Citizens' Networks and Civic Responsibility Chains for a Communitarian Response to the Post-pandemic Vulnerabilities

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Citizens' networks and civic responsibility chains for a communitarian response to the post-pandemic vulnerabilities

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Abstract:

During the pandemic, the system of social and health services has been heavily put under pressure, while the widespread micro-network of individual and collective actors belonging to the third sector and informal volunteering has emerged as fundamental. Besides activating quickly, these actors managed to adapt to the use of digital technologies to develop remote proximity. The paper analyses the evolution of the Social Street Residents in Via Venti Settembre in Verona as a form of technologically-mediated sociality. Using semi-structured interviews and the social network analysis, the aim is to investigate whether the network of offline relationships has been transposed online, what types of support the members exchanged online, what roles the members played, and whether the Social Street developed ties with other actors of the neighbourhood. The results show a strong resilience of the Social Street, which uses digital technology to exchange psychological support and to organize responses to instrumental needs with other third sector actors of the neighbourhood. However, the potential for networking, communication, and generation of proximity spaces does not meet a local government capable of including the Social Street in a civic and urban responsibility chain.

Keywords: Social Networks; Civic Responsibility; Urban Governance; Space of Proximity

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[1] Although the article is the result of numerous shared reflections, Riccardo Prandini wrote sections 1 and 5, while Giulia Ganugi wrote sections 2, 3, and 4.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has required reorganization processes in every social sphere. It shows how daily functioning is based on an immense network of rules (formal and informal), socio-technical devices, and operating regimes. We usually take this functioning for granted and trust it without knowing exactly how it works until something goes wrong. When the pandemic impacted the functioning of this invisible network of expert systems, the huge and growing (evolutionary) improbability on which our society is founded was "revealed" (Giddens 1990). This situation put under pressure the social and health services system which was called upon to respond to the real explosion of demand for interventions (Bernardoni 2020; Dellavalle and Cellini 2020). Consequently, this increasing demand highlighted the weaknesses of the national welfare system (Bernardoni 2020) (Mordeglia 2020). At the same time, the emergence of new needs and the worsening of existing needs emphasized the Italian regional heterogeneity because some territories reacted operationally, administratively, and politically better than others. (Dellavalle and Cellini 2020; Gazzi 2020).

However, during the emergency some strengths also emerged: firstly, the existence of a network of social enterprises and third sector entities, which during the crisis were at the forefront in addressing the difficulties of families or lonely people, even by intervening, in many cases, before the public actors (Bernardoni 2020); secondly, the full availability of a widespread network of voluntary organizations and informal groups of citizens for emergency help (Marini et al. 2020). Moreover, aid to the traditional welfare system also came from the private sector, especially from proximity shops, shopping centres, professional firms, and for-profit enterprises (*ibidem*).

Basically, the technocratic and elitist ideology of the Smart Cities could not stand alone the challenges of the pandemic crisis, being so widespread, localized and micro-territorial. The "belief" in the necessity to shift from the informal and invisible work of social micro-realities to the digitalisation of information and the control of society through big data rapidly collapsed. Recently, Shannon Mattern has critically reflected precisely on this proper ideology represented by the trend of *cities dashboards*. The cities dashboards are control panels where all New Big Data should be projected to control and manage live the processes of the city. The anthropologist pointed out how the image of cities dashboards actually hides the *Mud* from the critical discussion. The Mud is «all the dirty ("un-cleaned") data, the variables that have nothing to do with key performance (however it's defined), the parts that don't lend themselves to quantification and visualization. All the insight that doesn't accommodate tidy operationalization and airtight widgetization: that's what the dashboard screens out» (2021, 31). This Mud re-emerged in an absolutely unpredictable way in the creative methods adopted by social and health workers (Allegri and Di Rosa 2020; Gui 2020), and in

the countless practices of voluntary help, reciprocity and solidarity which have regenerated proximity (Cesareo and Pavesi 2019a), and sense of acceptance and belonging. Therefore, the results were innovative forms of "distanced proximity", given by the integration of the real presence of bodies (interaction) and the virtual presence (interactivity).

