

Special Issue Distances

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Anna Maria Zaccaria

Maria Camilla Fraudatario



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Gabriele Qualizza, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

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Urban Distance, Civic Virtues, and Bottom-Up Solidarity in Milan: the Case of Brigade Volontarie per l'Emergenza²

1. Introduction

The measures and restrictions imposed to limit the spread of Coronavirus within urban areas (i.e. mobility limitations, travel restrictions, stay-at-home orders, the closure/limited access to public spaces and facilities) have created social and urban distancing with the outcome of disrupting social interactions, altering the use of public spaces, exacerbating existing social inequalities, and affecting individuals on a psychological and emotional levels (Martinze, Short, 2021). Covid-related outcomes added to the disruptions of proximity bonds and public welfare brought about by neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism can be defined as the extension of market mechanisms to all spheres of social activities, relying on State interventions, such as privatizations (Pinson, Journal, 2016: 371). From a more critical perspective, neoliberalization entails destruction of social relations (proximity bonds), and welfare provisions to pursue the maximization of entrepreneurial freedom, and individual liberty, which became the values of human wellbeing (Harvey, 2006).

In this fashion, urban life becomes dominated by market logic, whereby, market and entrepreneurial opportunities are enhanced but proximity relations are under threat, as well as the capacity of public services to cope with a moment of crises. The urban scale and neoliberalization process are highly interrelated, to the extent that cities "provide fundamental material bases for this process, but also for its contestation" (Pinson, Journal, 2016 p. 137).

Against this backdrop, this study is going to explore how practices of civic mobilization are able to counter the effects of the neoliberal city and reduce urban distances, while becoming practices of contestation (Raffini, Pirni 2019; Harvey, 2006; Brecher *et al.*, 2000). People at the grassroots mobilize and organize into networks "to impose their own needs and interests" (Brecher *et al.*, 2000:ix), practicing solidarity against the neoliberal city. Solidarity holds a transformative power to counter the disruptive effects globalized capitalism, as a form of "contestation from below" (Brecher *et al.*, 2000:ix).

Mutual aid and grassroots solidarity practices emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in the city of Milan. The research identifies three dimensions through which practices of solidarity contributed to the reduction of urban distancing: the "re-politicization" of solidarity; the empowerment of citizens; and the reinterpretation of spaces.

The work is based on the third-mission initiative³ of the Milano-Bicocca University, specifically the "URBANA" initiative⁴ organized by the Department of Sociology and Social Research. The 2021 edition (May-September), examined the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Milan. Nine teams of scholars investigated various topics related to the pandemic's effects, including boundaries, mobility, housing, food, waiting time, and community building; see Xxxxx; xxxxx; xxxxx (2022) for the contribution to URBANA 2021 initiative about Milan food landscape and Covid-19. Each team produced a research video using smartphones and qualitative research methodologies. This study focuses on the food working group, which analyzed the Brigade Volontarie per l'Emergenza case (Volunteer Emergency Brigades – hereinafter BVEs)⁵

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3 Third Mission in universities refers to their societal or public engagement activities that go beyond traditional teaching (first mission) and research (second mission).

4 Info about URBANA is available online: <https://www.urbana.sociologia.unimib.it/>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFSL_KgljHQ, <https://www.urbana2021.sociologia.unimib.it/urbana-2021>.

5 The URBANA video from the *food* working group is available here: https://youtu.be/whY_tPyxNng.

The BVEs is an association of mutual aid, set up as a Volunteer Organization, born in Milan during the Covid-19 emergency. It addresses the well-known problems related to our unequal and individualistic society (Harvey, 2006; Pinson, Journal, 2016), but also new needs such as growing food insecurity. It was chosen because they contributed to the local food needs of families and fragile people in need, acting as a connecting and empowering actor able to reduce the urban distance imposed by the Covid-19 containment rules.

The article delves into their role in the city, discussing the spatial and social consequences of these practices. It provides a contextual background (section 2), methodology (section 3), case study (section 4), and analysis of the results (section 5).

2. Poverty and food insecurity: some figures

In Europe, one in five Europeans (21.9% of the European population) was at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2020 (Eurostat, 2021). The pandemic heightened existing inequalities, resulting in the emergence of “new poor” and the so-called “new working poor”: families not at risk until Covid-19 found themselves in an unprecedented condition of indigence, due to job losses or income reduction associated with the pandemic (Emergency, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2020). Italy as well has been harshly affected, with the year 2020 witnessing the highest rates of absolute poverty since 2005. Almost 6 million individuals (9.4% of population in 2020 against 7.7% in 2019) found themselves in conditions of poverty (Istat, 2021). According to civil society organizations, Italy is experiencing a real social emergency. In 2020, one-third of the population experienced an average income loss of 25%. Many workers faced prolonged unemployment, resulting in severe food insecurity for the first time (ActionAid, 2020; Demena *et al.*, 2022). Marchetti and Secondi (2022), developed an analytical tool to estimate the “at-risk-of-food-poverty” (ARoFP) rate and food insecurity index, founding that in Italy individuals at risk of food poverty or food insecurity amount to 22.3% of the entire population⁶.

