



Caritas diocesana
Reggio Emilia-Guastalla

PROJECT PRESENTATION

MENSA DIFFUSA

CARITAS REGGIANA



WHY?

The pandemics forced us to review the consolidated management of the canteen system, respecting the legislative prescriptions and limitations gradually introduced in Italy as emergency measures facing the spreading of the virus.

The Caritas local branch (1), starting from the Central Canteen services located in via Adua and thanks to the precious participation of many volunteers, has redesigned the service provision, rearranging the delivery of meals in new locations where people in need could actually eat their meals in safe and warm spaces, networking with others. Indeed for some people, especially homeless, not having a place where to actually eat a proper meal is indeed a problem not to be underestimated. Starting from this challenge, the team has brainstormed ideas elaborating possible solutions, providing people in need with a safe shelter offering networking and relational opportunities in times of restrictions to movement and social gathering.

The redesign phase has initially looked for new areas or spaces to be reconverted into lunch rooms capable of hosting smaller groups of people, reaching at once the goal of being closer to the needs of the poor, thus better linking the services offered by the Charity supporting the vulnerable at the local level in every possible basic need. This first experimental phase of the project started in November 2020 with the opening of the San Maurizio canteen , a decentralised space hosting the meals delivery and a space for safe contacts and relations around the concept of lunch. This the evolved including the opening of other neighbourhood lunch rooms or canteen spaces, representing a first step towards the creation of a distributed network of various canteens including several actors such as parishes , houses and social contexts engaged in reaching out to vulnerable groups starting from the meals' distribution.

1 Caritas Italiana (Caritas Italy) is a pastoral organisation of the Italian Bishop's Conference which was founded in 1971, answering the call of Paul VI to promote charity with a commitment to raising public awareness. It connects 220 diocesan Caritas, committed in their daily activities to support the most vulnerable people.

The national and diocesan local chapters of Caritas in Italy are committed in many different areas such as, peace, old and new forms of poverty, immigration and asylum, mental health and homelessness as well as humanitarian emergency responses in Italy and abroad.

THE GOALS

AN INNOVATIVE WAY OF ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

The goal of the project is to address food poverty with an innovative solution fully taking into consideration the health risks emerged during the pandemic, paying attention to the relational and social actions of Caritas. The searched innovative response aims at raising the awareness on poverty challenges as well as inviting people to take care in person of those in need, presently experiencing underprivileged conditions.

CREATING DISSEMINATED WELCOMING SPACES

By paying more attention to the specific needs of the people in need and the tailored tutoring of the users, the disseminated spaces foster an easier access of the community to charity activities, developing a more caring attitude and closer attention to the peculiar features of vulnerability.

ANIMATING TERRITORIAL CHARITY ACTIONS.

To allow people who live in poverty and vulnerable conditions (reached generally by the local Charity counselling services) to meet in a safe, heated and cosy location, sharing the meals and building relations while eating around the table.



THE PROPOSAL

CARITAS has launched locally a call for spaces and volunteers addressed initially to all parishes in the district of Reggio Emilia, to implement the concept of a disseminated canteen. The searched spaces should have been suitable for hosting small group of people during the lunches. The users (in full compliance with the spatial distancing imposed by the COVID regulations) are addressed to the closest canteen service directly by the Caritas services, which map and encounter the presence of people in need and vulnerable in Reggio.



HOW DOES IT WORK

The identified spaces and places are dedicated to the lunch service for approximately 2 hours each day. In this time span at least three volunteers are present (selected among the people which registered both in the caritas or coming from the parishes' neighbourhood where the canteen is actually located). These are dedicated to the welcoming of the guests (they allow entrance without overcrowding the spaces, inviting to the proper sanitation of hands, taking the temperatures of people entering...), to the dispatching of the meals, the cleaning and sanitation of the tables and areas before and after the service. The central canteen – located in Via Adua 83- acts as the cooking centre; meals are prepared in this centre and then delivered by volunteers fully respecting all hygienic requirements linked to food distribution. A close connection with the district local Health Unit – Department responsible for food hygiene and safety has been established in order to allow full compliance with all safety requirements also with reference to food preparation.