These forms of distanced proximity developed through the ability of health professionals and formal or informal Third Sector's actors to adapt to the alternative places provided by digital media, which have proved to be fundamental for supporting the social fabric of daily life (Bonini 2020). In fact, the period of domestic confinement accelerated the process of personal communication mediatisation, which became almost the only possible form of sociality during the rigid lockdowns. The Platform Society (Van Dijck et al. 2019) reached its highest levels and the time spent socializing within an ecosystem of digital platforms (Deuze 2011) exceeded the time spent in public space and face-to-face interaction.

The analysis we propose concerns one of these forms of digitalized sociality: the Social Street (henceforth, SS) of the residents in Via Venti Settembre in Verona. During the first lockdown, this neighbourhood community transformed the stored social capital into new forms of interactive proximity. This conversion of real assets into virtual assets could be a replicable innovation, which would constitute an effective urban chain of micro-responsibilities (Cesareo and Pavesi 2019b) if properly governed. Within some rich territories of cohesive social networks, such as the Trentino family districts (Prandini and Tronca, 2019), the Turin neighbourhood houses, the Milan neighbourhood networks of QuBì Project, what we observed is precisely the emergence of a broad micro-network of individual and collective actors, who learn to communicate and share resources and goods. Over time, the pervasiveness of these micro-networks could become a practical habitus of collaborative actions, which can be always potentially activated in an emergency. If public institutions manage to create enabling interfaces for the collaborative micro-networks, then interesting *bottom-linked* welfare experiments (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019) can arise. Thus, an immune social device – capable of intercepting, first, and then treating negative events due to crises such as the pandemic – would be institutionalised.

2. The research design

The paper analyses the networks of Via Venti Settembre's Social Street in Verona. The group carries out many activities in the neighbourhood public space and it reorganized itself, by transferring the members' interactions (in presence) into the virtual sphere (interactivity). The aim is to reflect on the aforementioned interactive social proximity. Therefore, we investigate if and how the most active

members of the SS have "translated" their interactional practices (in presence) into interactive ones (online) during the first and most rigid lockdown from March to May 2020. Secondly, we observe what types of exchanging relationships were activated and whether everyone participated equally or relational asymmetries were created. Eventually, we examine whether online support networks hybridized into *onlife* support actions, connecting to other neighbourhood actors or municipal institutions and beginning to generate a chain of responsibility.

The research consists of two semi-structured interviews with the SS administrator and the social network analysis of the exchanges that occurred online between members (Robins 2015; Borgatti et al. 2018). The first interview preceded the social network analysis and focused on the SS members' initial reactions to the pandemic, while the second followed the social network analysis and served both as a backtalk of the data collected and as integration about the relationship between the SS and the institutional actor of the Verona Municipality[2].

Concerning the social network analysis, we applied the full network approach, which was composed of the 24 most active members of the SS[3]. This subgroup was shaped by members' self-selection on the basis of active participation in the SS activities. The members' interaction of the sub-group circulates in a specifically created WhatsApp group, which is parallel to the communication on the Facebook page. We sent the survey to this subgroup, collecting 18 responses out of 24 members. Besides personal data, the survey collected data on the type of exchange that took place during the observed period. The four investigated patterns of support are:

1. Health support: request/offer of purchase and delivery of medicines and health materials, health advice, medical knowledge.
2. Organisational support: request/offer of home delivery of food, household and cleaning products, etc.).
3. Recreational support: request/offer of ideas for spending the day and letting children play (sports and do-it-yourself activities).
4. Psychological support: request/offer of listening, companionship, conversation.

Besides the questions, the survey provided the list of the 24 members of the WhatsApp group: we asked everyone to indicate whom they had turned to for support and whom they had received requests for support from. Finally, two other questions collected information about the online contacts members had during the observed period and the people they routinely met (more than 2 times per month) in the SS offline activities before the pandemic. By using the software Ucinet (Borgatti et al.

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[2] The first interview was conducted via video call on April 18th, 2020. The survey for the network data collection was disseminated via a google form and was open from April 20th to May 18th, 2020. The second interview was conducted via a phone call on September 24th, 2021.