Additionally, food prices reached new peaks in both 2020 and 2021 (FAO, 2021), and FAO (2022) indicates that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further worsened the situation. With global fluctuations in food prices, reduction of incomes, increasing inequalities, and widespread loss of jobs related to the pandemic, the scenario is alarming. The impacts affect not only vulnerable groups but also affluent urban areas, including Milan, which experienced a rise in poverty and a significant increase in support requests during the first lockdown. Milan is renowned as one of the wealthiest cities in the country based on consumption rates (Sole24Ore, 2022). However, during the first lockdown in March 2020, the city witnessed a worsening of poverty, with Caritas Ambrosiana, an Italian charity organization, reporting a staggering 121% increase in support requests (2020). Economic difficulties are affecting growing segments of the population, leading to a surge in poverty rates and the emergence of unexpected groups experiencing food insecurity. These groups, known as the “new poor”, consist of individuals who never sought assistance before the Covid-19 pandemic and were not detectable by regular social assistance and welfare services (Emergency, 2021).

Against this backdrop, during the first lockdown in Milan, as well as in many other European cities, autonomous and independent citizens, municipal institutions, and a range of civic actors mobilized to meet the emerging food security needs of the local community. Their action reduced not only the physical urban distance imposed by lockdown, connecting and supporting people in need, but also the social one, feeding (and being fed by) civic virtues while promoting bottom-up solidarity. Indeed, the research explores community responses that spontaneously emerged in the city of Milan to address food insecurity, and in particular the BVEs case, as a reaction and a form of contestation.

6 According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a person is food insecure when regular access to enough nutritious (and safe) food for growth and development and active and healthy life is lacking (FAO, 1996). This condition can occur due to the unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to access food (Barrett, 2010).

3. The methodology

In line with the URBANA initiative's principles, the research team recognizes the importance of active involvement of Academia in shaping urban policies and informing citizenry. They also emphasize the significance of including engaged citizens and their grassroots organizations, in the knowledge production process about urban phenomena. The research team values the data and knowledge generated by the BVEs, considering it as a vital component of the analysis. To achieve this, a desk analysis was conducted, reviewing relevant academic literature as well as literature produced by the BVEs. Topics covered included mutual aid, grassroots solidarity, network and relational capital at the urban level, food security, and the repurposing of spaces. Additionally, the content of the BVEs' website and Instagram page was carefully examined and analysed.

Furthermore, a series of interviews were conducted in May and June 2021 with key informants of the BVEs' work: two in-depth interviews were carried out with the representatives of Coordination Brigade and Social Research Brigade (Gramsci Brigade); four semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of Baggio Neighbourhood Brigade (Emma Brigade) and Support Brigade (Longo Brigade). In addition, a semi-structure interview was also conducted with the President of Recup, a local organization that received a special mandate from the Milan Municipality to save food from waste in major Milan marketplaces, a key partner of BVEs. A second round of interviews was conducted in April 2022 as follow-up with the Recup President and representatives of the Support Brigade. Interviewees were selected as key informants on the food crisis scenario in Milan and on the functioning of the BVEs, according to their availability for interviews. They came both from associationism and informal groups. Interviews content analysis set out actors' concerns, discourse, and practices related to the pandemic food and poverty crisis (Grant, Iedema, 2005). The analysis helped to understand the BVEs' functioning and contribution to the fast-changing Covid-19 scenario.

In addition, the research team actively participated in the BVEs' voluntary work and initiatives, as volunteers, adopting the participant observation methodology. This approach facilitated a first-hand experience of the emotional and solidaristic motivations that drive civic participation in the BVEs' actions (Vinten, 1994). Active participation was also crucial in enabling a visual, impactful, and in-depth observation of the "food places" and their transformation. By actively engaging in the activities, the researchers were able to witness the interactions and exchanges between the volunteers and beneficiaries. Researchers participated in four moments to observe: 1. places of supply (Ortomercato, Milan wholesale fruits, and vegetable market); 2. places of sorting (two BVEs Hub places); 3. places of distribution (Baggio neighbourhood public park in Milan). These places are different in typology: third-sector organizations or civic associations closed during the Italian lockdown months made their spaces and headquarters available to the BVEs, to sort food to be distributed. Public spaces were also used to meet people and distribute food boxes. Interviews were video recorded, and during participant observations, pictures and footage were taken and impressions were noted. This allowed to testify the emotional scope of the solidaristic action, and to witness how the urban space is modified by solidarity activities.

A content analysis of the visual materials (Bell, 2001) was performed and paired with interviews and desk analysis for a comprehensive restitution of the impact of mutual help activities in Milan on the reduction of urban distancing.

