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COLLETTIVI A TAVOLA

Teorie e pratiche del cibo condiviso

a cura di
Alice Giannitrapani, Davide Puca

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INTRODUZIONE

Di recente la cucina italiana è stata dichiarata patrimonio dell'umanità dall'UNESCO. E stiamo pur certi che questo contribuirà a nutrire il già ampio dibattito sull'alimentazione contemporanea. Sappiamo bene come la gastronomia sia uno degli ambiti più studiati e più praticati, oggetto di saperi specialistici, di narrazioni mediatiche, di rituali fortemente codificati. Eppure, una delle forme più diffuse e strutturanti del mangiare contemporaneo – quello della ristorazione collettiva – resta ancora poco interrogata. Presente nei luoghi del lavoro, dell'istruzione, della cura e dell'assistenza, la ristorazione collettiva accompagna le nostre quotidianità. Ogni giorno cerchiamo il baretto di turno, la mensa universitaria, la sala cucina dove poter scaldare il pasto che da casa abbiamo portato nel sofisticatissimo lunch box di ultima generazione. Investigare il funzionamento di mense & co. significa guardare contemporaneamente al cibo e ai dispositivi che ne organizzano la distribuzione e il consumo e, per loro tramite, anche capire meglio il modo in cui strutturiamo le nostre vite. Come funziona dunque il mondo della ristorazione collettiva? Cosa si intende con questo termine? E da cosa è composto il collettivo che appare nel nome? Domande cui questo volume cerca di fornire una risposta.

La ristorazione collettiva affonda le proprie origini nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento e si lega alla nascita della società industriale e alle nuove connesse forme di organizzazione della vita, lavorativa e sociale. Essa occupa da subito uno statuto ambiguo tra le diverse forme di refezione, ponendosi a metà tra il consumo alimentare domestico (con cui condivide la dimensione della quotidianità) e quello commerciale (con cui condivide un diverso modo di pensare gli spazi e gli attori coinvolti). Il pasto offerto è, almeno inizialmente, legato al soddisfacimento di esigenze eminentemente pratiche, ovvero alla necessità di nutrimento degli operai.

Il dibattito su questo tipo di ristorazione, che ha regole proprie sia dal punto di vista produttivo sia da quello del

consumo, diviene ben presto un dibattito politico: la mensa è un diritto? La qualità del cibo va tenuta in considerazione? E cosa accade quando questa forma di ristorazione si allarga a strutture in cui si manifesta quello che Foucault chiamava potere disciplinare, quali asili, scuole, ma anche ospedali, carceri, strutture assistenziali? L'interesse per questo genere di ristorazione deriva insomma dal suo essere a cavallo tra diversi campi discorsivi che vanno da quello politico a quello igienico-sanitario, da quello pedagogico a quello nutrizionale, passando per quello tecnologico e gustativo.

La pandemia, poi, come un po' in tutti i campi, ha prodotto anche in questo caso una scossa: da un lato una forte crisi derivante dalle trasformazioni strutturali nell'organizzazione del lavoro e nella forma della vita quotidiana; dall'altro un necessario ripensamento che ha coinvolto l'innovazione tecnologica, la logistica, il tipo di clientela, nonché i valori culinari alla base dei servizi. La ristorazione collettiva si è ibridata con il catering e il delivery, ha abbandonato la sua distribuzione broadcast in favore di una definizione sempre più specifica di tipologia di clientela e di menu. Parallelamente i flussi di attraversamento urbano – di persone e di cibi – sono stati rivoluzionati, si è imposta una forma di narrazione volta a rilanciare l'homemade, si sono sperimentate nuove modalità di ritualità conviviale. Attorno al cibo sono stati riarticolati i parametri fondamentali dell'esistenza: da un lato, i valori astratti della razionalità economica a fondamento della città, dall'altro, quelli concreti del buon vivere, nel quadro di una riformulazione del rapporto con l'ambiente. Contrasti in realtà che sono tali solo in apparenza, dal momento che la tecnologia giova alla nuova dialettica tra città e campagna (e, anzi, consente di conciliare l'opposizione mitica fra questi due ambiti) e che, d'altro canto, una serie di politiche urbane tende a inglobare il mondo della natura (si pensi a pedonalizzazioni, parchi pubblici, *foodscapes*, orti urbani e ristoranti con orto, luoghi di intrattenimento e consumo critico). E la ristorazione collettiva si è fatta carico di questi nuovi discorsi sociali, moltiplicandosi in differenti sottogeneri che hanno sdoganato le basi su cui sembrava fondarsi (per esempio puntando in alcuni casi sulla qualità degli ingredienti, sul soddisfacimento di nicchie di consumatori, sulla ecosostenibilità o sul radicamento nel territorio).

