

HEALTH INEQUALITIES CASE STUDIES

ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY DURING THE NATIONAL LOCKDOWN IN THE COURSE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF ITALY



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We stand against discrimination, for inclusion and equal opportunities for all to live, work and age in sustainable, healthy environments. EPHA has called on researchers and policy analysts to submit research articles to help build knowledge about how the health of disadvantaged groups is affected by inequalities in areas such as employment, housing, education, healthcare, environment, and climate.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a serious threat for global food insecurity, increasing food insecurity and its related health disparities among already at-risk populations. To face the pandemic, many countries implemented several social, economic, and public health measures such as isolation of infected individuals, school closures, stay at home orders, business closures, and national lockdowns.

Faced with this unprecedented situation, food banks, different governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society and several institutions had to act in a timely manner and go through a reorganization process in order to safely continue their activity of supporting the condition of food security of individuals, families, and communities.

This paper aims to collect information on the response of organizations that address food insecurity in the Italian territory during national lockdowns from March to May 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the response, particularly concerning the territorial network and the new emerged vulnerabilities in order to identify a replicable model and integrable response chains, and provide guidelines and policy recommendations.

The identification of the response of several organizations to address food insecurity in Italy during the national lockdowns in the period March-May 2020 was conducted through an extensive three-step methodological desk research:

- **Step 1:** Scientific literature search
- **Step 2:** Grey literature search
- **Step 3:** Desk research on institutional online repositories

Our results highlighted the lack of a structured policy framework, both at the international and national level. The Italian response was expressed in the promotion of economic aid to families, businesses, and workers, with a close eye on the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The operability was mostly entrusted to municipal and regional choices to reach people in need, in most cases in the form of food vouchers. At the international level, the European Commission and FAO promoted sustainability and collaboration between countries. Nationally, most of the initiatives were promoted and supported by citizens or voluntary organizations, creating networks of solidarity on the territory that have calmed the socio-economic crisis, but have not offered solutions for the long term. It would be advisable to create an integrated response network. In addition, authorities should design and implement programs that can identify the needs of the most vulnerable populations, continuously monitor the progress and outcomes, in order to inform and strengthen the policy planning process.

Keywords: food insecurity; COVID-19; Italy; measures; strategies

Introduction

Food insecurity, a condition defined by limited or uncertain access to sufficient, nutritious and safe food for an active, healthy life, is one of the social determinants of health, and hence, plays a crucial role in the well-being and health of individuals. It is a high burden to the individuals, society, and health services, representing an important public health issue.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food insecurity has been on the rise since 2014,¹ and it is reported that in 2019, 2 billion people in the world did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food.² The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic represents a serious threat for global food insecurity, increasing food insecurity and its related health disparities among already at-risk populations.¹ To face the pandemic, many countries implemented several social, economic, and public health measures such as isolation of infected individuals, school closures, business closures, and national lockdowns. Evidence suggests that food insecurity has been rapidly rising above pre-epidemic levels in several countries, including developed ones which have reported already worrying rates of food insecurity.³

Italy was the first country in Europe to face the COVID-19 pandemic and the health, economic and social challenges that it posed.⁴ Due to the mandatory national lockdowns that took place in the period March-May 2020, many people lost their jobs, creating concerns about stability, availability, accessibility, and usage of food.

As a result of labor shortages, disruption in food supply chains, loss of work with reduced income, many people experienced the worsening of food insecurity, already an issue in Italy,⁵ exacerbated inequalities and the emergence of new vulnerabilities. The situation of high inequalities, which have increased after the 2007-2008 economic crisis has only gotten worse because of the pandemic. Caritas and Food Bank in Italy reported an increase of 40% in food requests rising up to 70% in the South of Italy. This region experiences even higher levels of socio-economic inequalities and unemployment. However, despite facing the

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO, "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020," *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020*, Jul. 2020, doi: 10.4060/CA9692EN.

² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO, "The State of food security and nutrition in the world 2019. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns," Rome, 2019. Accessed: Oct. 01, 2021. [Online]. Available: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf>

³ Zaće D, di Pietro ML, Caprini F, de Waure C, and Ricciardi W, "Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among children in high-income European countries. A systematic review," *Annali dell'Istituto superiore di sanità*, vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 90–98, 2020, doi: 10.4415/ANN_20_01_13.

