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The adaptive change of the Italian Food Bank foundation: a case study

Cristina Santini

Università San Raffaele, Rome, Italy, and

Alessio Cavicchi

*Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism,
University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the case of the Italian Food Bank Foundation, highlighting how ongoing global and European challenges are pushing the organization to adapt and change. The paper aims to identify the new role that the Italian Food Bank should play in response to these new challenges.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study was developed. Data were collected through the combination of a survey and in depth interviews with people working for the organization.

Findings – Although the Food Bank has done a lot to improve its delivery of food aid and to respond to changing needs, it appears that the organization has not pursued a clearly defined strategy, and thus it should adopt a strategic mindset.

Originality/value – The paper provides details on the Italian Food Bank and the importance of adaptation to and management of change. Moreover this is the first attempt to describe the work of the Fondazione Banco Alimentare Onlus for an international readership.

Keywords Italy, Economic crisis, Food banks, Adaptive strategy, Food emergency

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The Fondazione Banco Alimentare Onlus (FBAO) is a food bank that operates in Italy. Since 1989 the FBAO has collected food surpluses, redistributing them to over 8,000 charitable organizations that assist the poor and disadvantaged throughout the country. The FBAO began in 1989 through the initiative of an entrepreneur of an Italian food corporation and is a non-religious based organization.

Food banks are generally community-centered warehouses that solicit, store and distribute food from local producers, retail food sources, the federal commodity distribution program and the food industry (Nichols-Casebolt and Morris, 2001 in Berner and O'Brien, 2004). The FBAO follows this model of operation, collecting food surpluses and redistributing them to over 8,000 local-level charities throughout Italy.

The FBAO, like many other European food banks, is now facing new challenges. Nonprofit organizations like the FBAO can find it difficult to adapt (Alexander, 2000) to environmental, political and socio-economic changes.

The authors would like to thank Mr Marco Lucchini, General Director of the FBAO, and his staff for the invaluable support and availability. However, the views expressed herein are those of the authors based on collected data. Furthermore, to confirm that this topic is extremely dynamic and of primary interest at European level, after the acceptance of this paper the first funds of FEAD have been delivered to EU member states and new strategies have been planned by the FBAO. Updates and recent statistics can be retrieved at: www.bancoalimentare.it/



This paper examines the case of the Italian FBAO and highlights how ongoing challenges are pushing the FBAO to adapt and change. Three factors in particular are pressing the management of FBAO to follow new paths of development

The first factor is the **reformulation of the EU food aid program**. The EU's "Food Distribution Program for the Most Deprived Persons (MDP) of the Community" was set up in December 1987 to release to the member states the public intervention stocks of food generated by the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). Since then, the CAP has undergone changes, stocks have been reduced and the program, which at its peak had an annual budget of 500 million euros, was closed in 2013. A new program, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), has been launched to support the actions of EU countries to provide material assistance such as food, clothing and other essential items for personal use. This assistance must be part and parcel of social inclusion measures to help people out of poverty. The monies need not be spent exclusively on food aid, and resources can be devoted to other initiatives such as mental health.

The second factor is the **increase in the number of deprived persons in Italy**, due to the economic and financial crisis that has been particularly harsh for Spain, Greece, Ireland and Italy. Italy has recorded steep increases in severe material deprivation starting in 2010 (Duiella and Turrini, 2014) and poverty has reached the highest level in 20 years, almost doubling since 2007. In 2012, relative poverty (defined as a family of two that lives on a monthly income of 991 euros or less) affected 12.7 percent of Italian families (ISTAT, 2013), and conditions of absolute poverty also worsened (ISTAT, 2013). This economic crisis has impacted shopping habits, with a general reduction of goods purchased, even in "untouchable" categories such as food (Romano, 2011). Food consumption patterns have changed, as consumers have cut their spending on breakfast at bars or meals in restaurants, and frequently look for lower priced food substitutes when shopping (Ancc-Coop, 2013).

The third factor is the **emergence of other players in the food provision market for deprived persons, in response to the economic crisis and related food emergency**. This has required groups to organize their actions to ensure effectiveness and efficiency, and has bought new challenges in the sphere of public-private partnership.