La ristorazione collettiva, in quanto riflesso e al contempo motore di più ampie dinamiche sociali, si pone allora al centro di nuovi dibattiti – politici in senso ampio – legati alla ridefinizione qualitativa del cibo (ma come definire la qualità?), a nuovi modi di intendere la collettività (da chi è composto un collettivo e quando si può parlare di ristorazione collettiva?), a nuove forme di produzione e distribuzione dei pasti, a nuovi utenti e nuovi attori che prendono parte a questo processo, a nuovi generi di ristorazione sempre più spesso ibridati tra loro. Tutti temi al centro dell'interesse pubblico e che coinvolgono innovazioni tecnologiche e modi di intendere il gusto e l'alimentazione.

In ossequio alla presa d'atto del ruolo di cartina di tornasole e di avanguardia svolto dal cibo in tali trasformazioni, raccogliamo in questo volume i primi risultati del progetto PRIN 2022 “Collettivi a Tavola” – COLTA, che ha indagato il mondo della ristorazione collettiva, intendendo con questa locuzione il servizio quotidianamente espletato da mense aziendali, enti caritatevoli, organizzazioni pubbliche come ospedali, scuole e università. Un progetto che ha visto collaborare l'Università di Palermo (capofila) con l'Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Pollenzo e il Politecnico di Milano e in cui studiosi afferenti a diverse discipline – semiotica, estetica, filosofia, service design – hanno collaborato per mettere a fuoco le peculiarità di un ambito estremamente rilevante e diffuso dell'alimentazione ma storicamente poco indagato¹. Il confronto costante con i professionisti che operano quotidianamente in questo settore ha stimolato e accompagnato l'osservazione diretta di realtà diverse, per dimensione e finalità, e ha consentito di operare un continuo passaggio dalla teoria alla pratica e viceversa. Un volume, questo, che non intende configurarsi come punto finale di raccolta dei risultati di un progetto, ma piuttosto come una forma di rilancio, tesa a sollevare nuovi interrogativi e ad aprire nuovi orizzonti di ricerca.

G.M.

1 Per l'Università di Palermo hanno collaborato, dietro il coordinamento di Gianfranco Marrone, Gianluca Burgio, Antonio Cetani, Alice Giannitrapani, Dario Mangano, Francesco Mangiapane, Tiziana Migliore, Davide Puca, Franciscu Sedda, Mirco Vannoni, Ilaria Ventura Bordenca. Per l'Università di Pollenzo, dietro il coordinamento di Nicola Perullo, hanno collaborato Franco Fassio e Maddalena Borsato. Per il Politecnico di Milano, dietro il coordinamento di Beatrice Villari, hanno collaborato Stefano Maffei e Beatrice Ferrari.

BEATRICE VILLARI, STEFANO MAFFEI
THE DISTRIBUTED CANTEEN
MODEL OF REGGIO EMILIA

A relational, systemic, and transformative
perspective for services

1. *Food Aid and Solidarity Canteens as Drivers of Social Innovation*

Food poverty in Italy has now become a long-term, structural issue. According to the *Report on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Italy* (De Lauso in Caritas Italiana 2025, p. 35):

[...] approximately one in ten people in Italy currently lives in a condition of deprivation (9.8% of the population); this amounts to more than 5.7 million individuals, distributed across over 2.2 million households (8.4% of families). Looking at the data from a historical perspective, particularly over the past decade, a dramatic increase emerges: between 2014 and 2024, the number of people living in absolute poverty rose from approximately 4 million to over 5.7 million (+38%), while the number of households increased from 1.5 million to 2.2 million (+43.3%) [...].

