hub directly connected the donors with the beneficiaries; in the new model, the Magazzini Sociali hub does not distribute the food surplus directly to the beneficiaries, rather it delivers it to what they call “second level distributors”, which distribute to it beneficiaries (Figure 3).

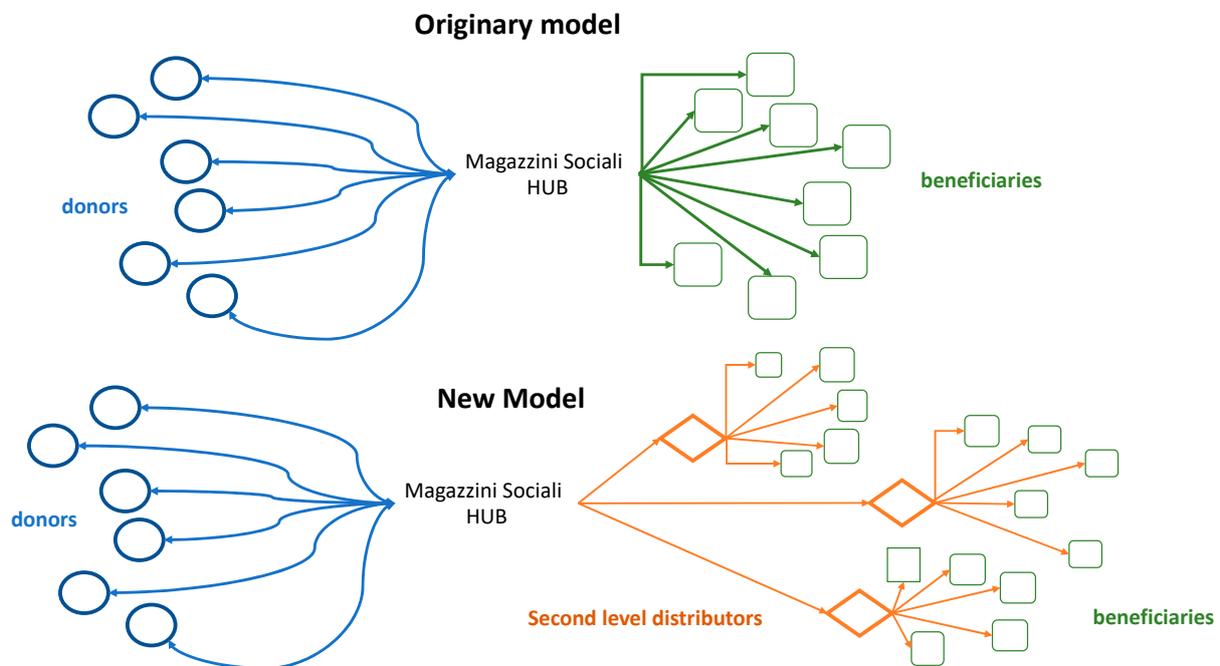


Figure 3. The Magazzini Social distributive model.

With the “Solidarietà Sociale” project, Magazzini Sociali is also scaling-up, which in part refers to reaching upper institutional level. From being a sub-municipal self-organizing community, Magazzini Sociali has reached the municipal level (the Municipality of Potenza is a project promoter), and it has expanded by involving other 22 municipalities, counting 152,000 inhabitants in total. During the interviews, it emerged that two out of the four projects financed by the Basilicata Region asked support to Magazzini Sociali, whereas the vision of Magazzini Sociali is to create and coordinate a distributed regional food hub built around the four projects financed by the Basilicata Region.

The translatability of Magazzini Sociali is strictly intertwined with the hybridity. As translatability refers to facilitating the *translation* of niche ideas into mainstream settings, Magazzini Sociali translated its food surplus redistribution model into the institutional setting of co-construction and co-production of public policies of the Regional Law and into the market by experimenting with a “circular and solidarity market” model, starting with the 166 beer and ready to scale out with other products.

## 7. Conclusions

Food surplus redistribution to people in need is presented as a win-win solution to tackle the food paradox, and food banks are the prevalent form of civil society organizations involved in food aid. Notwithstanding, in the literature, food banks are criticised as a short-term solution that cures the symptom rather than the causes and, at the same time, enhances the neoliberal agenda in the food system. While recognizing the structural and operational limits of food banks, other scholars argue that food banks have transformative potential towards more just and sustainable food systems. In the same fashion, in this paper, we argue that food banks have the potential for food system transformation, and we have developed the PAHS model to investigate the transformative capacity of these initiatives. Prefiguration, hybridity, autonomy, and scalability are the key concepts around which the PAHS model is built. To test the conceptual framework, we investigated the

experience of Magazzini Sociali, a food bank project developed by IoPotentino, a not-for-profit organization operating in Potenza.

Does Magazzini Sociali have a transformative capacity? Following the PAHS model, we can argue that, first of all, Magazzini Sociali is a socio-technical community-led innovation that emerged from the bottom, trying to fix the existing market and state failures in challenging the food paradox. When they started, Gadda Law did not exist yet and none of the “national circuit” organisations specializing in food redistribution were working in the Basilicata Region. Second, Magazzini Sociali is a prefigurative initiative where the food, from a commodity, has been re-signified as a citizenship right and, therefore, as a commons. Furthermore, Magazzini Sociali is not a charity, but a solidarity project with a vision: building a local “circular social economy”, where food surplus is collected, transformed, and distributed not only for people in need, but for all local people. The 166 beer is a seed of the coming local “circular social economy”; it is the starting point for a new hybrid market where the relationships between actors involved in the economic exchange are not competitive, but rather cooperative, and the economic exchange value is reconfigured according to other values such as sustainability, social justice, and solidarity. In addition, IoPotentino works with local public institutions co-producing social and environmental policies. Autonomy is the key asset of Magazzini Sociali; indeed, since the beginning, IoPotentino has always self-financed its activities. The autonomy does not mean that Magazzini Sociali is detached from institutions; they collaborate with local and regional institutions and they get funding from Regional Law, but they avoid the “politicisation” of their initiative and, at the moment, “institutionalisation” is not an option. Finally, Magazzini Sociali is scaling up, it is replicable, and IoPotentino is working with other municipalities to develop initiatives like Magazzini Sociali, which is growing in scale; furthermore, the number of donors, beneficiaries, partners, and volunteers involved the activity is expanding, and it is also translating from niche into mainstream settings by scaling from the local to the regional level.

As a result of the PAHS model analysis, we can argue the Magazzini Sociali is not a “charity” perpetuating the social injustice and unsustainability of the neoliberal food system, but it has the transformative capacity to support the food system transition towards social justice and environmental sustainability. The risk and the peril are the co-optation of the initiative by national players or the institutionalisation by the region. Networking among food banks and other actors of civil society claiming food justice may result in a disruptive change of the food system, overturning the current approach to food waste, which narrates it as a technical and neutral solution to food poverty.

However, the PAHS model can be refined. In this paper, it has been presented as a conceptual framework and a first analysis, but specific indicators of the four pillars that compose it could be enriching. We suggest to adopt the conceptual framework of PAHS in new case studies, and then compare the methodological differences used for the evaluation of each case.

We conclude by arguing that the PAHS has been demonstrated to be an efficacious model to investigate the transformative capacity of food surplus redistribution initiatives, and it would be very interesting to adopt it for a comparative analysis.

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