⁴ Boccia S, Ricciardi W, and Ioannidis JPA, "What Other Countries Can Learn From Italy During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *JAMA internal medicine*, vol. 180, no. 7, pp. 927–928, Jul. 2020, doi: 10.1001/JAMAINTERNALMED.2020.1447.

⁵ D. Zaće, M. L. di Pietro, L. Reali, C. de Waure, and W. Ricciardi, "Prevalence, socio-economic predictors and health correlates of food insecurity among Italian children- findings from a cross-sectional study," *Food Security* 2020 13:1, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 13–24, Oct. 2020, doi: 10.1007/S12571-020-01111-1.

increasing rates of food insecurity and its burden on individuals' health and on society, there is a lack of routinely collected evidence in many European countries, including Italy, regarding this issue.^{3,5} Faced with this unprecedented situation, food banks, different governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society and several institutions in Italy had to act in a timely manner and go through a reorganization process in order to safely continue their activity of supporting the condition of food security of individuals, families and communities.

This paper aims to collect information on the response of organizations that address food insecurity in the Italian territory during national lockdowns from March to May 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the response, particularly concerning the territorial network and the new emerged vulnerabilities in order to identify a replicable model and integrable response chains and provide guidelines and policy recommendations.

Our target population includes all those individuals, households or communities that have faced food insecurity during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Italy, whose situation was addressed by interventions, strategies or publications by different organizations in the Italian territory.

The identification of the response of several organizations to address food insecurity in Italy was conducted through an extensive three-step methodological desk research:

- **Step 1:** Scientific literature search
- **Step 2:** Grey literature search
- **Step 3:** Desk research on institutional online repositories

1) Scientific Literature Search

Electronic scientific databases, such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Sciences were searched to retrieve any available article, policy, review, report, or documents on food banks, governmental and non-governmental organizations, published in English or Italian language.

2) Grey literature search

A web search was conducted in the main online search engines, such as Google Scholar, Bing, and Google, in combination with a broad set of search terms to retrieve any potential publicly available document or report.

3) Desk research on institutional online repositories

The mapping was further extended by extensively searching publicly accessible institutional repositories at national and regional level, including:

- Italian Ministry of Health
- Italian National Health Institute
- Italian Food Bank Network
- Regional websites (Governmental repository "Gazzetta Ufficiale"; Deputies' Chamber website)

The search terms used in all the methodological steps were: "COVID-19, covid19, SARS-Cov-2, Italy, strategy, policy, program, initiative, international, national, regional, local, nutrition, food security, hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition". The research included any interventions, activities and strategies implemented by national governmental or non-governmental organizations (ex. food banks, food pantries) and national/local authorities, which supported these organizations in addressing food insecurity during COVID19 lockdowns. In addition, we searched any International or European organizations that have been practising their activity in the Italian territory during the lockdown. A descriptive synthesis was carried out from the data retrieved from the aforementioned sources and a content analysis was performed, focusing on the policy challenges encountered during this period.

Results and Discussion

Our search strategy produced a total of 922 articles, three of which were considered pertinent for inclusion. Other documents were retrieved from grey literature and desk research. Based on the collected evidence a thematic analysis was conducted, dividing the initiatives or strategies into four categories: those implemented in an international, national, regional or local level (*Table 1*).



Table 1. Initiatives to address food insecurity during lockdown in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic at international, national, regional and local level

INTERNATIONAL LEVEL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAO – Food Coalition • EU Commission – Farm to Fork strategy
ITALIAN LEVEL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Protection Ordinance n. 658 • Ministry decree March 17th 2020 • Ministry decree April 8th 2020 • Law 8/2020 • Decree law n. 18/2020 (Cura Italia) • Decree Law 34/2020 (Decreto Rilancio) • Decree of the President of Ministry Council March 11th 2020
	<p>Associations active on the national territory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency • Caritas • Food Bank • Actionaid
REGIONAL LEVEL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CALABRIA: Regional funds available to the cities • CAMPANIA: Solidarity canteens initiatives • SICILIA: Food Solidarity Project
LOCAL LEVEL:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L'Aquila City Council funds for food stamps • Napoli City Council food distribution and solidarity funds • Torino City Council through "Torino Solidale" • Catania City Council and food bank through "Catania aiuta Catania" • Reggio Calabria through regional funds • Milano City Council through "Dispositivo di Aiuto Alimentare (DAI)" • Red Cross active in Milano, L'Aquila, Napoli • Emergency in Milano through "Milano aiuta" • Rome Food Council • Solidarity Purchasing Groups and Community Supported Agriculture • "Spesa sospesa" in Napoli, Portici, Cesa, Angri, Sorrento, Afragola, Caserta, Roma, Nettuno, Formia, Priverno, Gaeta, Bergamo, Milano, Seveso, Canonica d'Adda, Conselve, Venezia, Bolzano, Merano, Udine, Torino, Alessandria, Rivoli, Garlenda, Genova, Sassari, Sigillo, Perugia, Città di Castello, Larino, Isernia, Potenza, Reggio Calabria, Catanzaro, Parma, Granarolo • Emergency "Nessuno Escluso" in Milano, Roma, Piacenza, Napoli, Catanzaro, Catania, Varese • Social and Solidarity Economy Network in Roma