This situation is the result of multiple factors, including economic stagnation, demographic ageing, geopolitical crises, and labour precarisation. Absolute poverty in Northern Italy¹ has

1 As Federica De Lauso writes (Caritas, 2025, p. 36): “The macro-regional data analysis infrastructure confirms Southern Italy as the area of the country with the highest levels of poverty (12.5% on an individual basis); particularly concerning is the situation of the Islands, where, in just one year, the incidence among individuals rose from 11.9% to 13.4%. Moreover, the phenomenon tends to intensify in the Southern and Island regions: not only does the number of people living in poverty increase, but they also fall progressively further below the minimum expenditure threshold required to avoid deprivation; in other words, this is poverty that is

nearly doubled since 2008 (+95.6%), with especially severe effects on migrant communities and households excluded from social protection systems.

In the absence of a comprehensive national policy addressing food poverty, efforts to counteract it are largely entrusted to territorial solidarity networks, often rooted in religious-assistential or philanthropic traditions. These networks have contributed to building infrastructures of solidarity and collaboration among citizens, institutions, and the third sector (Caraher, Coveney 2016). Such forms of collective action align with the perspectives proposed by Putnam (1994) and Bourdieu (1986) regarding territorial civiness as a foundational mechanism for producing social capital and reciprocity networks, which can constitute a crucial reserve of welfare and assistance resources, particularly during periods of crisis.

Within this framework, collective canteens, understood as a form of solidarity-based food aid, play a significant role in constructing collective and community value. It does not merely provide meals but also functions as an additional food policy instrument capable of influencing broader public health dimensions, including dietary habits (Morgan, Sonnino 2013). Its effectiveness is linked to its capacity to connect diverse actors, including private entities, public institutions, non-profit organisations, and local producer ecosystems (Galli et al. 2018). As observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, these mechanisms have demonstrated that bottom-up collective action, activated through voluntary networks, constitutes a form of social innovation deeply rooted in local communities, capable of addressing unforeseen crises and generating long-term benefits (Cattivelli 2022). Beyond their immediate impact on reducing food waste, these social aid strategies strengthen local solidarity-based economies and build community support networks.

worsening in its intensity. However, if the analysis is extended over a longer time horizon, a significant finding emerges: over the past decade, the Northern regions are those that have experienced the most pronounced effects of the many socio-economic crises that have followed one another since 2008. In these areas, historically characterised by levels of well-being above the national average, the number of households in absolute poverty has almost doubled (+95.6%), compared with more limited increases in the Centre (+24.6%) and in the South (+15.6%).”

A further qualifying element concerns their indirect impact on environmental sustainability. The adoption of practices aimed at waste reduction, surplus recovery, and the promotion of circular economies amplifies the positive effects of solidarity initiatives, generating value not only for direct beneficiaries but also for the entire local food supply chain (Sonnino, McWilliam 2011).

It is within this context that the experience of the *mense diffuse* of Reggio Emilia is situated. They represent a decentralised model of solidarity that combines organisational efficiency, social inclusion, and territorial sustainability. Beyond constituting an innovative service model, the *mense diffuse* contribute to the construction of a significant *narrative of change* (Wittmayer 2019) around the right to food and solidarity-based inclusion processes. These bottom-up actions challenge dominant market paradigms primarily oriented towards economic value generation, proposing alternative models of social justice and collaboration.

2. *The Case Study: The Mense Diffuse of Reggio Emilia as a Relational Service Paradigm*

The concept of the *mense diffuse* emerged within the Diocesan Caritas of Reggio Emilia in 2020 as a response to the limitations of the centralised canteen model during the COVID-19 pandemic. It developed through a critical analysis of service mechanisms aimed not only at ensuring effective food distribution, but also at enhancing accessibility and relationality. In its current post-pandemic configuration, the system connects institutional actors, volunteers, and beneficiaries through a central production hub and a distributed network of meal distribution points embedded within the urban fabric.

Its implementation was inspired by decentralised models already present in other contexts and represented a concrete response to the needs that emerged during the health emergency, when it was necessary to avoid overcrowding while ensuring accessibility. The service provided by the Diocesan Caritas of Reggio Emilia guarantees lunch and takeaway meals for vulnerable beneficiaries, delivered through a network of parish spaces distributed across the municipal territory (and beyond).