Italy's welfare system is characterized by a universalistic approach that over the years has manifested some weaknesses. As a response to the emerging problems, Italy has tried to shift its welfare policy toward progressive decentralization and privatization (Niero, 1996). The difficulties that the Italian welfare system is experiencing are stimulating a discussion about the need to generate resources and empower people through government-organized welfare, in addition to the collection and distribution of resources by private initiatives (Zancan, 2012).

In Italy, the FBAO is the main organization that operates at a national level collecting and distributing food, and it represents Italy in the European Food Banks Organization. Other organizations are slowly expanding from a local base to a national level; for example, the Last Minute Market company, which began Bologna (northern Italy) to promote reduction of food wastage, is now involved in 40 projects all around Italy.

This paper seeks to understand how the IFB should change to meet the challenges posed by these three factors. We look at the situation of the FBAO in the context of research on adaptive change in non-profit organizations.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we focus on methodology and define the process that has helped us frame our research question. Next, we describe the activity of the FBAO, the context in which it operates, and the changes and challenges it must face.

This is followed by an examination of its response and adaptive changes, and then a discussion and conclusion.

Methodology and case study design

The case study protocol used is based on Yin (1994), Stake (1995) and Tellis (1997): during the initial phases of the research design we adopted the action research approach, which includes articulation of the researcher's motivation for choosing a given topic. We chose this case because of our experience volunteering for the national food collection day (details can be found below) from 2000 to 2013. During a conference in 2009 we had an informal talk with the director of the Italian Food Bank, who described the vast activity carried on by a few professionals and managers and over 1,000 volunteers. We subsequently organized a conference promoting a debate on this topic and interviewed people who deliver food parcels. We are convinced, as Swantz (2001) affirms, that "any scientific enquiry conducted on the level of human encounter involves the inquirer in interpersonal exchange" (p. 42). We decided to pursue our initial curiosity about the FBAO and focus on this issue using the action research approach.

To formulate the research question we held a brainstorming session with the Food Bank director in January 2013, analyzing the most important criticalities affecting the organization.

Following the discussion, we explored the literature to identify a methodological framework to adopt in building this case study and to glean the insights these scholars could provide. The literature review has been employed in all the phases support in the entire cyclical process of the action research approach, as the methodological framework suggests. (see among the others, Checkland and Holwell, 1998; Grant *et al.*, 2001).

After designing the research protocol, we conducted this exploratory case study (Yin, 1994; Tellis, 1997); in particular, we developed an open ended questionnaire and asked eight people – the director and two staff members of the Italian Food Bank central office, one director and one employee of a regional food bank, and three volunteers– to fill it out and then, on the basis of the information provided, conducted in-depth interviews with them.

In order to develop the questionnaire and the interview we used the insights from the literature on food banks and nonprofit organization adaptive mechanisms; particularly useful was the work by Anheier (2005), especially in identifying the key research questions to be considered when exploring the third sector, namely the existence, the behavior and the importance of non-profit organizations on the levels of organization, the field and society. This means understanding the complexity of non-profits organizations by taking into account all the relationships that the organization has with the stakeholders. In writing the questionnaire, we observed ethical principles recommended by scholars (Alcser *et al.*, 2010; Groves *et al.*, 2013). The first section of the questionnaire asks about the organization (the people involved, how it works, etc.) and the people served; the questions in the second section investigate how the food bank faces the new challenges emerging from the economic scenario and how the organization addresses food security, that is, the ongoing availability of food, in its policy and mission.

Data from the interviews was analyzed and integrated with other data from desk research to ensure strategy triangulation (Tellis, 1997; Guion *et al.*, 2011).

The research plan was structured as follows:

- an initial phase of brainstorming to glean insights from the researchers' personal background and from some informal interviews carried with people working for the Food Bank;

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- a literature review phase;
 - a phase dedicated to the development and testing of the questionnaire;
 - a field research phase of data collection; and
 - a writing and reflection phase: the case study was written up according to the case study protocol previously defined, with reflection on the insights that emerged from the case and from data triangulation.

