



**SCHOOL OF
GLOBAL STUDIES**

The Good Kitchen: A Social Hub that Creates Meaning, Inclusion and Sustainability

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Thesis: 15 ECTS

Program and/or Course: Bachelor Thesis in Social Anthropology

Level: Undergraduate

Term/Year: Spring 2025

Supervisor: Johan Wedel

Abstract

Bachelor's thesis: 15 ECTS

Program: Anthropology

Level: Undergraduate

Term/Year: Spring 2025

Supervisor: Johan Wedel

Key words: Social inclusion, Community, Food aid, Sustainability, NGO

This ethnographic study explores The Good Kitchen, a community-based food initiative in Mussomeli, Sicily, and its role in fostering social inclusion, cultural exchange, and sustainability. In a town shaped by depopulation and rigid social norms, the initiative reimagines food assistance by combining surplus food redistribution with communal meals, workshops, and volunteer participation. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg's concept of the "Third Place" and Victor Turner's "Communitas," the research shows how the kitchen creates an informal, inclusive space that bridges generational and cultural divides. Through collaboration with local NGOs and a focus on informal learning, The Good Kitchen empowers youth, challenges gender norms, and combats social isolation. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the study reveals how the kitchen becomes a site of connection, self-expression, and belonging, particularly for marginalized groups. The findings suggest that initiatives like The Good Kitchen can contribute meaningfully to rural revitalization by reframing food aid as a participatory and culturally embedded practice that strengthens community resilience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my friends and family for believing in my idea and providing me with unwavering emotional support throughout this entire journey.

A special thank you to the members of *The Good Kitchen*: Danny, Valeria, and Laura, for hosting me and giving me the incredible opportunity to be part of Good Kitchen's family.

I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to the wonderful gang from *Stauss* for making my stay not only enjoyable but filled with unforgettable memories. A special mention to Stelios, Rossi, and Valeria for their kindness and constant companionship throughout this experience.

Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Johan Wedel, who helped and guided me through this entire process.

You can support The Good Kitchen by buying their amazing book:

Good Kitchen, The: Love and Connection Through Food

ISBN 978-1-922779-24-3

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1. Introduction

1.1. The functioning of The Good kitchen

Food is far more than just sustenance; it is deeply intertwined with culture, identity, and social interaction. It serves as a key medium for cultural exchange, integration, and community building, yet social fragmentation and exclusion persist in many societies. Economic inequality means that some individuals are in urgent need of nourishment but cannot afford proper food (Alexander and Smaje, 2008). This socio-economic divide, compounded by the stigma and performative nature of charity, motivates this study to examine how food donations and shared meals can reduce social fragmentation by fostering social relationships and community cohesion. By exploring The Good Kitchen in Mussomeli, Sicily, this research delves into how food can function as a bridge between social groups and promote integration, collective identity, and a shared sense of belonging.

The Good Kitchen, a community-driven initiative founded by Australian Danny McCubbin (see Appendix, Figure 1), provides a unique case study.¹ Located in a small town of about 10,000 residents, which has been grappling with a declining population, The Good Kitchen aims to address food insecurity while also serving as a place for social interaction and cultural exchange. The kitchen is powered by donations of surplus food from local grocery stores, which both reduces food waste and helps support those in need. Unlike traditional food aid programs, which tend to focus solely on meeting immediate needs, The Good Kitchen combines voluntary work, cultural exchange, and social support to foster deeper social ties and integration. The Good Kitchen operates primarily through a combination of government grants, though these represent only a small portion of its funding. The bulk of its financial support comes from generous donations made by visitors and community members who value its mission. In addition, the initiative benefits from the profits generated by “Good Kitchen,” a book written by its founder, Danny McCubbin (2024). This book not only chronicles the story of the kitchen but also serves as a key fundraising tool, contributing to the sustainability of the project while raising awareness about the organization.

The organization’s mission is to not only provide meals but also to create inclusive spaces where people from diverse backgrounds: locals, migrants, and volunteers alike, can meet, share

¹ The Good Kitchen <https://www.thegoodkitchensicily.com>

meals, and engage in meaningful interactions. This approach challenges conventional notions of food aid by positioning food as a medium for social cohesion and empowerment rather than just charity.

The Good Kitchen's model exemplifies the potential of community-based food initiatives to reimagine food assistance. Previous research (Galli et al., 2019) indicates that food donation programs, such as those implemented by The Good Kitchen, can increase the capacity of food banks, thereby reaching more people in need. These programs create a positive feedback loop: as more donations flow in, more people are supported, which in turn motivates additional donations. Furthermore, legislative reforms in Italy have simplified the food donation process, making it easier for organizations like The Good Kitchen to redistribute surplus food and reduce waste. This aligns with the findings of Alexander and Smaje (2008), who argue that initiatives designed to manage food waste and surplus can simultaneously improve food security and reduce environmental impact.