By overcoming the functional conception of canteens as mere food providers, the model becomes a relational infrastructure capable of fostering new forms of dialogue and a new relational paradigm, generating benefits not only for service users but for the entire territory (Folgheraiter 2007; Gollini 2021), thereby contributing to the production of social capital. The decentralisation of meal distribution sites has yielded significant advantages: reduced crowding, increased operational safety, and, through smaller, more intimate spaces, more effective interactions between volunteers and diners, thereby facilitating deeper mutual understanding and dialogue.

3. *The Capillarity of the Network: Effects and Impacts*

The creation of a distributed network of canteens addressed immediate accessibility needs while also generating stronger social effects, producing positive impacts across multiple dimensions, including inclusion and participation, civic engagement, and cultural transformation. The activation of relationships in specific places among volunteers, beneficiaries, and institutions has generated processes of collective empowerment, confirming that services based on collaborative networks can stimulate social innovation (Mulgan 2006; Manzini 2014). This dynamic is also evident at the international level, underscoring the importance of cross-sector collaborations and hybrid social enterprise models for strengthening equity and inclusion in food policies (Vickers et al. 2025).

Even prior to the introduction of the *mense diffuse* model, Caritas of Reggio Emilia had developed a long-term vision centred on the centrality of human relationships, conceiving the service as integrated care (Manzini 2022; Meroni, Corubolo 2023), rather than as a mere process of meeting material needs (Gollini 2024). The implementation of the distributed network amplified this perspective, transforming the service into a complex ecosystem of interactions, synergistically integrated into the territorial fabric, promoting inclusion and the valorisation of individual vulnerabilities. This model thus represents an example of social innovation in which relationships constitute a crucial resource: the canteen is no longer merely a place of consumption, but a space of encounter and dialogue, capable

of generating trust-based relationships and strengthening social cohesion (Cipolla, Manzini 2009; Gollini 2024).

4. *Methodological Approach*

To analyse the functioning and dynamics of the *mense diffuse* of Reggio Emilia, an action research approach was adopted, a methodology that integrates observation, reflection, and intervention within an iterative and participatory process characteristic of design research (Reason, Bradbury 2001; Villari 2023). This approach enabled exploration not only of organisational and operational practices but also of the relational and cultural dimensions that define the service's identity.

Ethnographic tools, including participant and non-participant observations, were useful for observing interactions and emerging relationships across different contexts, revealing social structures and norms that are difficult to capture through quantitative inquiry. The integration of ethnographic tools applied to service design (Segelström, Raijmakers, Holmlid 2009), along with the use of visual and conceptual maps, enabled a systemic reading of the service by connecting actors, processes, spaces, and values. In this sense, the research functioned not only as observation but also as a reflective and transformative process aimed at co-creating knowledge with the stakeholders involved.

5. *Data Collection*

Data collection took place between March 2024 and February 2025 and was conducted by a team of three researchers adopting a diversified qualitative approach, with the aim of providing a systemic understanding of the service, its components, and operational modalities. The use of multiple research tools enabled the capture of the phenomenon's complexity, leveraging the complementarity of the methods employed. Semi-structured interviews constituted a fundamental tool for giving voice to the various service actors, at both managerial and operational levels. Through repeated interview sessions (recorded and transcribed), it was possible not only to reconstruct daily activities

and the organisational mechanisms sustaining the canteens, but also to understand the strategic choices that situate the service within a broader territorial ecosystem.

Alongside direct interviews, participant observation was conducted by assuming the role of volunteers, enabling researchers to participate directly in service delivery and gain insight into the deeper dynamics characterising practices and interactions. Participant observation allowed for the exploration of interpersonal relationships, symbolic meanings, spatial connotations, and everyday gestures. This observational activity was supported by the collection of photographs and videos, which enabled the documentation of significant aspects and provided material to support shared reflections within the research team.