International Level

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on an international level, FAO promoted and established the Food Coalition, as a comprehensive response and recovery programme to guard and ensure food systems, food security and nutrition. Conceived by the Italian Government in April 2020, the alliance was officially launched by FAO six months later. Italy contributed with an initial grant of USD 1.2 million.

Aiming to prevent a health crisis from becoming a food crisis, the Coalition prioritizes seven work areas:⁶

1. A Global Humanitarian Response Plan (integral part of the United Nations Overall Humanitarian Response to COVID-19);
2. Data for decision-making;
3. Economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty;
4. Trade and food safety standards;
5. Boosting smallholder resilience for recovery;
6. Preventing the next zoonotic pandemic zoonotic pandemics and a cross-sectoral, multi-actor One Health approach;
7. Food systems transformation.

As for the European Union (EU) Commission initiatives, the Farm to Fork (F2F) initiative emphasises the food systems' sustainability, which emerged as a paramount concern during the pandemic. The strategy was issued in May 2020 as the key document of the European Green Deal. It addressed the vulnerability of the EU agri-food chain, with the objective of developing preparedness in various sectors and guaranteeing food security in times of crisis.^{7,8} It is built on 4 pillars:

1. food loss and waste prevention;
2. sustainable food production;
3. sustainable food processing and distribution;
4. sustainable food consumption.

National Level

As the COVID-19 infuriated the national territory, the government set a series of closures and restrictions on production activities. The Decree of the President of the Ministry Council March 11th 2020 guaranteed the continuity of the activities of the agricultural, zootechnical, agro-food processing sector, including the sectors supplying goods and services.⁹

⁶ FAO, *Food Coalition*. <http://www.fao.org/food-coalition/en/> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021)

⁷ F. Montanari *et al.*, "The Response of the EU Agri-Food Chain to the COVID-19 Pandemic:Chronicles from the EU and Selected Member States." [Online]. Available: <https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2020/05/eu-countries-take->

⁸ European Commission, *Farm to Fork Strategy*.

⁹ "Gazzetta Ufficiale | DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DEL CONSIGLIO DEI MINISTRI 11 marzo 2020 ." <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/11/20A01605/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

The Italian efforts to address food insecurity, exacerbated during the lockdown period, started at the end of March 2020 through the Civil Protection Ordinance n. 658, drawing on the Municipal Solidarity Fund, for EUR 400 million to be allocated to food solidarity initiatives by municipalities affected by the epidemic emergency by COVID-19. It plated the absence of a context-specific legislative framework, and set out the criteria on which to distribute funds (population density, income, COVID-19 burden).^{10,11}

Subsequently, the Ministry Decree March 17th 2020 was issued. It adopted the *2020 National Programme for the distribution of food to deprived persons* which allocated, in the homonymous fund (Fondo per la distribuzione delle derrate alimentari alle persone indigenti, founded in 2014), EUR 6 million to the purchase of raw milk for UHT.^{12,13} On the same date, the so-called *Decreto Cura Italia* (Decree Law 18/2020, converted in Law 27/2020 on April 24th) replenished the *Fund for the distribution of food to deprived persons* by EUR 50 million for 2020. The Decree took from the Ordinance, trying to meet the most urgent and essential needs of some families in difficulty, through the means of shopping vouchers up to EUR 50 per household and food parcels derived by volunteers.^{13,14}