However, while food donations provide immediate relief, they do not address the underlying causes of food insecurity, such as economic inequality and inadequate social support. As noted by Alexander and Smaje (2008), reliance on charitable food donations may create dependency and perpetuate stigma, leaving vulnerable populations in a cycle of temporary aid rather than providing long-term solutions. The Good Kitchen, however, goes beyond simply providing meals by integrating social support mechanisms into its operations. It offers a space where individuals from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds come together, fostering opportunities for integration, social interaction, and mutual support. The good kitchen has close cooperation with the NGO Strauss Association of Social Promotion (ASP), which organizes activities aimed at providing young people with opportunities to meet and engage in social interactions.

The diversity of participants at The Good Kitchen further enriches its social dynamics. The kitchen engages residents, migrants, elderly individuals at risk of social isolation, and volunteers of various ages. One poignant example shared by McCubbin in his TEDx Talk (2024) highlights how The Good Kitchen has helped a Ukrainian family displaced by the war. The kitchen's role in facilitating the children's social integration with local peers illustrates the powerful potential of the spaces like The Good Kitchen to bridge cultural divides and promote social inclusion.

In studying The Good Kitchen, this research seeks to understand how food-related initiatives can contribute to strengthening social cohesion, particularly in smaller, depopulated communities. The project's ability to engage various social groups, locals, migrants, volunteers, and its focus on communal meals and shared activities highlights the broader potential of such initiatives to promote well-being and inclusion in today's society. This research aims to provide insights into how similar community-based food programs can serve as hubs for social interaction and cultural exchange, ultimately contributing to the revitalization and sustainability of local communities.

1.1 Aim and Research questions

The study focuses on the role of a community kitchen in a society characterized by depopulation and cultural homogeneity.

This research seeks to respond to the following questions:

- What is the role of the community-driven, non-governmental, organization The Good Kitchen and how does it work?
- What impact has The Good Kitchen had on the local community and how has this been experienced by the residents and by the volunteers?

2. Previous research

Food serves as a central factor in strengthening social bonds and kinship, while contributing to the creation of identity and community (Lupton, 1994; Carsten, 1995). The shared experience of food can create a sense of belonging and help to bridge differences between individuals. A central theme in this study is community, with a particular focus on how social and cultural practices, such as cooking and shared meals, play a role in creating and strengthening relationships. Theories and previous research on social processes and their impact on individuals and groups are used to analyze these dynamics.

2.1. Food as ontology

Hage (1997) describes how the sense of home is not only about the physical place but also about security and community. This feeling of familiarity arises in an environment where we can act naturally and feel in harmony with our surroundings, providing us with control and

safety. Carsten (1995) discusses the link between food, personhood, and kinship, which is useful for understanding how The Good Kitchen creates a sense of belonging among participants. This argument is supported by Lupton (1994, p. 666), who describes food from an ontological perspective and argues that food not only satisfies physical needs but is also part of our existential reality. It influences how we understand ourselves and others and how we interact with the world. Agency in this context refers to our actions and choices – how we, through food, can express or influence our way of being and acting in relation to others. She gives an example of how one can practice dominance in the household through the food that is prepared, where the food served is the one preferred by the person, even if someone else is doing the cooking. Food is often associated with memories and can help us identify symbolic meanings reflected in different social relationships.

Holtzman (2006) supports the idea that food creates both personal and collectively shared meaning and memory. He emphasizes that food plays a significant role in (ethnic) identity, referring to several studies showing how different ethnic American groups use food in both festivals and family settings to preserve and strengthen a historically rooted ethnic identity.

2.2. Social sustainability and NGOs

The Good Kitchen is largely driven by volunteer work, and Mackenzie et al. (2019) show that communities with higher levels of volunteer engagement tend to have lower crime rates and better public health. Volunteering strengthens trust and cohesion within the community and has been shown to contribute to reducing crime. Research also highlights the importance of non-governmental community service organizations (NGOs) in rural areas, especially their role in supporting local economies and community services. These organizations play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion, economic development, and increased civic engagement. Tsai et al. (2022) suggest that a charismatic leader's personal story can help the community by creating a shared sense of purpose and emotional connection, which motivates individuals to engage with and support the cause. This emotional bond fosters a stronger community, where people feel personally invested in the mission, leading to greater participation and long-term sustainability.