In parallel, a diary was maintained during and after participation in activities, recording annotations and emotional impressions associated with unexpected situations, thus offering a more personal perspective on the lived experience. Finally, data collection was supported by visual maps that visualised connections among actors, processes, and resources, synthesising the service's structural components and facilitating an integrated interpretation of the collected evidence.

This methodological triangulation made it possible to investigate three key service dimensions in particular: (1) organisational dynamics, including resource management, service structure, and delivery modalities; (2) social relationships, observable through spatial configurations, communicative practices, and interpersonal relations; and (3) food processes, from procurement to distribution and consumption.

6. *Data Analysis*

The data analysis phase aimed to transform the collected material into shared, design-oriented knowledge. This phase extended beyond mere description, assuming a dialogical and transformative dimension in which researchers and service actors actively collaborated to construct a shared interpretation of the emerging evidence. This approach enabled the valorisation of situated knowledge and the lived experience of those directly involved in the service.

The process unfolded in three main stages. First, a synthesis of the “as-is” service was developed by constructing overview maps that represent the current system configuration in terms of offerings, processes, and involved actors. These service design tools enabled visualisation of relationships, interdependencies, and critical aspects, providing an accessible overview even to non-experts.

Subsequently, a participatory validation phase was conducted: findings were collectively discussed with the *mense diffuse* team through continuous dialogue, ensuring alignment between the analyses and operators’ direct experience. This phase held strategic value, as it both consolidated the legitimacy of the research process and strengthened mutual trust between researchers and staff.

Based on the analytical findings, areas for transformation were identified through an interpretive process that highlighted themes and domains for subsequent design actions. This process went beyond identifying criticalities, seeking instead to reveal latent potential and outlining development opportunities at the operational, strategic, and relational levels.

In this way, the analysis phase produced not merely a snapshot of the service’s current state but a design-oriented perspective capable of guiding future actions. The systematisation and interpretation work thus led to the identification of potential transformation scenarios by defining priority actions for medium- and long-term strategies. This approach ensured coherence with the adopted relational and systemic framework, underscoring that service value emerges precisely at the intersection of observation, reflection, and collective co-design.

7. Service Design as an Approach to Strategic Analysis

Service design is a design approach focused on the creation, organisation, and optimisation of services, in which all service actors contribute to value generation (Vargo, Akaka, Vaughan 2017). It primarily addresses intangible dimensions related to actions and processes, examining how people, technologies, spaces, and organisations interact to generate value through physical or digital interactions and experiences.

Key characteristics of service design include:

- a strong focus on users' needs and behaviours (and more broadly on social and environmental challenges extending beyond the human sphere);
- co-creation processes involving multiple stakeholders throughout service phases, fostering collaborative solutions and processes;
- the materialisation and tangibilisation of intangible service components through specific tools such as journey maps or service blueprints;
- iterative processes aimed at experimenting with and incrementally improving solutions across multiple design cycles.

Applying a service design approach to the study of the *mense diffuse* enabled the service to be interpreted not only as a delivery system, but also as a social infrastructure capable of evolving over time. From this perspective, service design functions as a strategic lever for identifying areas for improvement and transformation scenarios, balancing immediate needs with long-term vision (Sangiorgi 2011; Villari 2025). This approach aligns with the social innovation framework understood as the reconfiguration of social practices (SIMRA 2017), where design generates not only incremental improvements but opportunities for systemic transformation.

Specifically, the analysis focused on three distinct yet interconnected levels: a macro level concerning relationships with territory, institutions, and community networks; a meso level describing internal management and organisational dynamics; and a micro level focusing on users' everyday experiences and the quality of social interactions.

This perspective assumes that the value of the *mense diffuse* lies not solely in meal provision but in its capacity to activate relationships, strengthen social capital, and generate processes of inclusion. In this sense, the meal becomes a social enabler, a means for building belonging, mutuality, and solidarity (Caraher, Coveney 2016). From a *Transformative Social Innovation* (TSI) perspective, the *mense diffuse* operate across multiple levels of change: they introduce new social practices (social innovation), influence local subsystems (system innovation), respond to external factors such as socio-economic crises, and foster new narratives around food as a commons (Hebinck et al. 2018). From a social innovation standpoint, this also involves supporting communities in perceiving themselves as part of a broader

transformation, strengthening collective agency and a sense of belonging (Wittmayer et al. 2019).