To implement the resources for the indigent people, the Ministry Decree of April 8th 2020 earmarked the new funds to the procurement of fresh vegetables, fruit juices, PDO (protected designation of origin) meats and PDO cheese (EUR 14.5 million for the purchase of PDO cheeses; EUR 4 million for canned appertized vegetables obtained from fresh product; EUR 2 million for legume soups from fresh vegetables; EUR 2 million for minestrone from fresh vegetables; EUR 2.5 million for fruit juices; EUR 2 million for homogenised lamb; EUR 9 million for PDO ham; EUR 4 million for IGP and/or DOP cured meats and EUR 10 million for canned beef).^{13,15} Finally, the Fund was further supplemented by EUR 250 million, thanks to the Decree Law 34/2020 (so called *Decreto Rilancio*, converted in Law 77/2020 on July 17th).^{13,16} Other economic resources were provided by the *Fund for limiting food waste* (instituted by the Law 166/2016) thanks to the Law 8/2020, to finance innovative integrated projects in reference to food and its allocation to indigent people.^{17,18}

10 "Politiche sociali per fronteggiare l'emergenza coronavirus."

11 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | ORDINANZA 29 marzo 2020," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/30/20A01942/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

12 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | DECRETO 17 marzo 2020," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/04/27/20A02317/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

13 "Il Fondo per la distribuzione delle derrate alimentari agli indigenti," 2021.

14 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | DECRETO-LEGGE 17 marzo 2020, n. 18," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/17/20G00034/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

15 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | DECRETO-LEGGE 8 aprile 2020, n. 23," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/04/08/20G00043/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

16 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | DECRETO-LEGGE 19 maggio 2020, n. 34," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/05/19/20G00052/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

17 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | LEGGE 19 agosto 2016, n. 166," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/08/30/16G00179/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

18 "Gazzetta Ufficiale | LEGGE 28 febbraio 2020, n. 8," <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/29/20G00021/sg> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

Active throughout the country and working in concert with local solidarity initiatives, the Italian Food Bank Network (IFBN) continued to collect foods which are still perfectly edible but, having lost their commercial value, would be destined to destruction, and distributed to charitable organizations. IFBN connects with the European Union through a specific programme of helping the poor. The food supply is based on industry surpluses at different levels and donations from citizens and the public.¹⁹

Powered by funds from the Catholic Church and voluntary donations, Caritas has supported the poorest sections of the population through the distribution of food and basic necessities, ensuring the presence of a solid network all over the national territory. They connected to other non-governmental agencies and to other local initiatives to ensure food supplies and shelter for the homeless.²⁰

Regional Level

The first of regional initiatives concerned the Campania region, characterized by high income disparities, lower quality of public services and poorer health. In the period March-April 2020 initiatives for food provision took place in this region, such as the open-street map *Networks and solidarity practices in the emergency* (Reti e pratiche solidali nell'emergenza). In this map, all citizens posted the self-organized initiatives emerging during the lockdown to fight fragility, social exclusion, and isolation.²¹

The region of Calabria has drawn on funds allocated by the Department of Labor, Training and Social Policies to increase the supply of food and necessities. In this time, an increase in demand of 50% was reported for the Caritas soup kitchens.²²

During the lockdown, the Sicilian region promoted the project “Food Solidarity” (Solidarietà Alimentare), which aimed to raise awareness of agricultural and food producers in Sicily, with the involvement of trade organizations, food districts, protection consortia, etc and to collect agricultural and food products and redistribute them to different food banks in the Sicilian territory.²³

¹⁹ “Rete Banco Alimentare, Italian Food Bank Network: about us | Banco Alimentare.” <https://www.bancoalimentare.it/it/italian-food-bank-banco-alimentare-about-us> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

²⁰ “Risposta a Covid-19 | EMERGENCY.” <https://www.emergency.it/cosa-facciamo/risposta-covid/?> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

²¹ V. Cattivelli and V. Rusciano, “Social innovation and food provisioning during Covid-19: The case of urban-rural initiatives in the Province Of Naples,” *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, vol. 12, no. 11, Jun. 2020, doi: 10.3390/su12114444.

²² ActionAid, “LA PANDEMIA CHE AFFAMA L’ITALIA Covid-19, povertà alimentare e diritto al cibo,” 2020.