Findings

The FBAO

The FBAO was founded in 1989, when Danilo Fossati, the CEO of the Italian multinational food corporation STAR learned about the St Mary's Food Bank begun in Phoenix, Arizona, USA in 1967, and decided to do something similar to help the underprivileged in Italy. Mr Fossati received support early on from the Catholic movement of Communion and Liberation, in particular from its founder, Father Luigi Giussani, who encouraged Mr Fossati and told members about this charitable initiative, thus helping recruit volunteers who would donate their time to Mr Fossati's project (Da Rold, 2001). The FBAO operates through a branched network of local Food Banks in Italy that collect foodstuffs that are edible but would otherwise be thrown away, and draws upon food production facilities, large-scale retail operations and collective catering services, as well as European programs to help the poor. The FBAO is of social value to the community, helps companies to reduce costs from inventory and waste disposal, and creates not only economic value but environmental value as well, in the sense that food recovery can contribute to reducing carbon emissions. Finally, the FBAO aims to raise public consciousness about sharing time and resources with others and reducing food waste. Thus the social role played by the Italian Food Bank is quite complex, as it aims not only to feed people, but also to generate social, economic, environmental and educational value.

The Food Bank operates through a network of 21 non-profit regional food banks located throughout Italy, not only to reach and serve the highest number of people at a national level, but also to allow these local organizations the freedom to work as they see fit to most effectively meet people's needs on a local level and to manage relationships with stakeholders. In 2008 in its new by-laws the FBAO established this "Rete Banco Alimentare" (Food Bank Network), which it guides and coordinates, composed of these non-profit regional organizations it has authorized to use the "Banco Alimentare" logo and trademark free of charge. Today the FBAO employs 117 people, and 1,738 volunteers usually give their time to assist the food bank during everyday operations; the number of volunteers reaches 130,000 during the national collection day, called the Colletta Alimentare. The Food Bank has more than 39,000 square meters of storage facilities throughout the country and 80 vehicles for foodstuff transportation.

Each regional Food Bank collects and distributes food aid locally, following the indications in the collection and distribution agreements signed with the FBAO. Charitable associations ask the FBAO to receive food aid, and are not charged any fees for receiving food.

The FBAO network includes many stakeholders; Table I describes them by category, according to 2012 data. There are the charitable organizations served by FBAO (in 2013 the FBAO served 8,898 points of distribution that served 1.9 million people), and the people that the organizations serve; there are also the donors, (food producers and distributors, retailers, catering companies, etc.), public bodies and institutions. The Food

BFJ 116,9	<i>The network</i>	
	Fondazione Banco Alimentare Onlus	1
1450	Organizations that belong to the Network	21
	<i>Human resources</i>	
	Employees (full time and part time)	118
	Volunteers	1.657
	<i>Charitable organization structures served</i>	
	<i>Donators</i>	
	Food companies	745
	Distributors and retailers	705
	Distributors	222
	Stores	483
	Catering industry	249
Workplace canteen	97	
School canteen	152	
Source: Fondazione Banco Alimentare		

Table I.
The FBAO Network
and stakeholders by
number and type of
stakeholder, 2012

Bank has a strong relationship with European Union, which has traditionally been considered a donor. Moreover, FBAO has strong relationships with Italian institutions, since the FBAO is part of the welfare system and contributes to reducing the problem of unfair access to food, ameliorating the needs of the most disadvantaged members of society.

The activity of the Food Bank mainly centers on the logistics of collecting foodstuffs from donors such as supermarkets or food producing companies, storing them, and distributing them to charitable organizations. It also organizes initiatives to educate people to donate and to share with the others what they have, as in the Food Bank motto “sharing needs, to share the meaning of life”.

At the end of November every year the FBAO organizes a national food collection drive, called the “colletta alimentare”, in supermarkets: at the store entrances, local volunteers distribute leaflets that illustrate what the collection is and the aims of the Food Bank, as well as suggestions about the kinds of non-perishable food to donate. This event not only collects food for the poor, but serves to inform people about the activity of FBAO and to raise public consciousness about the importance of sharing with others and not wasting food.

Volunteers ask people to give freely what they are able to, making this charitable action accessible to everyone, from the lowest income groups to the richest. In 2013, during the Colletta day, 9,037 tons of foodstuff were collected (–6 percent compared to 2012) at 11,182 supermarkets.

Further information about the activity of food recovery and food collection are summarized in Table II.

The Food Bank has also launched new initiatives for collecting foodstuffs from companies and raising consciousness about the organization and the problem of food need among the people. The organization has also set up an initiative with a company that produces biscuits and other snacks for breakfast, in which it donates breakfasts to people in need. The FBAO is using social networks to provide information about its initiatives.

The scenario: changes and challenges

The environment within which the FBAO operates has changed dramatically in recent years. Some of the main challenges for the Food Bank are described here.