[3] The current number of members on the Facebook group is over 600 profiles. Data updated to 21/09/2021.

2002) and Netdraw (Borgatti 2002), we analysed the cohesion of the networks, the reciprocity of the members' exchanges, the degree of homophily and heterophily among members and, eventually, the role played by members in encouraging and mediating the exchanges within the group.

3. Poly-contextual exchanges in the Social Street network

Since 2013 Social Streets have spread in Italy as an innovative social practice able to fight individualism (Introini and Pasqualini 2017) on the one hand and to generate civic engagement activities in response to collective needs (Macchioni et al. 2017) on the other hand. The main purposes of the groups are to foster good neighbourly practices, to carry out collective projects of common interest, and to benefit from increased social interaction (www.socialstreet.it/). Therefore, Social Streets have also been investigated as a strategy to reintegrate social and economic practices (Akhavan et al. 2018; Pais 2015; Castrignanò and Morelli 2019). Although each group is organised around a specific territorial area, members' interaction is supported via Facebook, developing at the intersection between online and offline dimensions as a new mode of engagement and sense of community (Augè and Pasqualini 2016; Cabitza et al. 2016).

The Social Street of via Venti Settembre's residents was born in Verona, in the Veronetta neighbourhood, in March 2014. Over the years, not only the number of members increased but the type of activities and projects expanded too. Along with the traditional weekly dinner at Nani Garden, which is one of the few public green spaces in the neighbourhood, and along with other recreational activities, the SS has organized – or taken part in – creative workshops aimed at the work-life balance and job placement of disadvantaged women. The SS also began to collaborate in the shared management of the Garden by signing a subsidiarity pact with the Municipality of Verona. Moreover, the spontaneous meetings between the SS members generated two projects: *Recup* is against food waste and social exclusion in local markets[4]; *Ri-Ciak Community Cinema in Veronetta* aims to redevelop an abandoned historic cinema[5].

We use the first interview with the SS Administrator to contextualise the group's reaction to the pandemic. As soon as the restrictive measures forced the discontinuation of in-person meetings, the members' concern was «to not leave anyone behind», especially the most disadvantaged families and small businesses in the neighbourhood. The SS members collectively reasoned about what each of them could do: phone calls multiplied, some members made themselves available to bring groceries, other members organised the collection of essential goods through baskets placed in strategic points

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[4] https://www.facebook.com/recupverona, 21/09/2021.
[5] https://www.riciak.org/il-progetto-ri-ciak/; https://www.facebook.com/riciakverona, 21/09/2021.

of the neighbourhood. Within the Facebook group, the number of registrations for solidarity purposes increased, even from store owners who offered fresh products or useful objects for leisure time at home. The SS most active members decided to move the weekly "social dinner" online, each member connecting from their home via video calls. Furthermore, the volunteers in charge of the creative workshops which took place at Nani Garden before the pandemic founded another Facebook group, called "Free circulation of knowledge and arts", in order not to totally interrupt the workshops and to publish activities' tutorials that might interest both artisans and families. According to the interviewed administrator, the strongest motivations for the SS members to get active online was the desire, on one hand, to find collective solutions to preserve the collective well-being and, and on the other, to meet physically at the Garden as soon as possible.

The social network analysis underlines the sociodemographic peculiarities of the SS "active minority". Indeed, the most active members were predominantly women (13 out of 18). Most of them were between 30 and 45 years old and had a high level of education (bachelor's, master's or PhD). Aside from two unemployed people, all the others had an occupation and most of them worked in the social, cultural or educational sectors. Three members lived with more than two people in the same household; seven members lived with a partner or relative; eight members lived alone or with a flatmate. Thus, this information depicts the presence of small family units or the absence of them.