Langmann et al. (2024) discuss Community Capacity Building (CCB), which focuses on working with marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu, India, to foster their engagement in

social, economic, and political life. The top-down approach aims to improve conditions through education, advocacy, and technical support but has been criticized for being detached from local needs, creating dependency, and hindering community-driven innovation. In contrast, the bottom-up approach emphasizes sustainable development by prioritizing community values, ambitions, and active participation. It seeks to use local resources and skills to improve collective well-being, empower vulnerable individuals, and challenge existing power structures. By applying the CCB and its shortcomings, one can, also examine how The Good Kitchen promotes local initiatives, where local actors, such as residents, are not just passive recipients of help but active participants in creating and driving the operations. Through peer-led programs and parental education, NGOs can empower young people to make healthier choices by offering alternative activities. By tailoring interventions to local cultural contexts, NGOs can help reshape and foster long-term positive change. Programs that focus on building life skills, resilience, and decision-making abilities among adolescents are common. Such programs help adolescents deal with stress, peer pressure, and family issues without resorting to negative habits (Onya et al., 2012).

3. Theoretical perspectives

Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the Third Place, as a space for community and new relationships. The theory of "Third Places" explores informal gathering spots where people from different backgrounds can interact and build community. Oldenburg (1999, p. 21) argues that for people's lives to be meaningful and relaxed, they must find a balance between three different realms of experience, or places. The first is the private and familial, the second is the productive or professional, and the third is the social, which fosters community. Each realm is built on specific relationships, has its own physically distinct places, and requires a certain degree of autonomy from the others. He points out that the third place does not only serve as a space to escape the relationships of family or work but also offers new experiences and relationships.

Turner's (1969) analytical concept of *communitas* provides a useful lens for potentially understanding how informal groups can create strong, egalitarian social bonds through shared experiences, such as in an environment like The Good Kitchen. Turner describes *communitas* as a state where social structure temporarily dissolves, allowing for a form of relational community where individuals experience a deeper, more spontaneous sense of belonging. It is

not about adhering to established social norms or roles but about creating mutual understanding and equality that goes beyond formal structures. The sense of sameness and the dissolution of hierarchies that characterize *communitas* make it a concept of particular interest when analyzing whether and how such dynamics arise in practice at The Good Kitchen. Moreover, *communitas* can be seen as a counterpoint to stigmatization, offering an environment where individuals are not defined by labels or social hierarchies, but are instead able to connect on a more human level.

4. Methods and Materials

To answer my research questions about how The Good Kitchen creates and maintains social relationships and community, and how cooking and shared meals contribute to these processes, I have chosen methods that allow me to observe and understand social interactions in this context. The fieldwork, through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, provided me with a deeper insight into both the informal and formal social processes that occur within the kitchen. Participant observation enabled me to not only observe the social interactions between participants but also to understand the dynamics that arise when people of different ages and backgrounds come together and work collaboratively.

4.1. Delimitations

The study is limited to The Good Kitchen as the central site of observation, focusing on its specific environment and activities. Due to the scope of this research, I was not able to explore other similar community-based kitchens or initiatives. Additionally, the data collection is constrained by a three-week time frame, which limits the number of interactions and observations that can be made. The research prioritized participants who are actively involved in the kitchen activities, leaving out those who may be indirectly connected. My initial focus was to gather information from members who had been involved the longest or who worked there most consistently. I then shifted my attention to informants who were beneficiaries of the kitchen services, individuals whose lives had been meaningfully impacted by the organization.

Access to informants was not an issue; on the contrary, I received more recommendations than I could feasibly follow up on. The founder of the kitchen, Danny, is highly connected and was consistently able to suggest new, relevant individuals to interview. His extensive social network significantly facilitated the recruitment process. Throughout fieldwork, topics related

to women's and teenagers' socialization emerged frequently. While this prompted an interest in exploring these themes further, I ultimately chose to maintain a focused scope, concentrating on the broader social impact of The Good Kitchen within the Mussomeli community.

4.2. Choice of methods

To address my research questions regarding how The Good Kitchen creates and maintains social relationships and community, and how cooking and shared meals contribute to these processes, I have chosen methods that allow me to observe and understand the social interactions in this context.

4.2.1. Qualitative method

A quantitative approach is not central to this research, as it is not intended to generalize results across a larger population but rather to gain a deeper understanding of specific social processes. The qualitative method is well-suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences and interactions. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather personal insights, and participant observation enables me to witness and immerse myself in the everyday activities and interactions at The Good Kitchen. These methods helped me to capture the nuances of social dynamics, emotions, and the personal connections made in this communal setting. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this particular context, and the study's reliability (understood as the potential for replication) is limited. However, its validity is strong, especially when assessed through Sanjek's (1990) three criteria: honesty (accurately representing participants' voices), depth (providing rich contextual understanding), and balance (acknowledging multiple theoretical perspectives). Although the study focuses on a specific context, it still provides useful insight into community-driven food initiatives.