4. The objective of the study: an introduction to Brigade Volontarie per l'Emergenza in Milan

The BVEs were spontaneously born in March 2020 as grass-root units of volunteers, to cope with lockdown times but also to cope with the structural poverty affecting the city. Their mis-

sion is based on three fundamental principles: care, solidarity, and community (BVE, 2021; BVE, 2022). They explicitly position themselves in opposition to the individualistic and poverty-driven dynamics of the neoliberal city (Harvey, 2006; Brecher *et al.*, 2000).

The volunteers of the BVEs come from diverse backgrounds, consisting of ordinary citizens who may not have had prior involvement in politics or volunteering. However, they felt compelled to participate for various reasons, such as responding to feelings of isolation, developing political awareness, upholding ethical and religious values, and seeking personal growth. Above all, their primary motivation is the desire to make a meaningful contribution by taking on responsibilities.

Mutual help and self-organization lay at the very core of the BVEs' action. The boundary between benefits and service is blurred, and many beneficiaries eventually became volunteers.

During the initial phase of the Italian lockdown, the BVEs emerged spontaneously and began assisting individuals in quarantine, providing grocery shopping and medicine. They soon joined forces with Emergency, an Italian NGO renowned for its work in war zones, to support the official city helpline initiative, called *MilanoAiuta*. This collaboration formalized the deliveries to people's doorsteps. After a few weeks of strict lockdown, it became evident that mere grocery deliveries were insufficient. The number of families unable to afford food was growing rapidly. To address this issue, in May 2020, the BVEs, in partnership with Emergency, launched the #NessunoEscluso project. This initiative involved collecting food donations and delivering them directly to food-insecure families. The project's name, "nobody is excluded", reflects its inclusive nature. The significance of #NessunoEscluso lies in its ability to reach marginalized groups, often unknown to the traditional assistance system that do not meet the formal requirements for accessing public aid measures (Emergency, 2021, p. 2).

The City of Milan approved and supported the project acknowledging a lack of an institutional response to the emergency. The BVEs were officially institutionalized as partners of the Municipality of Milan and Emergency in addressing the health and food crisis. Other initiatives for food supplies were realized by institutions like *Banco Alimentare* (a major Italian charity network), as well as private actors including supermarkets and other companies.

With Emergency's organizational and managerial expertise and the active involvement of BVE's volunteers, boxes of dry food and hygiene items were distributed to meet the increasing number of requests. By November 2020, fresh fruits and vegetables were added to the dry food boxes, addressing nutrition and food security concerns. To obtain fresh produce, the BVEs partnered with a local NGO called Recup, whose work is to reduce food waste. According to Recup's President and Support Brigade-Longo, the BVEs collect over 500 kgs of seasonal fresh products from Recup twice a week at the Ortomercato marketplace. This collaboration aims to add to each package approximately 2.5 kg of fresh fruit.⁷

Since the beginning of the #NessunoEscluso project, the BVEs have provided food boxes (both dry and fresh food) to almost 3,000 families (2,978 households) in the city's 9 zone. The project reached almost 12,000 individuals (11,912), of whom 87% never asked for food aid before the pandemic (BVEs, 2021b). Interestingly, the BVEs deliveries touched also *Municipio 1*, namely the most central and wealthy area of the city, corresponding to the historic center (Social Research-Gramsci Brigade, 2020).

The BVEs play several roles within the #NessunoEscluso project. They identify the needs of the beneficiaries through questionnaires, connecting with them and thus establishing a bond of trust; through the territorial Brigades they distribute food boxes at their collection points or, in case of need, at home; they coordinate the distribution, providing support where necessary and weekly appraisals for the inclusion of new beneficiaries (*Ibid*).

The BVEs network comprises over 1,300 volunteers (BVEs, 2021c), who operate at a hyper-local level and maintain close connections with the neighbourhoods they serve. Each brigade unit

⁷ Info taken from interviews with Recup President and Support Brigade-Longo.

is associated with a specific neighbourhood, enabling them to understand and address the unique needs of that community. Alongside these neighbourhood-specific brigades, there are also several brigades with broader roles: the Coordination Brigade oversees the other brigades, the Social Research-Gramsci Brigade collects data on box distribution, and the Psychological Support-Basaglia Brigade provides psychological assistance through a helpline. Additionally, there are two transversal brigades: the Brighella Brigade organizes entertainment activities, such as theatre initiatives, and the Kuliscioff Brigade offers health support, including Covid tests and personal protective equipment (such as face masks).

Furthermore, the BVEs have implemented internal governance mechanisms to ensure their efficient operation (BVEs, 2022). These mechanisms include Inter-Brigade assemblies, Working Tables, a National Committee, and Citizens Committees at the local level. These structures enable effective coordination and decision-making within the BVEs. In terms of organizational structure, the BVEs exhibit dynamism, with approximately 20 to 25 groups actively operating in Milan. However, the precise number of groups may vary as they may merge or divide based on the needs and circumstances. The local presence of the BVEs promotes participatory engagement and collaboration among different neighbourhoods.