Comparing pre-pandemic offline interactions with online conversations during the lockdown, we note a slight decrease in the number of ties and the density of nodes, while the compactness and reciprocity remain similar: the transfer of interactions from the neighbourhood to the Net seems not to have caused a loss of ties (Tab. 1: grey columns). With regard to the purpose of the online exchanges, despite the first interview primarily reporting the members' contribution to solidarity initiatives for goods' collection, distribution and other practical types of help, the networks show that psychological support was the most exchanged one. The other types of support involved fewer nodes and in a less cohesive way (Tab. 1: white columns). This evidence reflects both the original reason why the SS was founded and the contingent urgency of the pandemic vulnerabilities. Indeed, the SS first aim was meeting the needs for sociality, acquaintance, trust and care among neighbours and these values remained crucial throughout the whole development of the SS. Since the beginning, thus, the SS played an "expressive" function as classically understood by Parsons and Bales (1974). Then, during the pandemic, the expressive function also translated into an attempt to "make sense" of the pandemic crisis by sharing information and opinions to support people while every certainty was collapsing. Instead, the other three types of support – health, recreational and organizational – resembled the "instrumental" function (*ibid.*), useful to organize activities and roles among members. Apparently, this function was on standby during the first lockdown.

Cohesion measures	Psychological support	Recreational support	Organisational support	Health support	Offline interactions	Online conversations
Ties	77	45	28	7	184	148
Density	25%	14%	9%	2%	60%	48%
Compactness	47%	26%	16%	2%	77%	71%
Reciprocity	44%	44%	43%	3%	73%	80%

Tab. 1: The cohesion measures of the six analysed networks. Ties: the number of bonds between nodes. Density: number of existent ties divided by the maximum number possible of ties in the network. Compactness: the mean of all the reciprocal distances; the higher the percentage, the faster/more consistently the contents of the ties pass between the nodes. Reciprocity: percentage of mutual ties out of total possible ties.

Keeping the division between instrumental and expressive function, we visually show the different cohesion within the supporting networks. The network of instrumental supports has fewer mutual ties and a higher number of nodes is linked to central nodes, without being tied to each other (Fig. 1). The expressive support network rather attests to an increasing number of reciprocal ties. Within the network, all members – except one – are connected to at least two other members, making it more difficult to identify – at least visually – the central nodes (Fig. 2). Thus, we advance the hypothesis that psychological support circulated in a rather horizontal and reciprocal form, whereas instrumental support led to the emergence of specific asymmetries.
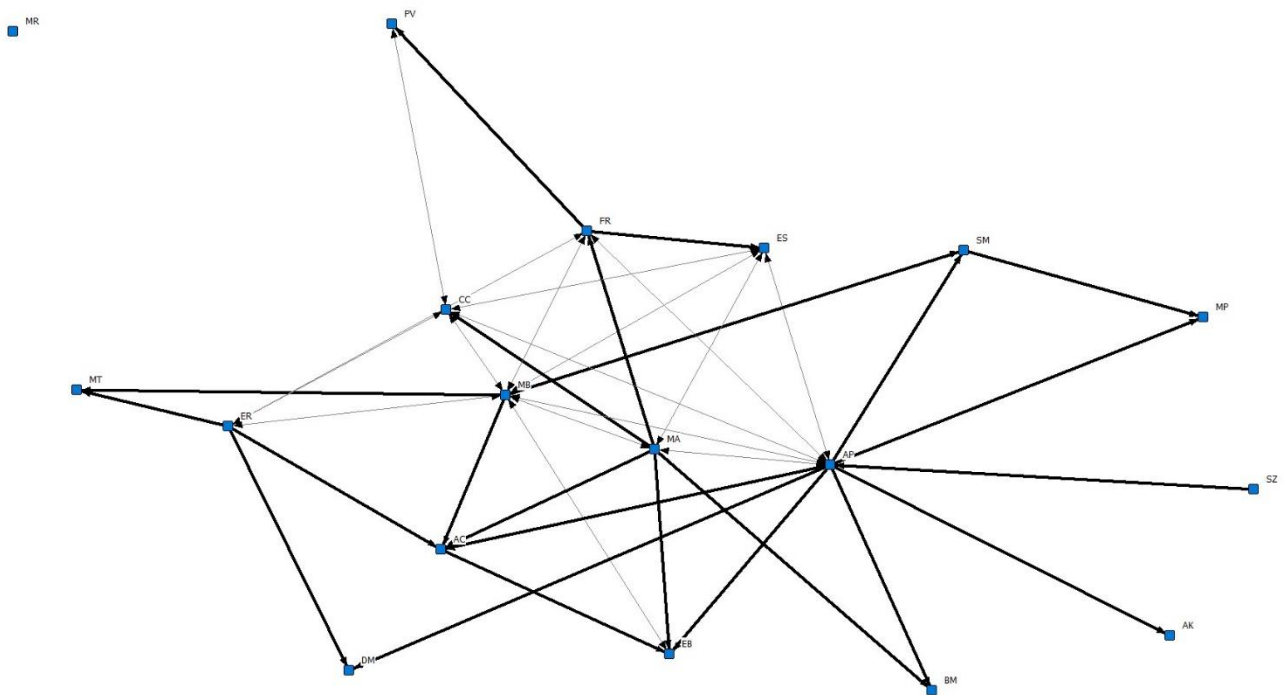