8. *Distributed Canteens as a Relational Paradigm: A Service Perspective*

The concept of *relational services*, developed by Carla Cipolla and Ezio Manzini (2009), emerged from the observation of social innovations based on collaborative forms of everyday life organisation. These services are distinguished by the fact that their effectiveness depends more on the quality of interpersonal relationships than on predefined service procedures. The Reggio Emilia canteens fall within this category, as personal involvement, community spaces, and trust-building are crucial dimensions in which service users are recognised as individuals with whom time, attention, and care are shared.

Qualitative observation revealed three main dimensions through which the service takes shape and produces value:

- *Value dimension*, encompassing shared meanings through which collective identity is built around the canteen as a place of community and hospitality.
- *Tangible dimension*, relating to physical spaces, logistical organisation, and meal distribution modalities.
- *Communicative dimension*, characterising interactions between diners and volunteers, activating processes of listening, empathy, and reciprocity.

Analysed through a service design lens, these dimensions demonstrate that the value of the *mense diffuse* experience does not depend solely on food quality or logistical efficiency, but rather on the service's capacity to generate meaning and relational value (Cipolla, Manzini 2009).

This analysis can be further enriched through a service perspective that moves beyond a purely infrastructural reading, highlighting how value emerges in situated and intersubjective ways. Relational perspectives in service literature (FitzPatrick et al. 2015; Vink, Hay, Duan 2025) conceptualise services as phenomena shaped by social and material relational networks, reconfiguring actors' positions and the very nature of the value generated. Within this framework, the Reggio Emilia model

cannot be interpreted merely as a complex organisational network, but rather as an entanglement of relationships extending beyond formal institutional boundaries.

The relational perspective shifts attention from individual actors to reciprocal processes among subjects. Volunteers, for example, are not simply task executors, but agents co-constructing trust and reciprocity with diners. Similarly, diners are not passive users, but co-creators of the service, contributing to its evolution through shared responsibility and everyday practices of care.

The *mense diffuse* function as nodes within a socio-material fabric in which formal and informal interactions, everyday proximities, and institutional ties constantly intersect, thereby supporting the model's adaptive capacity. From this perspective, the service functions as a relational infrastructure that sustains inclusion practices and generates social capital. Each canteen, understood as a relational node, becomes a space of continuous social renegotiation, where differences, tensions, and interdependencies generate novel possibilities for collective transformation (Vink, Hay, Duan 2025). In this light, the *mense diffuse* emerge not only as contingent responses to primary needs, but also as spaces oriented towards relational care and community-building grounded in shared values such as equity and solidarity.

9. Participation and Value Co-Creation

Service design places value co-creation at its core (Vargo, Lusch 2004), and the *mense diffuse* exemplify this process. The Reggio Emilia model demonstrates how active participation by all actors not only enhances service efficiency but also strengthens community belonging. Within this framework, three aspects emerge as particularly central to value co-creation:

- *Role of volunteers*: the volunteer community extends beyond execution tasks, playing a crucial role in fostering trust and reciprocity with diners and among volunteers.
- *Active involvement of diners*: where possible, diners participate through shared responsibility for spaces and their use be-

yond meal consumption (e.g., community activities), fostering co-responsibility and cohesion.

- *Canteens as spaces of social learning*: beyond meal provision, canteen spaces activate interpersonal support networks and foster new relational forms (e.g., spontaneous mutual aid).

Due to their social function, these spaces can be interpreted as community hubs, similar to community food hubs described in various contexts (LeBlanc et al. 2014; Vickers et al. 2025). They operate not only as food redistribution sites, but also as nodes of participatory governance, integrating diverse actors into collaborative networks. In this sense, the *mense diffuse* can be considered true laboratories of social innovation (Mulgan 2006; Murray, Caulier-Grice, Mulgan 2010), capable of activating transformative processes extending beyond dignified meal provision, influencing solidarity culture and local welfare governance.