The BVEs have a dual mission: to provide immediate assistance during emergencies, and to address long-term socioeconomic and environmental poverty. Their scope extends beyond the city of Milan, encompassing national and international efforts. They engage in diverse projects, including providing educational resources for distance learning, language schools for foreign residents, and solidarity actions in response to conflicts like the Russian-Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, the BVEs have established Casa Della Brigata, a dedicated facility in Milan that accommodates Ukrainian refugees. Their overarching objective is to foster a resilient community that tackles a wide range of societal challenges and creates positive change (BVEs, 2022, 2022c).

5. The dimensions of analysis: a discussion of results

The investigation of the BVEs allowed us to identify three analytical dimensions useful to understand and interpret the BVEs' contribution to a process of reduction of urban distances both in material and immaterial terms. These dimensions are discussed in this paragraph referring to the interviews, testimony, footage and the experiences collected and observed during data gathering. The dimensions of analysis identified are the following:

1. the process of "re-politicization" of solidarity;
2. the creation of new relationships and the empowerment of citizens;
3. the reinterpretation of spaces.

These dimensions are closely connected to the abilities and behaviours that typically promote the common good and the effective functioning of society. What sociologist Christopher Lasch (2001) called the "civic virtues", such as civic engagement, active participation in the community, social responsibility, mutual trust, and respect for others, which are closely related to these dimensions. In addressing the challenges of socio-economic poverty, the BVEs not only contribute to reducing urban distancing (material and immaterial) but also, through the three dimensions, promote these very civic virtues.

5.1 Re-politicisation of solidarity

The research shows that practices of mutual support and grassroots solidarity contribute to a re-politicization of solidarity and citizenship. The practices of participation activated by the BVEs

challenge neoliberal policies and financial capitalism (Pinson, Journal, 2016; Gallino, 2011; Harvey 2006) reversing some of the dynamics of neoliberalism (Brecher *et al.*, 2000; Harvey, 2006). In their action, the BVEs are closed to the so-called Alternative action organizations (AAOs) (among others: Forno, Graziano, 2014; Milbourne, 2013; Moulaert, Ailenei, 2005), described by Zamponi, Bosi (2018, p. 797) as «collective bodies engaged in carrying out alternatives to dominant socio-economic and cultural practices through actions that aim to provide people with alternative ways of enduring day-to-day difficulties and challenges in hard economic times».

As Raffini, Pini (2019) affirm, the expression of innovative practices of participation, promotes a process of re-politicization and empower individuals to make political choices and use solidarity as collective tools. Mutual help promoted by BVEs harnesses the powerful strength of human connection to drive impactful and long-term actions. As an interviewee declared:

«Milan is grappling with multiple challenges including economic hardship, food insecurity, distance learning limitations, lack of devices and internet access, domestic violence, and depression. We have taken a proactive stance to address these issues, recognizing the need for political intervention to drive transformative change in societal dynamics. Balancing political critique with mutual support is a challenging yet empowering endeavour that propels us towards progress.» (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021)

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the shortcomings of the Lombardy regional health system, giving rise to criticisms of the privatization efforts that have taken place over the past 25 years (Brando, 2020). Despite having a high ratio of hospital beds to the population, this alone proved insufficient to handle the surge in cases. According to a recent report by GI-ESCR, Lombardy has one of the most privatized healthcare systems in Italy and Europe (De Falco, 2021), and it is well-established that privatized and commercialized healthcare systems are less effective in responding to crises such as a pandemic. The inadequate health policy response in Lombardy during the pandemic can be attributed, in part, to the high levels of healthcare privatization in the region (*Ibid.*). These findings have intensified the criticisms and, in turn, fuelled the process of re-politicizing solidarity. As a result, citizens have rallied behind the BVEs, actively engaging in civic participation and civil protection measures to provide support and solidarity to the vulnerable members of society.

It should also be remembered that at the very beginning of the lockdown, it was forbidden to leave one's dwelling due to the government-imposed restrictions. In this context, the BVEs challenged the authority and its impositions, fighting to be available to the community, in the streets. Practicing active contestation, the BVEs highlighted the inadequacy of public services, and volunteer associations; providing not only food, but also medical and social assistance (protection devices and assistance for applications for public housing) and encouraging regular people to mobilize. As in Pizzorno (1966), BVEs have encouraged the activation of people not previously involved in solidarity or politics, as a way of political fighting, against the conditions of inequality. This was the first and most influential action of re-politicisation of the BVEs:

«We mobilized individuals who don't typically engage in activism or volunteering, in their first volunteering and political experience. Our organization established a network of local merchants as a community-based supply network, activating social connections and community ties in neighbourhoods [...]. The BVEs bring people together through shared values, aiming for a politicized and united society, where the need for BVEs or solidarity professionals will diminish.» (I., Social Research Brigade, 21 May 2021)

Furthermore, the BVEs volunteers constitute a new political force, originated during very difficult time, that grew stronger and stronger:

«Our volunteers play a crucial role during times of crisis. The involvement of both beneficiaries and volunteers in solidarity has not ceased, even after the most intense months of the emergency. Engaging in beneficial actions fosters a greater willingness for solidarity among people. » (I., Social research Brigade, 21 May 2021)

Acknowledging poverty as a social issue, rather than an individual fault, is a core principle of mutualism (Peet, 1975). Interviews, direct observation, and footage of volunteers and beneficiaries during the distribution of Emergency food boxes showed that hardship and insecurity were intended as a common issue, and a social and political problem. The BVEs foster trust in grassroots politics, particularly in times when this is challenging.