Fig. 1: The network of instrumental (health, organizational, recreational) supports. Black and thick ties: non-reciprocal; grey and thin ties: reciprocal.
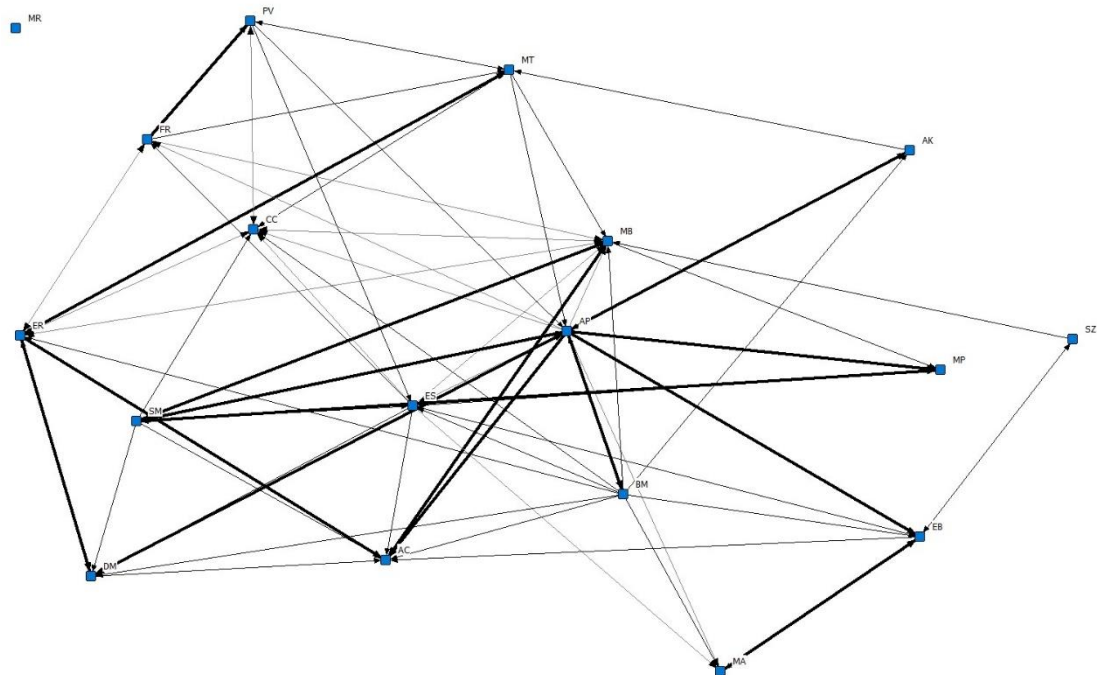
Fig. 2: The network of expressive (psychological) support. Black and thick ties: non-reciprocal; grey and thin ties: reciprocal.

To validate this hypothesis, we calculate the centrality measures[6] (Tab. 2), focusing in particular on the indegree, that is how much each node was contacted by others for requests of support. It turns out that the most central nodes – CC in instrumental supports and MB along with CC and AC in psychological support – correspond to the SS members who were a reference point both for activities and offline relationships of the group even before the pandemic. Therefore, the online dimension seems to reproduce the same roles configuration that existed offline.