For this study, I employed a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and photographs to collect empirical data, which is essential in ethnographic research. Interviews serve as a foundational method for understanding individuals' subjective experiences, particularly in relation to their engagement with The Good Kitchen. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to balance pre-determined questions with flexibility. This structure allowed me to explore pre-planned themes while adapting to new

insights and follow-up questions that emerged organically from the participants' responses (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2022).

Each interview covered 3 to 5 key themes, with flexibility to follow the informants' lead. While I prepared questions in advance, conversations often flowed organically as participants touched on multiple themes. In addition to interviews, participant observation was crucial for understanding the dynamics of The Good Kitchen. Although I initially struggled to balance participation and documentation, I found that being actively involved in tasks allowed me to observe interactions and social dynamics while later recording key details in my field notes. Volunteering, conversing with locals and volunteers, and engaging in community activities were central to my observations. When I was not actively involved in the activities, I documented relevant conversations and interactions.

In addition to interviews and observations, I incorporated photographs to enrich my ethnographic data. Photographs serve as a valuable tool for documenting reality and providing visual context to the social processes observed, such as meal organization and group interactions. These images complement the verbal and observational data by capturing moments that might not be fully conveyed through words alone. When using photographs in research, it is crucial to consider not only what they depict but also who created them, the context in which they were taken, and how they are interpreted by others (Perera, 2019).

4.3. Selection

The participants selected for this study were those who were directly involved in various activities at The Good Kitchen. These individuals were chosen to ensure diversity, including a mix of social backgrounds, age groups, and roles such as volunteers, participants, and leaders within the organization. The participants provided a rich set of perspectives that can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the community dynamics. The study included four participants from The Good Kitchen, all of whom are involved in different roles and activities within the community. These participants were selected based on their willingness to engage and their diverse backgrounds. Several key informants, including the three informal leaders of The Good Kitchen: Laura (local), Valeria (foreigner), and the founder, Danny (foreigner), provided valuable insights into the kitchen's structure, challenges, and community impact. An

additional informant, chosen through the collaborative approach, was an anthropologist whose interview answers were considered more analytical in nature.

4.3.1. Presentation of respondents

Name	Age	Sex	Occupation
Danny	60	Male	Patron and Founder of The good kitchen
Valeria	32	Female	Volunteer/Employee at The Good kitchen
Laura	30	Female	Volunteer/Employee at The Good kitchen
Giuseppe (Alias)	Around 20	Male	Person who is receiving food from The Good Kitchen
Clara (Alias)	26	Female	An anthropologist with Italian (Sicilian) background.

Table 1. - Respondent profile

4.4. Ethical Considerations

In conducting this ethnographic study, I encountered several challenges related to both communication and ethical considerations. One of the primary difficulties was language barriers, particularly in a remote town where many of the local population, especially older individuals and families in need of assistance from The Good Kitchen, do not speak English. While most volunteers and staff at The Good Kitchen were fluent in English, communication with the recipients of aid, who were less likely to speak English, proved to be more challenging. Only two individuals I encountered spoke English, one of whom I interviewed.

Ethical considerations were central throughout my fieldwork. As my first volunteering experience, I quickly related to the challenges faced by previous volunteers at community kitchens. A particular ethical dilemma arose around food distribution, where some individuals, not the most urgent cases, would arrive early and expect priority. This created an internal conflict between adhering to a fair system and my instinct to help those immediately in front of me. Despite the challenge, I remained committed to maintaining fairness, ensuring that food was distributed based on need rather than proximity. Throughout this process, I took several

steps to protect my informants' identities. I ensured anonymity by using pseudonyms, securely storing interview recordings, and removing any identifying details from my notes. Additionally, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. This approach was essential in maintaining trust and ethical integrity within the study.

Another ethical challenge I encountered involved observing private conversations that were not part of the official data collection process. While these discussions often provided valuable insights into the social dynamics and opinions surrounding The Good Kitchen, they occurred "off camera" and were not part of the intended research material. I considered these conversations harmless in the sense that they did not seem to cause any immediate harm, but I was unsure about whether it would be ethically appropriate to use them as part of my research. My current approach is to anonymize these conversations and use them only as inspiration, drawing on the patterns and themes they revealed rather than quoting them directly. This allows me to protect the privacy of the participants while still incorporating valuable insights into the social dynamics at play.