The socialization and de-individualization of poverty are significant political actions that can transform both societal and individual realities, countering the dominance of neoliberalism and individualism. Additionally, food plays a crucial role in reconnecting people and overcoming distrust:

«Food fosters trust, bridges differences, and counters scepticism in society. It promotes understanding, mitigates hostility, and prevents animosity among diverse groups. It addresses identity crises and transforms frustration into connections. [...]. Food-based interactions create awareness of shared burdens and empower individuals to overcome defeat and weakness. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021)

Understanding the uncertainty and complexity of these times as a shared condition, can help to cope with such crises (Henderson, 1998). Conviviality and solidarity become political and social actions, finding in food an alternative answer to hate. At the same time, it helps to resolve individual and political identity crises through proximity, mutual support, and hope.

In addition, mutual help and solidarity contribute more to individual and collective, compared to institutional charity and welfare, thanks to first-hand activation and first-hand experience of hardship and support and the proximity that characterize mutualism (Bradley, Malki, 2022). Volunteers and beneficiaries expressed a deep sense of personal obligation as they witnessed first-hand the profound impact of BVEs'. In this sense, solidarity becomes a political tool that fosters consensus and exercises counter-power, contestation, resistance (Pinson, Journal, 2016; Harvey, 2006; Bracher *et al.*, 2000). Grass-root movements like BVEs, emerging informally, compel institutions to acknowledge their effectiveness and become partners for transformative change:

«We received right-wing criticism about "red mutualism" when we obtained special authorization to ride through the city during the lockdown. But by being proactive and close to the people, we outpaced institutional responses. This empowered us and made it challenging for institutions to deny our actions. We compelled them to recognize the importance of our work. As influential players, we had a seat at institutional tables and contributed valuable insights based on our ideas and experiences. » (I., Social research Brigade, 21 May 2021).

Re-politicization also involves self-reflection and introspective action. The BVEs not only provided essential services and fostered community strength and individual empowerment, but they adopted reflexivity:

«Internally, we address volunteer labor exploitation and strive to avoid exploitative dynamics. We prioritize mutualism while actively engaging in political battles and asserting our rights while delivering free services. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021).

Lastly, a notable instance of the re-politicization through the BVEs is the participation of one representative from the Longo Brigade and one from the Mario Vargas Brigade, in the 2022 Municipal Elections. These two members, along with former councillor for social and housing policies Mr. Gabriele Rabaiotti, joined mayoral candidate Giuseppe Sala. Their program aimed to expand on the values and initiatives of the Brigades and Milan's solidarity capital.

5.2 Citizens' empowerment and creation of new relations

The second dimension that leads to a reduction of urban and social distancing is the creation of new and stronger relationships thanks to the mutual help and the networking created by the BVEs' action.

By fostering close relationships and connections within the community, the BVEs play a crucial role in creating a sense of togetherness and strengthening social ties at the local level. This nurturing of proximity relationships helps build communitarian bonds and enhances the social and relational capital within the community (Dubois, 2018). Through their actions, the BVEs empower citizens, particularly when public and third-sector institutions have fallen short. They provide the community with a 'platform' for civic engagement and participation, offering numerous associated benefits. The reduction of urban distancing is intended in terms of improved access to services, or alternative forms of services, to those who were most affected by the crisis, including the "new poor" and "new working poor" categories already mentioned. Secondly, the reduction of urban distancing passed through the dimension of territorial proximity, thanks to those connections and flows created by the brigades. In mutual help, the blurred distinction between volunteers and beneficiaries (more and more beneficiaries decide to become volunteers after a positive and touching experience) is another way to reduce distances.

The BVEs assert that nobody is alone in this crisis. They believe that through assistance and social cohesion, they can overcome the isolation caused by the financial-capitalist system. Through community engagement, they establish new bonds and revitalize solidarity. This urban transformation facilitates the empowerment of beneficiaries, who may eventually become volunteers themselves.

The proximity exercise undertaken by BVEs through food solidarity is well explained in this quote: «It is outstanding how with the BVEs we were so inside society, so in touch with people in need... in that sense, we 'used' food as a tool to connect with people and convey an alternative view of the world. » (I., Social research Brigade, 21 May 2021).