²³ “Regione Siciliana - 01-APR-2020 - PROGETTO SOLIDARIETÀ ALIMENTARE.” https://pti.regione.sicilia.it/portal/page/portal/PIR_PORTALE/PIR_LaStrutturaRegionale/PIR_AssessoratoregionaledelleRisorseAgricoleeAlimentari/PIR_Assessoratoregionale delleRisorseAgricoleeAlimentari_News?stepThematicNews=det_news&idNews=200594171&thematicFilter=PIR_ArchivioNewsAssessoratoregionale delleRisorseAgricoleeAli (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

Local Level

The province of Naples activated several initiatives aiming to support the citizens during the first lockdown period, divided into three categories: food banks (33), canteens (9) and other projects to support food provision (institutional projects) (10). Naples municipality offered temporary assistance in the period March-April 2020. A total of 13,502 people have benefited from the Municipal Solidarity Fund, which distributed vouchers for food purchasing to people in need.²⁴ Food banks and canteens had also a crucial role in other cities of Italy during the lockdown period.^{24,25,26,27}

Another local initiative was *suspended spending*, which gives the possibility to donate food, medicines, and other basic necessities to those who are in a state of need, by leaving products at the checkout store. The Municipality in Naples was the first to support this form of solidarity spending.^{24,28} Masseria Ferraioli, which is a farm, offering also a space for educational and practical workshops on food issues, a shop for the sale of agricultural products from the Masseria and other farms, and a refreshment point, with the specific aim to give job opportunities to the poor people, did not stop its activities and supported the food provisioning in the provincial area of Naples. Together with the civil protection and the municipality of Afragola, the Masseria has donated 36 food parcels to the parishes of St. Anthony and St. Michael, so that they could be distributed to the neediest.²⁴

As reported by experts of the field in a survey, among the most implemented initiatives regarding food provision, access and distribution in the city of Rome, there were: allowing farmers' markets to remain open, food collection and donations to people in need (56%), fight against food waste (45%) and the creation of logistic platforms and hubs for food marketing and distribution (41%). In May 2020, the municipality of Rome distributed 45 thousand food parcels, and also provided shopping vouchers for the purchase of basic supplies to people in need to over 200,000 people, for a value of around EUR 21 million.²⁷

Many citizens organizations mobilized to respond to the difficult situation creating for example *Condominium Purchasing Groups*. These groups also launched a fundraiser to donate fruit and vegetable parcels from a local organic cooperative to those in the neighbourhood who could not afford

²⁴ V. Cattivelli and V. Rusciano, "Social innovation and food provisioning during Covid-19: The case of urban-rural initiatives in the Province Of Naples," *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, vol. 12, no. 11, Jun. 2020, doi: 10.3390/su12114444.

²⁵ F. Montanari *et al.*, "The Response of the EU Agri-Food Chain to the COVID-19 Pandemic:Chronicles from the EU and Selected Member States."

²⁶ "Rete Banco Alimentare, Italian Food Bank Network: about us | Banco Alimentare." <https://www.bancoalimentare.it/it/italian-food-bank-banco-alimentare-about-us> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

²⁷ S. Zollet *et al.*, "Towards territorially embedded, equitable and resilient food systems? Insights from grassroots responses to covid-19 in italy and the city region of rome," *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 1–25, Mar. 2021, doi: 10.3390/su13052425.

²⁸ "SpesaSospesa.ORG – LAB00." <https://lab00.org/index.php/cause/spesasospesa/> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

them. Local farms and small neighbourhood retailers also provided free-of-charge deliveries to vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly.²⁷

The initiative *Torino Solidale*, promoted by the city of Turin, aimed to reach out to over 15 thousand families for the free supply of food and basic necessities, through a collaboration network with local associations. This network ensured the supply, storage, and distribution of food products to voluntary and private social entities within the territory, and also, directly to individuals and families in difficult situations. *Torino plural* was another network, among the City Integration Department and migrant associations and communities, providing up to EUR 650 per association for the purchase of necessities for people excluded from other forms of public support, such as shopping vouchers and distribution of food parcels.²⁹

In Milan, was implemented the initiative *Food Aid Device* (DAI - Dispositivo di Aiuto Alimentare) by the municipality, thanks to the coordination between the Food Policy Office and the Department of Social and Housing Policies. Since March 16th, it has been active for 15 weeks, reaching 6,337 families, 20,744 persons with 16 kg food per week per family. The device has guaranteed the logistics of distribution of food aid to families in difficulty identified from the lists of associations active on the territory, such as Food Bank, Caritas and Red Cross, and additionally from the requests received directly by them and the municipality, and the calls to switchboard 020202. A total of 616 tons of food were distributed, including products for new-borns and a special diet for Muslims. On June 26th, with resources almost finished, the DAI stopped working and the beneficiary families were informed with leaflets in five languages, explaining where to continue food assistance.²⁹