Food recovered		%
Total (tons)	61.552	
EU (through the Agency for Payment in Agriculture, AGEA)	40.357	65.6
Fruit and vegetables producers	5.274	8.6
Food companies	11.109	18.0
Retailers	2.438	4.0
Catering industry (bread and fruit)	295	0.5
Food distribution centers	2.079	3.4
Ready to eat meals prepared by catering and canteen services (#)	659.817	

Source: Fondazione Banco Alimentare

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Table II.
Food recovered by type
and source in 2012

A key issue is the relationship with the EU, and its public funding policies. Up until 2013 the European Union was one of the leading donators to the FBAO (see Table II). Because of the shortage of stock under the CAP program, the EU began funding food banks to buying food on the open market, and for a long time this has provided the primary source of foodstuffs for the FBAO. In 2012, 31 percent of the FBAO income was from Italian government and EU funding, a fact that indicates how essential the EU input has been for the survival of the organization. As mentioned in the introduction, during the last five years the European Union has reshaped its food donation policy, causing a shift in the set of relationships between public institutions and the FBAO:

We have seen that percentage of poor people is growing as well as the need for food, but the European Union is progressively donating less, so we are experiencing some problems (from the interview with the General Director, Mr Lucchini).

The impact of growing demand on the Food Bank activity has been particularly strong:

Some years ago foodstuff used to be delivered to charitable organizations once a month, but today the delivery happens more frequently, because the need for foodstuff has increased (from the interview with Mr Lucchini).

Unfortunately, we have so many requests and it is impossible satisfy them through the food aids we receive from our regular donors (from an interview with an employee in the regional food bank of Tuscany).

The main problem that we as a Food Bank have to face is that in the past in Europe we had 500 million euros a year to spend only for food, whilst with the new program, the total budget must cover food and non-food needs (from the interview with Mr Lucchini).

Several charitable associations have highlighted the crucial role of EU funding in fighting poverty, but, at the same time, they have indicated that this input is still insufficient (www.euractive.com), as confirmed by employees and volunteers at the FBAO:

We are continuously looking to new initiatives to attract new donors and sponsors. The lack of funds risks becoming a key problem for us (from an interview with an employee in the regional food bank of Tuscany).

Considering the increased demand for food aid, I see a risk that there will not be enough food to deliver to the charitable organizations we assist.

Another aspect concerns the welfare system and the growth of poor populations. Food banks have a primary role in the management of emergency food need, and due to the

progressive privatization and decentralization policy, they can be considered as part of the national welfare system (Gentilini, 2013).

Over the years the FBAO has built a stable network of relationships with Italian government agencies:

Our presence in the network also aimed to guarantee an effective and efficient employment of European funds: we could help in deciding which products we could get with funds according to the needs of the people served (from the interview with Mr Lucchini).

Past experience of the Food Bank also suggests that there are differences between the north and south of Italy that should be taken into account when defining the type of problems and needs to be fulfilled:

In the northern Italy some measures like the social card[1] are more effective than in the south, where people want to receive foodstuff (from the interview with Mr Lucchini).

Thus, another important function of the FBAO is to draw attention to differences and needs emerging in Italy in order best administer the funds available to help people. The advent of the recent economic crisis has increased food poverty and inequality among social classes (Riches, 2002); this, together with the changes we have previously outlined, is promoting reflection about the weaknesses of the welfare system.

A reflection on adaptation and non-profit organizations, and the response of the FBAO
The degree of adaptation of a non-profit organization depends on various factors. First of all, the achievement of distinctive competences by the organization is of primary importance for the survival of the organization.

The FBAO, as we have seen, has very limited bargaining and controlling power over the decisions undertaken by policy makers and on the type of food collected, with some consequences on the overall degree of food security provided. The stream of controlled resources defines the ability of the organization to survive and consequently its relative bargaining power influences the adaptive strategy.

Thus, the problem of achieving control over resource flows is even more complex: in general, an organization's degree of control depends on the degree to which other actors recognize the set of distinctive competences that the organization has developed internally (Thompson, 1967); this process may be particularly hard for non-profit organizations (Alexander, 2000).

Food banks in general have some small degree of control on food donated, but no control on demand. A second aspect to be considered is the instability that often characterizes non-profit organizations: as observed by Roberts (2000), donor fatigue and volunteer burnout are sources of instability for Food Banks, and can increase the difficulties for the planning and management of the organization.