The caritas staff is involved in the project through a proper counselling services to all users and people in need. They map the needy, allow them to enter the process not only providing the meal but gradually developing an individualized path of independence, allowing for the most vulnerable to enter once again in a dimension of self-reliance, gaining a new role in the community. All this happens around the table, with the presence dialogue and daily exchange with the volunteers. This exchange happens in an informal setting favouring discussion, facilitating networking generating a comfortable atmosphere where to connect and tie new relations with others.

The disseminated canteen is thus a project which has leveraged the potential of serving a meal to the most vulnerable going far beyond the right o access food, focusing rather on the social dimension and function of the meal, nurturing not only the body but also the spirit, the relations, the hunger for contact and social inclusion.



THE SAN MAURIZIO EXPERIENCE (FIRST PILOT ACTION).

The 23rd of November 2020 the first experience of the decentralised canteen has been established in the premises of the San Maurizio parish (in the territory of Regio Emilia). The service is structured around a lunch room which welcomes the meals collected from the central canteen service located in the kitchen in via Adua where all the food is prepared. The room is open throughout the whole morning as it requires time to be arranged, sanitized and there is a wish to allow time and space for people to arrive gather, chat around a coffee.

Following a start up phase lasting a couple of weeks, the service has been running at a “full speed” welcoming 23 people on a daily basis. People in need come to the parish spaces to collect something for the lunch or the dinner.

The CARITASS specialised staff accompanies the people in need through a presence twice a week for counselling, sitting around the table with the guests of the lunchroom, exchanging views, listening to each specific need, monitoring access to service and the state of vulnerability, gradually developing individual projects of autonomy and social/ professional rehabilitation. The projects are developed around the table in the process of sharing a meal, a context which allows to shorten distances and to favour a more empathic dialogue.



THE FLOOR TO THE PEOPLE

The local chapter of Caritas has developed a video recording all the voices of those who have experienced the project of the disseminated canteen service, including volunteers and users coming from the first pilot experience of San Maurizio. Through the words of the interviewed representatives one can appreciate the true impact of the project, clearly understanding the level of coherence existing between the project goals set on paper and the implemented experiences. We hereby highlight the most significant quotes of the interviewed stakeholders, addressing you to the video for a more comprehensive overview on the people's opinion.

"Initially the volunteers were taking care of cleaning and tidying the room, setting the tables, sanitizing everything. Lately we started doing it together. Lots of people proposed to join and help, thus filling this intangible gap and distance existing maybe in the people's minds: the distance between the social worker and those who come here to access the meal" the cornerstone of the project seems to be summarized in these words.



The shared responsibility towards the space which is hosting us is actually perceived and acted at once, allowing to remove the stigma of poverty, one which people in need feel upon themselves most of the times. This has been facilitated by the constant presence of volunteers, some of which started their service since the very first opening of the new service such as Enrica who testifies:

"I have been very lucky because I actually registered to support the canteen while all this was actually starting, so I have seen it grow from the beginning (...) one chats, talks, all this also has allowed for us to establish relations, waiting one for the other day after day, telling each other how things were evolving, speaking about the weather, or simply checking the news"

"A relation which is shaped throughout the continuous presence, day after day, of volunteers. One shaped through very simple passages, small actions which truly testify the care for the people. Apparently as a contradiction with respect to the given rules and restrictions imposed to combat the diffusion of COVID, a true added value which has been recognized to the distribution of meals to the people in need: "is not merely the act of taking/receiving a small bag of food then leaving; we may sit together with them (the volunteers) and we can converse about almost anything"



But there is more to be highlighted. The reduced numbers, as well as the greater attention to the privacy of the guests have allowed the pilot experience in San Maurizio to collect collateral benefits especially reaching those whom, greatly suffering for the shame upon being in need could not reach out for help to the ordinary CARITAS services. It has furthermore allowed to address with a first rapid response all those people who entered in a state of need during the pandemic months:

"I'm fine, I like it. In short, it's a peaceful environment, animated by easy people. Until six months ago I was working, didn't miss anything, no worries whatsoever. I've always earned my living. "

It is these elements (these are only few which emerged during the interviews) which drive us to continue promoting this experience of the disseminated canteen project, shaping spaces where, as Fausto is assessing "We renovate the capacity of living with a joyful wink!"

for more information

Mail: mensa@caritasreggiana.it

Supported by



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