10. Designing Scenarios: Implementing the Relational Model through Concrete Actions

The service scenarios represent the tangible outcomes of the research and function as strategic vision tools that translate analytical and reflective findings into concrete actions. They are not predefined solutions but rather hypothetical configurations that serve as levers for change, emerging from qualitative insights and stakeholder collaboration (Corubolo, Meroni 2024). From this perspective, the scenarios reflect real community needs and innovation levers within the current system, grounded in the relational paradigm that places interactions and value co-creation processes at the centre.

Specifically, the scenario-building process unfolded across six phases:

- (I) formulation and detailed description of research insights;
- (II) selection of significant insights;
- (III) association of insights with service categories;
- (IV) identification of opportunity areas;
- (V) development of a long-term vision and description of possible transformation trajectories.

This process enabled the identification of change trajectories based on existing system resources and competencies.

The scenarios highlight multiple areas of innovation at both the micro and broader organisational levels. These range from designing new interaction modalities between volunteers and diners to developing more efficient logistical management tools, creating inclusive and culturally diverse menus, or establishing mentorship pathways for volunteers. In each case, the relational paradigm frames these actions not merely as organisational improvements, but as opportunities to strengthen trust, reciprocity, and collective empowerment.

For instance, the “*Beyond the Canteen*” scenario interprets meal provision not as a simple consumption activity but as an opportunity for emancipation and growth, positioning the canteen toward an enabling, relational model that transforms beneficiaries into active community members. Similarly, “*The Volunteers’ Voice*” emphasises the importance of consolidating recognition and continuity pathways within the volunteer group, transforming volunteering into a long-term learning process.

The strategic articulation of proposals was synthesised into a roadmap structured across three temporal categories:

- *Now*, including immediately implementable solutions such as logistical optimisation;
- *New*, encompassing short-term perspectives aimed at expanding collaborative and intercultural practices;
- *Next*, outline medium- to long-term visions, such as expanding the model to other urban contexts or creating multifunctional social hubs.

This temporal framing integrates action concreteness with a transformative vision: each identified action becomes an opportunity to foster new design forms in which value is not reducible to individual contributions but emerges from the integration of diverse practices. Thus, design scenarios assume a dual role as operational tools and cultural devices. On the one hand, they guide strategic choices and future service planning in relation to available resources; on the other, they consolidate the *mense diffuse*’ status as hubs of social innovation, where change is understood as a continuous process of value negotiation and collective learning.

11. Concluding Reflections

Although rooted in a specific local context, the *mense diffuse* model of Reggio Emilia is embedded within a broader landscape of social innovations in the food system. It shares with other social innovation experiences the capacity to activate bottom-up responses, reconfigure existing practices, and engage communities in value co-creation. From this perspective, these characteristics position it as a laboratory for systemic transformation, capable of contributing to food sovereignty processes, the reduction of food poverty, and socio-environmental sustainability.

The experience thus represents an emblematic case of social innovation in solidarity-based collective catering. Through a service design lens, the model emerges as a complex ecosystem where operational efficiency and relational value intertwine to generate meaningful community-level impacts. Food assumes an enabling function: it not only satisfies a primary need but also serves as a vehicle for building trust-based relationships, strengthening social capital, and fostering cohesion, central elements of design practice. In this sense, the canteen functions as social infrastructure that influences cultural and behavioural dimensions while connecting diverse territorial resources.

The Reggio Emilia approach exemplifies a transition from an assistential welfare model to an enabling welfare environment that promotes inclusion, empowerment, and active participation. As stated by Gollini (2024), it is necessary “to move towards a more personalised and integrated approach to social canteen, actively involving people in need and transforming them from mere beneficiaries into active participants in the proposed solutions”. This paradigm shift requires joint commitment among public, private, and third-sector actors, opening pathways towards a new conception of welfare, not as passive assistance, but as a driver of emancipation and social cohesion, with relationships at the core.

The *mense diffuse* are therefore not an isolated service, but a potential contributor to redefining food policies and local welfare through a systemic and sustainable lens. In this perspective, the integration of systemic design approaches with long-term orientations characterises a form of service design

that transcends linear cause-effect models, envisioning strategic directions in which *solutions* emerge from the convergence of multiple small actions collectively sustaining a broader transformative vision (Lin, Villari 2023; Villari 2025).

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