Also the skills in garnering resources play a key role in shaping organization's adaptive capacity: background research has shown that the organizations' willingness to differentiate the sources of inputs could be particularly helpful for their survival, and it can happen that organizations must review their budgets in order to facilitate fundraising (Liebschutz, 1992).

The work by Alexander (2000) described some adaptation strategies pursued by some non-profit organizations; these include pursuing strategic expansion, developing business management techniques, stepping out boundary spanning activities and maintaining the public service character through commercialization; the study indicated that organizations require new competences and resources to invest in marketing if they want to undertake an adaptive change. The author highlighted that the organizations

interviewed perceived the need to adapt but had difficulties in identifying the best strategy to pursue, especially because they do not own the financial resources needed for adopting the strategy chosen and they are afraid of that change would bring “businessification” (Alexander, 2000) of their role and core values.

Further insights emerge from the work by Durst and Newell (2003): they investigated the changes occurring among non-profit organizations, and found that most organizations interviewed made changes in management and strategic planning. They defined individualism as a key feature characterizing non-profit organizations such as Food Banks: charitable organizations and Food Banks serve individuals with different needs, and they receive feedback from the people they serve. Since these needs vary from person to person, the feedback varies as well because of the very high degree of individualism of respondents. How then can these organizations combine multiple needs based on individual experiences? Durst and Newell (2003) suggested that a successful reinvention of a non-profit organization should first embrace the idea of a change, and then select the best way to adapt.

The research describes the pressures that affect non-profit organizations in general: situations change rapidly (Anheier, 2000) and financial uncertainty requires organizations to assume more responsibilities (Deakin, 1995). Thus, non-profit companies also have difficulties in identifying the best strategic path for undertaking a change (Anheier, 2000).

As many other food banks all over the world (see among the others, Wie and Giebler, 2013; Kapucu *et al.*, 2011), the FBAO feels the urgency for change and adaptation, and has worked to meet changing needs.

The FBAO has adapted in many ways in recent years, reaching out to both corporate donors and private individuals. It has made great efforts to show its own corporate donors the importance of maintaining strong relationships with the organization, as this enhances their corporate social responsibility (CSR). According to Alexander (2000), increased competition for donations has significantly reshaped the competitive environment of food banks: these private associations are trying to carve out a space in this market, and end up establishing a network with the same donors to food banks, crowding the supply chain.

Thus the FBAO has worked not only to improve its relationships with many food companies but also to find out new forms of partnership. For example, in July 2014, Deutsche Bank launched its first social bond, which is valued at up to 20 million euros, and gives to the FBAO 0.50 percent of the nominal amount placed, while subscribers will receive a 1.25 percent fixed gross coupon per year. This initiative shows how importance the Food Bank attaches to having a variety of different approaches toward partnerships in order to achieve not only a high number of partners, but also a good degree of diversification among them, and thus to be able to face the increasing competition. The FBAO, as well as other food banks, perceives that the change happening within the scenario of private donors (private companies in particular) will seriously affect donations: over the years companies have increased their attention to ethical principles and corporate social responsibility, because they perceive the benefits for the community and for their corporate image. Some companies have developed internal programs that help people in need.

The FBAO appeals to the self-interests of donors by proposing **two win-win opportunities. First, in doing something good for people, corporations such as banks also enhance their image in the public's eye. Second, it offers food-industry donors a way to reduce storage and disposal costs by cooperating with the food banks.** Since throwing away edible food is easier than donating it (Finn, 2011), the FBAO

spearheaded an effort the Turin area (northern Italy) (Spirito *et al.*, 2008) to make donating easy and “profitable”.

The FBAO has also developed other new forms of partnership. For example, it has entered into agreements with some companies that for each product sold on the shelves of a supermarket, the company gives a certain percentage of revenues to the Food Bank.