Of utmost importance was the creation of *Brigate Solidali* by social centres in several neighbourhoods with the support of Emergency, which distributed 4,892 food parcels in nine town halls of the city. These initiatives, although being autonomous, were in part coordinated by the city council as part of the *Milano Aiuta* (Milano Helps) project. In Aquila, at the beginning of the pandemic, numerous social organizations and associations created the network called "Rete Solidale" (Solidarity Network) that delivered weekly food packages to 290 people.²⁹

The Municipality of Catania in collaboration with Banco Alimentare launched *Catania helps Catania*, to support the most urgent cases. More than 4,000 parcels were distributed, through the collaboration of the City Council with some local associations and the stipulation of operational agreements. In San Berillo, a district with a majority of people in conditions of marginality, a network of solidarity involving the inhabitants was activated, which led to the establishment of the *Solidarity Fund for San Berillo* with the support of citizens, agencies and organizations.²⁹

²⁹ ActionAid, "LA PANDEMIA CHE AFFAMA L'ITALIA Covid-19, povertà alimentare e diritto al cibo," 2020.

A solidarity project called *Spesa Sospesa* was created to support companies and citizens in need, non-profit associations and small agri-food enterprises in difficulty. This initiative is present in some cities, including Napoli, Portici, Cesa, Angri, Sorrento, Afragola, Caserta, Roma, Nettuno, Formia, Priverno, Gaeta, Bergamo, Milano, Seveso, Canonica d'Adda, Conselve, Venezia, Bolzano, Merano, Udine, Torino, Alessandria, Rivoli, Garlenda, Genova, Sassari, Sigillo, Perugia, Città di Castello, Larino, Isernia, Potenza, Reggio Calabria, Catanzaro, Parma and Granarolo. Thanks to the Regusto platform, it enables citizens to donate money and companies to donate food, which is delivered to logistic hubs in the territory. From there, associations and non-profit entities take care of the distribution to the families in difficulty.³⁰

ActionAid Italy, a non-governmental agency, was active in Corsico, in Milan and in Naples, for the distribution of food goods, and supported the Aurora coordination for the COVID-19 emergency in Torino. Several diaspora communities joined with ActionAid to distribute food and necessities to the part of the population that was not targeted by support measures in place. Thanks to the SEEDS project (Seizing Equality to Escape the Disruption of Society), 137 shopping packages and basic necessities were distributed weekly for 3 months for 208 individuals. In Corsico, on the other hand, ActionAid intervened during Phase 2 to support the association La Speranza, providing food aid to over 300 families for a total of more than a thousand people. Additionally, in Corsico, with the collaboration of BuonMercato Solidarity Purchasing, the Association La Speranza, the Hope, the Cooperation and Technology Forum and Coordination of Democratic Parents Lombardy, have carried out the experimentation of a complementary model of food assistance, aimed at increasing the quality and sustainability of food distributed to families by using organic and local products.³¹

Emergency, a humanitarian association founded in 1994, cooperated with local and national healthcare authorities for the health emergency management during the COVID-19 pandemic. They started and contributed to several initiatives all over the Italian territory, delivering food parcels and essential goods to people in need, as they did in the initiative *Nessuno Escluso* operating in Milano, Roma, Piacenza, Napoli, Catanzaro, Catania, Varese. They also contributed to the initiatives *Milano aiuta* and helped replicating the model in Venezia, Catania, Piacenza.³²

³⁰ "SpesaSospesa.ORG – LAB00." <https://lab00.org/index.php/cause/spesasospesa/> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

³¹ ActionAid, "LA PANDEMIA CHE AFFAMA L'ITALIA Covid-19, povertà alimentare e diritto al cibo," 2020

³² "Caritas, durante il lockdown assistite 450.000 persone - QdS." <https://qds.it/caritas-durante-il-lockdown-assistite-450-000-persone/> (accessed Oct. 01, 2021).