Additionally, the BVEs' attentiveness to local needs bridges the gap between those who have access to institutional welfare, and the new poor (such as entertainment workers or the self-employed). Moreover, the BVEs overcome the barrier of shame associated with asking for help, recognizing that poverty is not an individual failing. The BVEs strive to make individuals realize that they are not alone and that communities can remain united.

«We provide assistance to those enduring extreme poverty and marginalized individuals. However, we are increasingly receiving requests from new groups: parcel-VAT workers, entertainment workers, restaurant workers, and those who suddenly lost their wages and official support. These individuals lack a sense of community and are unaccustomed to seeking help, often feeling ashamed to ask. Initially, they asked the packages somewhere, instead of their homes. However, when they saw their neighbors receiving food boxes, they approached in more relaxed way. When people feel alone in their struggles, they experience shame, but together, the dynamic changes. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021).

The BVEs leverage mutual-help principles, which are fundamental for empowerment and self-determination, expanding both individual and community agency (Dickerson, 1998). They enable people and communities to rely less on institutional assistance by creating a self-sustaining mechanism. This is particularly valuable during crises when shock-resisting mechanisms are compromised.

«[Through the experience of the BVEs, ed] It occurs that a nuclear mechanism of mutualism, that never ends because it is self-feeding, shows how several problems can be solved without necessarily asking institutions. We solve our problems at the community level because we acknowledge our fate as shared. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021).

In their commitment to food, the BVEs started a partnership with the organization Recup. Recup's mission is to save food from being wasted at the local Wholesale (Ortomercato) Marketplace and other local markets, redistributing it to organizations.

In terms of strengthening networks inside the city, the direct observation of Recup's food distribution at the Ortomercato hotspot is interesting because all the organizations and quantities that Recup supplies are listed on a chalkboard on the wall: «On the chalkboard, you can see, the list of all the organizations that are coming to collect Recup food today, the amounts collected, and which crop is still available for collection. » (B., Longo Brigade, 27 May 2021)

The chalkboard gives the idea of the extensive solidarity network in the city of Milan. It serves as a representation of a larger network that revolves around the marketplace and extends across the city. Through interviews⁸, it became evident that an increasing number of businesses and traders in the Ortomercato actively participate in the Recup hotspot, reducing waste but also contributing to local solidarity. The BVEs are not alone, they are part of a well-coordinated solidarity mechanism. Thus, their actions contribute a network with businesses and other local actors engaged in solidarity efforts, reducing distances between them. Furthermore, they modified and enhanced the richness of Milan's third sector landscape, since BVEs members represent already existing third sector organizations (that could not perform due to lockdown restrictions), or they funded new associations, following the experience with the BVEs. An example is Milano Futuro, an organization funded by a representative of the Longo Brigade⁹.

5.3 Reinterpretation and re-purposing of spaces

The third dimension observed in the analysis is the reinterpretation of spaces, whereby the BVEs affect both urban space and urban relationships. With their expansion, the observers noticed an increase in the number of locations designated for collection, sorting, and distribution purposes. This proliferation was accompanied by a transformation and redefinition of spaces in terms of their functions and significance. For instance, a cultural association, closed due to Covid-19 restrictions, was repurposed as a sorting center. Likewise, a public park was converted into a meeting point where volunteers could interact with individuals in need, distributing food boxes, along with other essential materials, and providing information.

The BVEs collaborate closely with other third-sector organizations to access spaces and services. Two notable examples include the already mentioned Recup, and Nuova Armenia, a cultural association that emerged as a redevelopment initiative for a publicly owned space. Nuova Armenia typically hosts cultural events in the Bovisa neighbourhood but, during lockdowns, offered its premises as a collection and distribution hub. It became the headquarters for the Support Brigade Longo, which collected food from Ortomercato and transported it to Nuova Armenia¹⁰. Moreover, welfare and charity institutions, including ALER, the Lombard Agency for Social Housing, have collaborated with the BVEs, offering their spaces. Arci clubs¹¹, a well-established network of third-sector organizations, have also provided their venues for the BVEs to carry out food sorting, storage, and distribution:

8 Interviews with Recup President and Support Brigade-Longo.

9 The information derives from the follow-up interviews with representatives of Longo Brigade (April 2022).

10 The Support Brigade Longo has been the subject of researchers' direct and participant observation; the researchers followed it for a whole day, from food collection at Ortomercato to Nuova Armenia food hub for sorting and packing.

11 Arci clubs were born in 1800–1900 as spaces dedicated to mutual-aid, sociality and bottom-up social participation, called "Società di Mutuo Soccorso" and "Case del Popolo". After WWII, they became institutionalized spaces for entertainment and cultural initiatives, and in the 50s they merged in the newly formed National Association "Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (ARCI)". Info available here: <https://www.arci.it/chi-siamo/storia/>. It is interesting that in an emergency situation they have returned to their original and historical use.