Similarly, FBAO efforts to reach out to individual donors have expanded. In June 2014 it organized a second Colletta Alimentare event, in addition to the traditional November food drive. Moreover, the success of the national food collection initiative has encouraged the Food Bank to reinforce its bond with individual donors as consumers, and not only with the food industry. In 2013 it launched the *spesa sospesa* (literally, suspended shopping), inspired by a habit in southern Italy of leaving a paid coffee in cafes for those who lack the money to pay for one. The principle is the same as that of the colletta, but with the difference that it is not limited to a single day in a year. In another effort to improve private donations, the FBAO has expanded its communication activity. Through the “Donate Now” campaign, the Food Bank informs people about the urgency of giving food to the poor. The FBAO’s newsletter often dedicates a space to the “donate now” campaign, including the stories of people who are helped by the organization, so that readers become more aware that there is a person behind the need. On Mother’s Day, for example, the organization asked mothers to donate to other mothers in need; one of the aims of the initiative was to foster reflection upon the human conditions of other people. Furthermore, the FBAO wants to highlight that the phenomenon of food emergency can also affect some people the donor knows. To this end, the organization has launched a campaign that shows some faces, and says “he could be your son’s classmate”; “she could be your neighbor”; “she could be your friend who has just lost her job”. A flagship event that deals with both communication and food collection was the launch of the countdown of one year till Expo 2015, marked by a special charitable session called “Turn up and weigh in”, in which the FBAO and the Expo Milano 2015 organizing committee invited citizens and tourists to go to a central square on April 30, and according to the total weight of public present, Coop and Eataly (the former is the biggest retailer in Italy, the latter is a company that manages Italian food specialty stores and restaurants worldwide) donated a matching weight of food to the FBAO, which amounted to more than 100 tons.

Education is another primary issue and the FBAO is committed to exploiting the opportunity of Expo 2015 to educate people about its cause. This is an ongoing process and it is not very clear how the organization will be involved, but there is awareness of the great opportunity that this iconic event could represent.

From the analysis of the information collected, the FBAO shows the need to be involved in a dialogue with policy makers and institutions about resource allocation: the reduction of monetary funds for food assistance is the result of a change in funding policy. The Food Bank has felt the urgency to create awareness among people about the effect of such a change, by asking them to take a position through public polls and to be personally involved in the decision making process.

Discussion and conclusions

This work represents the first attempt to describe the work of the FBAO for an international readership. With this paper we wanted to highlight the new challenges that the FBAO has to face. Its management clearly perceives the urgency to change, but it still remain difficult to identify the paths for transforming and reshaping the role of

the Food Bank. From the literature (Alexander, 2000) it emerges that the Food Bank can manage adaptation by expanding its activities, as other food banks are doing; improving the management techniques that have been adopted by the organization; focussing on some core activities; or improving the commercialization in order to maintain a public service character.

Nonprofit organizations may encounter many difficulties when they decide to undertake an adaptive path (Alexander, 2000). Organizations that depend heavily on public funding to survive have little autonomy (Alexander, 2000) since they are influenced by a set of heterogeneous factors that they cannot control (Antrobus, 1987). Furthermore, the advent of the “new public management” (Hood, 1991) has emphasized the values of effectiveness, efficacy and economy within non-profit organization management (Alexander, 2000) and a newer approach to evaluate the results and performances of non-profit organizations has been developed. The main problem that non-profits have to face today is how to meet financial and non-financial goals fairly well (Light, 2002).

Although the FBAO has done a lot in order to improve its activities and to respond to the emerging needs, it appears that the organization has not adopted a clearly defined strategy. None of the initiatives undertaken have been the product of a planned program: what animates people that manage the organization is the commitment to do something good and useful for other people in need, but this relegates a strategic mindset for planning and evaluating the Food Bank to a secondary role.

The FBAO is embedded in the national welfare system, because traditionally in Italy social welfare has been based on a principle of subsidiarity that enables a bottom-up approach to societal issues. The solution to some problems requires a managerial and professional approach, as emerges not only from the interviews and the data collected, but also from the literature review on food banks; food banks should be aware of the importance of a suitable managerial approach in achieving their charitable aims and it should understand that professionalization of management does not necessarily imply businessification of their aims and scopes. Some signals indicate that Europe is going to see some changes in the future: the ongoing debate among the Commission, the Parliament and the EU Member Countries underlines the importance given to the issues of food waste and food recovery in Europe (Planchenstainer, 2013). The FEAD program 2014-2020 (FEAD or MDP program) has been recently launched, with a total budget of 3.5 billion Euros to be split over seven years; thus, the average budget for each year accounts for 500 million euros, which is only what the MDP program had for food, since the new program is supposed to cover other initiatives such as those regarding mental health, and at a time of growing need. The changes in the European funding system with the advent of the FEAD suggests that a new way of conceiving EU donations must take root. The Euractive website expresses the concept well: “Food aid alone cannot be the only solution to address poverty. The complementarity of material assistance and social inclusion measures of the new FEAD is welcomed and should play a key role in shifting the paradigm from today’s food-aid model to a social inclusion-based model. This change is crucial to tackle poverty and empower the poorest and the most excluded ones in Europe” (www.euractive.com). The changes happening could represent the chance to rethink the food aid model and could support efforts to tackle the main challenges the Food Bank faces. While carrying out this research, we have had the opportunity to share thoughts and emerging insights with the FBAO management and our opinion, as action researchers, is that the current situation, if properly managed, could offer a good chance to improve the degree of