Policy Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the first months of the outbreak, noted the lack of a structured policy framework, both on the international and national level. The Italian response was expressed in the promotion of economic aid to families, businesses and workers, with a close eye on the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The operability was mostly entrusted to municipal and regional choices to reach people in need, in most cases in the form of food vouchers. Substantial funds were also poured into the *Agenzia per le erogazioni in agricoltura* (AgEA), an Italian state body that has the task of carrying out the functions of Coordinating Body and Paying Agency within the framework of the disbursement of European Union funds to agricultural producers. While Italian policies have focused on economic aid, the European Union and the FAO, at the international level, have promoted sustainability and collaboration between countries. Nevertheless, efforts appear fragmented, without a clear and integrated response. The strategies issued lacked synergistic coordination, leading to a response that struggled to be prompt and effective. Moreover, the quality of interventions has not been properly assessed. The need to create an international network that attracts policies and initiatives capable of offering a timely and effective response to emergencies has arisen as fundamental. In addition, defining a comprehensive framework of policies and recommendations to address the issue of food insecurity could be the only way to face long-term effects and prevent health and economic crises from becoming humanitarian crises. Many of the identified initiatives started from the citizens, who wanted to help people in need. This highlights the crucial role that citizens can play in these kind of emergency situations and that they should be included in any policy regarding these issues.

Particular attention should be given to vulnerable populations, which during this period and beyond faced limited access to social and nutrition services, increasing the risk of malnutrition, and impairment of physical and mental health.³³ Facing a public health crisis, unemployment and food insecurity, producers and consumers shifted to cheaper products, increasing micronutrient deficiencies. To address such issues, the food banks, or food parcels distributed among vulnerable groups should include fresh and organic meals, with fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meat, thus reducing the consumption of staple foods, especially in households in difficulty.^{34,35} Moreover, these policies should consider nutritional needs of any population groups considering cultural, religion and social diversities.

³³ D. Headey *et al.*, "Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood malnutrition and nutrition-related mortality," *The Lancet*, vol. 396, no. 10250, pp. 519–521, Aug. 2020, doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31647-0.

³⁴ D. Laborde and W. Martin, "Poverty and food insecurity could grow dramatically as COVID-19 spreads," 2020, doi: 10.2499/P15738COLL2.133762_02.

³⁵ D. Laborde, W. Martin, J. Swinnen, and R. Vos, "COVID-19 risks to global food security," *Science*, vol. 369, no. 6503, pp. 500–502, Jul. 2020, doi: 10.1126/SCIENCE.ABC4765.

The increased nutritional needs of pregnant and lactating women should be considered, strongly advocating the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding, complementary feeding and healthy diets.³⁶ Authorities should design and implement programs that can identify the needs of the most vulnerable populations, continuously monitor the progress and outcomes, in order to inform and strengthen the policy planning process. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in highly vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations, and detect at early stages the related issues, nutrition programs should be based on research evidence, indicators and data monitoring of the rapidly evolving context. Due to the closure facilities during the lockdown, there was a constricted access to health and nutrition facilities, therefore, authorities should make available screening services for the early detection and treatment of acute malnutrition.

The results of this work may be limited because, even if broad research, including scientific databases, desk research and grey literature, was conducted, there is still a possibility of publication bias. We could have not been able to identify all the initiatives also because many of the implemented initiatives, especially local smaller ones, may have not been reported in scientific databases or grey literature. Moreover, food insecurity may be a long-term issue, which means that even more important problems may have raised in the upcoming months, even after the lockdown was lifted. In this context, policies and decision makers should consider long-lasting strategies and interventions to address food insecurity in times of crises.

Conclusion

The pandemic, and especially the lockdowns, have brought to labor shortages, disruption in food supply chains, loss of work with reduced income, and led to the emergence of new vulnerabilities that have not been properly tutelated by the authorities. Food insecurity is more often faced by low-income households, single parents, parents with a higher number of children, or households with low parents' education and no occupation. Although the impact of COVID-19 on malnutrition during the lockdown, and beyond, is not yet fully known and evaluated, the results of this work show that there is a need for an international/national network and policies capable of offering a timely and effective response to emergencies paying special attention to the most vulnerable groups in order to fight inequalities that the pandemic has exacerbated. Authorities, decision-makers and different associations, at national and international level, should make a priority the identification of the impact of the pandemic on the state of food security and health of the entire population.

³⁶ UNICEF, "MATERNAL AND CHILD NUTRITION UNICEF PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES TO RESPOND", Accessed: Oct. 01, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.unscn.org/uploads/web/file/UNICEF-NUTRITION-AND-COVID-19-FINAL-.pdf>



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