«We have been provided with spaces by Arci and the church; what we noticed is the dynamic nature and diverse backgrounds of the BVE volunteers, particularly the presence of young individuals. We engage with everyone involved because we value the tangible impact of our actions. ALER has offered spaces to the BVEs. Although in different circumstances we might have been critical of this collaboration, considering ALER's role in the city's housing crisis, we were willing to collaborate given the current situation. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021)

The pandemic, as appears in this testimony, provided an opportunity for the BVEs to overcome previous barriers. Despite the BVEs' critical stance towards actors like ALER, responsible for the mismanagement and disruption of social housing in Milan (Giannattasio, 2015), the crisis called for open dialogue and collaboration for the collective benefit.

Moreover, BVEs act as multiplier of spaces of solidarity. Meanwhile, the meaning and impact of food are transformed, no longer a basic necessity but a vehicle for connections. Food as the cohesive element that offers alternative perspectives to the prevailing mainstream narrative: «For the post-pandemic period we envision the multiplication of places where we can eat together, not just receive food aid. We wish to build from food a relationship of mutual trust. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021)

Robust and motivated collaborations, exemplified by the partnership between Emergency, BVEs, and the Baggio community, have facilitated the identification of an ideal location for fostering solidarity and multipurpose engagement. The Baggio municipality garden, previously primarily a garden, evolved into a multifaceted hub that extends beyond simple food distribution. In addition, BVEs also provides clothing and sandwiches to local homeless individuals, distributes fruits and vegetables to unregistered families, and offers support for social housing applications, ensuring a more comprehensive range of assistance and inclusion within their efforts.

«Emergency started and then we formed the brigade for the Baggio neighborhood, in June 2020. We used to sort food [dry food, provided by Emergency] in a hub and deliver it to people's homes. Now we have this public space, it has a canopy and we can stay in winter. More people transit here, more people see us, see what we do. There are public showers in front of us, many homeless people come here. We started clothing distribution; we make sandwiches for those in need. [...] This week people are coming here [to the Baggio community garden] to fill out the application form for social housing, supported by an accountant who is already a volunteer at a housing support desk. » (R., Emma Brigade, 22 May 2021).

Public spaces have been transformed by BVEs from mere transit places to places of solidarity to access multiple services:

«We noticed ladies repeatedly coming to pick up food boxes with their kids, and children were extremely bored. We built a safe space for them, offering activities to distract them. This initiative attracted additional individuals seeking assistance, such as help with enrolling their children in school (due to issues like lack of computers or language barriers). As a result, we began offering this support at the food box pickup locations. » (V., Coordination Brigade, 21 May 2021).

Recup and its collaborators facilitated access to spaces, as noted in an interview. The collection hub at Wholesale Marketplace, provided by a private trader, has greatly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of Recup's solidarity efforts.: «This year we carved out this space in Ortomercato marketplace that was let to us on loan from a trader. This makes everything easier for us, the management of logistics flows, that is, the collection and redistribution of surplus. » (R., Recup, 27 May 2021).

All of these locations, repurposed for emergency needs, serve as spaces for the development, nurturing, and preservation of what Lasch (2001) referred to as "civic virtues" – qualities that facilitate communal living, expressions, and shared conditions within urban civilization. Urban

civilization, in this context, refers to the coming together of numerous individuals who may not be connected through familial or clan ties, yet still forge relationships beyond these affiliations, as suggested by Jedlowsky (2011).

6. Conclusions

Building upon fieldwork conducted within the Milano-Bicocca University's third-mission initiative, this research endeavours to examine the emergent practices of mutual aid and grassroots solidarity that have characterized the city of Milan during the pandemic. The focus is on the food sector, elucidating the escalating levels of food insecurity experienced by an increasingly sizable portion of the populace. Notably, even affluent cities and countries have been impacted by economic and food poverty due to the widespread transmission of Covid-19. Milan, as an example, has seen an increase in demand for food assistance, including even novel segments of the population known as the "new working poor".

Delving into the local initiatives that arose in response to the crisis, encompassing initiatives driven by autonomous citizens, municipal institutions, local non-governmental organizations, and civic actors, this study focuses on the BVEs. Chosen for their support and resources for those in need and for the connections and empowerment they create, helping bridge social and urban distances resulted from Covid-19 restrictions.

The analysis has delineated three interconnected dimensions that elucidate how the bottom-up and community-based solidarity, as well as the mutual aid facilitated by the BVEs, have effectively mitigated urban distances and alleviated feelings of isolation during the challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic. These dimensions, namely the re-politicization of solidarity, the reinforcement of proximate relationships and citizen empowerment, and the reinterpretation of spaces, converge synergistically within a comprehensive framework known as the "BVEs model". This model has garnered national recognition as a commendable practice that can be replicated, and the BVEs themselves have extended their assistance beyond national borders to support individuals in need in Ukraine. Our analysis reveals that these three dimensions in BVE's action have spawned a novel social force, enabling citizens to connect, support one another, and voice their concerns. This empowerment fosters collective action, facilitates community-institution relations, and transcends physical distances, demonstrating above all to be able to break or overcome immaterial, social, and human barriers that are posed by neoliberalism and worsened by the pandemic.