professionalization within the organization. Thus, the next steps should be to share the conclusions of this case study with the FBAO and its members and to promote reflection about the active role that research could have in bettering the performance of the FBAO.

Background research (see among the others, Riches, 2002; Wakefield *et al.*, 2012) has highlighted new emerging needs that should be taken into account when reshaping and rethinking the role covered by food banks. Since its first introduction in 1996 at the World Summit of Rome, the concept of food security, defined as the condition that ensures that “all people, at all times have physical social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2002), has progressively gained importance among food banks. The issue of food security has evolved: initially it was a problem that used to affect developing countries, but due to the economic crisis, the number of people that lack access to a regular and proper diet is increasing in western countries, Italy included (ISTAT, 2012). **Many food banks in the world have incorporated new priorities into their vision and mission and implemented changes within their organization or operations: some food banks have introduced new services (Cotugna and Beebe, 2002) or stressed the importance of focussing on healthy nutrition and food safety (Hoisington *et al.*, 2011).**

Some scholars have carried out research examining how food banks operate locally in order to ensure food security (see e.g. the case of the Canadian food banks with the works by Teron and Tarasuk, 1999 or Kennedy *et al.*, 1992). Thus, **food banks have to face two different problems when dealing with the issue of food security: first of all there is still a shadow of ambiguity over the issue of food security (Power, 1999) since on one hand its importance is clearly perceived, but on the other hand, institutions have not defined a clear approach to this issue. It becomes difficult to understand which measures should be taken into account for solving the problem of food security. Secondl, some scholars (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005) have pointed out that the nutritional concerns that food banks should have are in contrast with their role in relation to corporate disposal needs (p.183); this creates problems among workers who have to balance two different issues: on one hand they have to feed people with the donated food and on the other, they have to guarantee balanced nutritional contents. In many cases, as noted by Tarasuk and Eakin (2005) “giving something is better than nothing” (p. 183) but food banks cannot easily determine the quality, type and quantities of the foodstuff they get; so, how can they provide nutritional content if they cannot control donations?**

From the preliminary background research on the FBAO, it emerges that the studies that have been conducted by other scholars are mainly descriptive and with a local scope; thus, further empirical research must be carried out to indicate new methods for improving operational effectiveness. Cross-country analysis should be performed to explore the impact of location and national policies on food banks performances. Food banks can deliver value through the achievement of their social purpose, and donors feel satisfied by contributing to the cause embodied by the organization (Moore, 2000). Thus, for corporations, joining a social cause can bring several benefits not only to the people that join the cause (Moore, 2000), but also to the company itself, since a corporation’s social responsibility can positively affect its image in the public’s eyes (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). This has prompted some companies to develop programs for food donation and to allocate to the needy the internally produced foodstuff that could go wasted.

In order to meet the crisis affecting the FBAO's network, the Italian Food Bank should invest in reshaping the way it produces value for companies: this could catalyze the interest of food producers and retailers and offset the progressive decrease in European Union donations. An interesting insight concerns food safety issues and nutritional contents: from the interviews it emerged that **the FBAO perceives the importance of food safety and education about healthy diet, but the real problem is that the organization cannot control the type of food they receive through donations.** The FBAO should rethink its collection and delivery system. The FBAO could work with the charitable organizations it assists to obtain a significant amount of data and information about the people served, and use it for planning an effective nutritional strategy. This implies that the FBAO could cover another important role within its stakeholder network by facilitating dissemination of important information about those it serves.

Note

1. The social card is a tool created by the Italian Government that guarantees to deprived persons the accessibility to deprived persons through a sort of credit card released by National Postal Office (Poste Italiane)

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Corresponding author

Dr Cristina Santini can be contacted at: cristina.santini@unisanraffaele.gov.it