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[6] The Out-degree corresponds to the gregariousness/expansiveness index, i.e. how much the node reaches out to others (asking for support). The In-degree corresponds to the prestige or popularity index, i.e. how much the node has been sought out by others (giving support).

Health support			Organizational support			Recreational support			Psychological support		
id	Outdeg	Indeg	id	Outdeg	Indeg	id	Outdeg	Indeg	id	nOutdeg	nIndeg
CC	0,000	0,118	CC	0,000	0,235	CC	0,294	0,353	MB	0,294	0,529
ES	0,059	0,059	MB	0,588	0,235	ES	0,118	0,294	CC	0,235	0,471
AP	0,176	0,059	AP	0,059	0,235	AP	0,706	0,294	AC	0,000	0,471
MT	0,000	0,059	ES	0,235	0,176	MB	0,412	0,235	AP	0,706	0,353
AC	0,000	0,059	AC	0,000	0,118	EB	0,000	0,235	ER	0,353	0,353
AK	0,000	0,059	EB	0,059	0,118	ER	0,176	0,176	EB	0,176	0,294
MB	0,000	0,000	MA	0,412	0,118	MP	0,000	0,118	MT	0,294	0,294
DM	0,000	0,000	MT	0,000	0,118	MA	0,471	0,118	DM	0,118	0,294
ER	0,176	0,000	FR	0,000	0,118	BM	0,000	0,118	ES	0,588	0,235
MP	0,000	0,000	ER	0,235	0,059	MT	0,000	0,118	MP	0,000	0,235
EB	0,000	0,000	SM	0,000	0,059	AC	0,059	0,118	MA	0,059	0,235
PV	0,000	0,000	BM	0,000	0,059	FR	0,294	0,118	FR	0,235	0,176
SM	0,000	0,000	AK	0,000	0,000	DM	0,000	0,118	SM	0,412	0,176
SZ	0,000	0,000	DM	0,000	0,000	PV	0,059	0,118	PV	0,235	0,176
MR	0,000	0,000	MP	0,000	0,000	AK	0,000	0,059	AK	0,118	0,118
MA	0,000	0,000	PV	0,000	0,000	SM	0,059	0,059	BM	0,588	0,059
BM	0,000	0,000	SZ	0,059	0,000	SZ	0,000	0,000	SZ	0,118	0,059
FR	0,000	0,000	MR	0,000	0,000	MR	0,000	0,000	MR	0,000	0,000

Tab. 2: The centrality measures of the four supporting networks. The black thick rectangles sign the highest values of in-degree (prestige or popularity index, i.e. how much the node has been sought out by others (giving support).

In fact, MB was the administrator of the SS since 2014 and the founder of the association of social promotion "D-Hub", which was strongly active in the Veronetta neighbourhood and collaborated with the members of the SS since ever. In 2018, CC changed her role from being a "simple" SS member to entering the board of D-Hub. From that moment, CC began to manage the shifts of citizen volunteers for the care of the Nani Garden. AC, AP and the other nodes, especially those included in the rectangles of Tab. 2, were historical members of the SS, being active and part of the group since the beginning of its history. Finally, it is interesting to underline that in psychological support, almost all nodes had a certain degree of centrality, as if the expressive function is equally held by the members. The instrumental function rather remained a task of fewer, more centralised members.

A slight degree of homophily[7] emerges from the network data: members who lived alone or with another person (non-partner or relative flatmate) tended to seek more psychological support in those

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[7] Tendency of nodes to have ties with nodes which they share certain characteristics with.

who lived the same condition. Alternatively, we did not find any degree of homophily according to gender and age attributes in any of the other types of support.

Through the second interview with the administrator, we then gathered information regarding the period following the first lockdown (March-May 2020) and the relationship created between the SS and other institutional and third sector actors in the neighbourhood. In June 2020, when the lockdown restrictions were lifted, the SS started to meet again for the weekly "social dinner". The participants were a few, the «most faithful ones», but the difficult period spent apart contributed to establishing more intimacy among them. So, these members began to exchange reciprocally more instrumental support. Moreover, during the summer of 2020 new members joined the Facebook group, even if the autumn blocked again the activities and meetings.