The first dimension relates to the process of re-politicization embedded within the mutual and solidaristic approach embraced by the BVEs. Their mission and goals firmly oppose capitalist and neoliberal policies. Guided by care, solidarity, and community, they fight inequalities and strive to empower citizens within a society that unjustly assigns blame for poverty to individuals rather than recognizing it as a collective issue. They are closed to Alternative Action Organizations even if they spontaneously emerged from the people's desire to concretely act for helping those in need, intervening and taking responsibility during a crisis that institutions were not able to face. Their action leads to a re-elaboration of the political through participatory practices, strengthening human connections, and promoting long-term initiatives. In the Milanese context, predominantly privatized healthcare system has further bolstered the drive toward re-politicization among solidarity actors. The activation nudged by the BVEs involved a growing number of people, even those never engaged before in activism or associationism, or militancy and transforming beneficiaries into new volunteers. They engaged with local traders, as well as local public entities. Through these efforts, connections among individuals, private entities, civil society actors, and public institutions are forged. This expands the local solidarity network that acts as collective contestation from below. As a result, BVEs have become key city players, where

their solidarity approach serves as a political and counter-power exercise. Furthermore, the BVEs actively practiced reflexivity, questioning the potential exploitation of volunteer labour and continuously addressing social and labour-related concerns within their own ranks.

The second dimension focuses on citizens' empowerment and the establishment of new community ties. Nurturing proximity relations becomes a pivotal force in providing individuals with knowledge and fostering connections, not only bridging physical distances but also social gaps. The analysis reveals that by connecting people, raising awareness about shared conditions, equipping them with tools to comprehend contemporary challenges, new local bonds based on trust are formed. Isolation dissipates, shame diminishes, and collective trust emerges, shaping fresh community relations. Moreover, the empowerment process plays a significant role in transforming beneficiaries into active volunteers.

Additionally, the BVEs' partnerships with local organizations serve as a means to diminish distances and initiate mutually beneficial relationships. As observed, these partnerships contribute to nurturing and enlarging the local solidarity network.

The third dimension pertains to urban transformation and the re-purposing of spaces for collecting, sorting and distributing food. During the field research, these typologies of spaces have been observed and studied through participant observations. These spaces were made available to the BVEs through local organizations like Arci clubs, ALER spaces, municipal areas, and cultural association such as Nuova Armenia. In addition, the partnership with Recup, allowed the BVEs to use a location within the wholesale market with support from the traders operating in the market. These spaces served as hubs to gather, store food and materials, prepare packages, and distribute them. In addition to the transformation of existing spaces, new spaces also emerged for these activities. For instance, public gardens were made available for citizen gatherings and new uses. This redefinition of spaces facilitates the re-politicization and the empowerment of citizens, contributing to the reduction of urban, social, and interpersonal distances. They become places where "civic virtues" can be cultivated, promoting communal living among individuals who may not be otherwise connected, but who now share common challenges and can benefit from collective mutual support. Moreover, these spaces serve to access various services, i.e. children's entertainment, assistance with school enrolment or social housing applications, and the distribution of clothing.

The value that this research has provided is a deeper analysis of the BVEs model as a way to counter neoliberalism and isolation, through empirical evidence and theoretical insights into the potential of community-based initiatives like the BVEs model. There are fundamental dimensions of their actions that contribute to the reduction of both tangible and intangible distances, and this research offers a comprehensive understanding of their impacts on social, economic, and spatial dimensions; while fostering discussions on alternative approaches to social challenges, community empowerment, urban dynamics, and crisis response.

The emergence of the BVEs has revealed the shortcomings of the mainstream capitalist system in effectively responding to sudden and disruptive events such as a pandemic, without exacerbating inequalities, distances, and poverty. Their work has been transformative and invaluable in assisting the growing number of individuals in need within the city of Milan, fostering heightened political consciousness, nurturing stronger interpersonal connections, empowering citizens, and expanding the spaces dedicated to the collection, sorting, and distribution of essential resources. The BVEs have evolved into a resilient social force that has garnered recognition on a broader scale. Their efforts extend beyond the emergency phase and have transcended regional and national boundaries, reaching communities outside of Lombardy and even beyond Italy.

Despite its valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalization of the findings: a) the contextual specificity, as the focus is on Milan and the transferability of the findings to other contexts should be approached with caution; b) the temporal scope, making interviews during the first lockdown would have been extremely useful to monitor from the beginning their birth and evolution; in addition, fur-

their follow-ups would make the research more complete. In addition, other questions to focus on to advance the research could include: how would the BVEs experience change, for the effect of institutionalization, especially given the tension between political and civil society activism in the backgrounds of his activists? How would the BVEs welcome the effects of a change of scale, especially when they will need to seat at the same table together with controversial institutional actors? The ongoing observation of their actions and impacts will provide the answers.

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