During the second pandemic wave, the SS managed to network more with numerous associations in the neighbourhood. In some cases, the SS members became supporters of other initiatives, such as "*Sos spesa*[8]" of the association Paratodos, in order to collect and distribute basic supplies. In one case, instead, the SS launched the Christmas boxes initiative for the collection and distribution of warm clothes, hobby items, food, hygiene products and greeting cards. The initiative garnered great approval and it was relaunched by the bigger association Ronda della Carità. Both individuals and neighbourhood associations supported the project, by bringing boxes and suggesting families whom to donate the boxes to.

Conversely, the collaboration with the Verona Municipality stayed inactive, because the latter only turned to the large cooperative and associations of the city. The political and administrative strategy of the Municipality was expanded with various members of the civil society and some representatives of the political opposition, who were interviewed during previous research. Although the City of Verona enacted a specific office to develop subsidiarity relationships with citizens through the stipulation of collaboration agreements, it has never effectively set reflective interfaces that would open the dialogue with the SS and other similar – informal and formal – subjects of civil society. The SS had only contact with the neighbourhood District, because one member of the district council, who also live in Veronetta, informed the SS administrator – as responsible of the association D-Hub too – about the possibility of requesting public funds to carry out social and cultural activities at Nani Garden. D-Hub, in collaboration with the SS, applied for the funds to realise group support activities. However, the funds were not eventually granted due to the second pandemic wave.

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[8] In English: Sos grocery.

5. Social Streets' potentiality: from a local network of help to a "hub" in an urban civic chain

This analysis of original data shows the Social Streets' relevance during a moment of serious social and health crisis. The data illustrates also the Social Streets' possible evolution if they would be able to network with other similar subjects and if they would be supported by local governments too in a renewed framework of Urban Governance (Eizaguirre et al. 2012; Sabel and Zeitlin 2012; Zeitlin et al. 2021). The outlined SS of Verona showed an enormous capacity for creative adaptation during the first lockdown. It did not only transform itself from a place of social interactions in presence to a virtual space of interactivity, without totally suspending its activities due to the social distancing required by the national government. The SS also innovated its physical identity by transporting online those exchanges that were considered fundamental to overcome the contagion shock. This reaction—that is avoiding the collapse of its communicative structures, suspending the presence of people, and taking it to digital social networks—took off with taking care of the most urgent problems of the SS members. Not without surprise, we observed that the initial and most urgent need (given the sociodemographic characteristics of the members) was the psychological support, exchanging mutual attention and care in an environment that generated fear, uncertainty, and isolation. This expressive function of the group was acted out in a very uniform and reciprocal way by the interviewed members; we could say, a widespread and community-oriented function. At least in the first period, the instrumental supports – even the health one – were certainly less diffuse and, in any case, they were activated by the few members, who were already "organisers" before. The SS transformed into a network of interactivity capable of generating a strong sense of solidarity and security among the members. This sense concretised in the common desire of not leaving «anyone behind».

This initial transformation went hand in hand with a constant focus – made more or less feasible by the contingent legal regulation – on maintaining old communications and establishing new ones with other neighbourhood actors. The SS members always acted voluntarily, and they strongly facilitated online communication with small local businesses and other organisations or associations to ensure the circulation of goods and services. Therefore, the SS began a process of reticulation and proximity creation, extending the boundaries of a first chain of civic responsibility throughout the neighbourhood.

However, this enormous potentiality for networking and generating proximity has not found an equally responsible reply from the local government. This is where public administration's lack of imagination and innovation capacity is measured. Instead of supporting the SS, facilitating its transition from a network of *onlife* supports (for its members and neighbours) to a "hub" of a civic

and urban responsibility (supply) chain, the Municipality only dialogued with already known and politically established organizations. In a few words, the Municipality did not seize the potentiality to link street-located communicative networks. If every street became *Social* and if these streets networked, they could create a supportive and unimaginable public infrastructure. This bottom-linked process should be managed with multi-level local governance. The result could be a potential and broad "communication system", practicable in case of crisis or special needs: a sort of urban immune system capable of intercepting dangers and triggering specific just-in-time responses and treatments.

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