In adhering to ethical guidelines, I followed the principles outlined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA, n.d.), which emphasize transparency, honesty, and minimizing harm to participants. This study was conducted with full respect for the rights and well-being of those involved, ensuring that all participants gave informed consent before being interviewed or observed. The research adhered to the Swedish Research Council's guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024) on protecting participants, particularly when dealing with sensitive information or vulnerable individuals. For instance, as children were involved in volunteer activities at The Good Kitchen, I made the decision to observe their participation without conducting interviews, to avoid placing them in vulnerable situations.

Consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. In line with ethical principles, I prioritized the confidentiality of participants and ensured their privacy was respected throughout the research process. This approach reflects the importance of respecting the autonomy of informants and avoiding the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Moreover, I remained sensitive to the power dynamics at play, particularly the relationship between the volunteers and the recipients of aid. By ensuring that all participants understood their rights and were

given the opportunity for anonymity, I aimed to create a respectful, ethical environment for conducting the study.

Throughout my fieldwork, I remained conscious of the complexities involved in balancing research objectives with ethical responsibilities. I chose to anonymize certain informants, particularly those from vulnerable or marginalized groups, to protect their privacy and minimize any risk of stigmatization or harm resulting from their participation in the study. In contrast, some informants, particularly those who were more public figures within the kitchen/community or whose identities were already well-known, consented to being named. This decision was made based on informed consent, ensuring that these participants were fully aware of how their information would be used and understood the potential risks involved. The challenges I encountered, whether related to communication difficulties, emotional dilemmas, or ethical concerns regarding consent and privacy, served as important lessons in navigating the responsibilities of an ethnographic researcher.

4.5 Positionally

Reflecting on my position as an outsider, my role as a foreign researcher likely influenced how informants perceived me and the information they shared. Some may have simplified explanations, while others might have withheld details, assuming I wouldn't fully understand. However, I believe they ultimately saw me as another volunteer, as our conversations were informal. Balancing objectivity with empathy was challenging; I aimed to remain analytical while acknowledging the emotional aspects of my fieldwork. To manage this, I regularly reflected on my biases. I also collaborated with an Italian anthropologist, whose expert and native perspective helped me critically assess my interpretations and broaden my understanding.

5. Results and Analysis

In this section, I will present the key findings from my ethnographic research and define the main themes that emerged through the ethnographic process.

5.1 The Good Kitchen as an NGO

NGOs are typically non-profit organizations that operate independently of government, pursuing social, civil, or humanitarian goals. Mackenzie et al. (2019) describe country-based

NGOs as emerging anchor institutions that can counter regional shrinkage, offering an alternative to government and industry-led solutions. These organizations promote volunteering, civic engagement, and contribute to the social fabric of communities, making their community services key to regional development. Similarly, Iacovou et al. (2010) found that community kitchens improve cooking skills, promote social interactions, and nutritional intake, while fostering self-reliance and raising awareness of food insecurity in local communities. Galli et al. (2019) distinguish between "unavoidable food waste," which is unsellable due to spoilage or safety concerns, and "avoidable food waste," which is safe but discarded due to aesthetic reasons or market preferences. They also note that while food banks play a key role in addressing immediate food insecurity, they have limited impact on long-term food security, which is defined as the ability to access enough nutritious food due to financial or physical constraints. The Good Kitchen addresses this by rescuing surplus food, often classified as avoidable food waste, and redistributing it to create meals for those in need. However, if donated food is not nutritionally balanced, such as when it mainly consists of pastries or sweets, The Good Kitchen supplements it with extra ingredients like vegetables or pasta (from their own food storage) to ensure that people can cook a more nutritious meal.

Every Thursday and Saturday, volunteers collect surplus food donated by two local supermarkets through the *Banco Alimentare* program (see Appendix, Figure 2). Through this initiative, surplus food that would otherwise go to waste is redirected to The Good Kitchen. After picking up the donations, food is transported back to the kitchen, where it is sorted by separating any spoiled items from those that can still be used. Each week, the kitchen typically receives between 150 and 250 kg of food, of which only 8-10 % ends up being discarded. Priority is given to those on a designated list, and once they are served, others in the community receive the remaining food. On Fridays, Danny, the founder of The Good Kitchen, visits to meet with the team and plan workshops or handle administrative tasks. On Saturdays, the same food collection and sorting process occurs, with the food distributed on Sundays along with cooked meals, typically pasta.

On Sundays, volunteers (including Danny) cook meals and prepare 40-50 lunchboxes using leftover food from the previous day (see Appendix, Figure 3). The kitchen becomes an open community space where people can either help prepare the food or socialize. Some Sundays are dedicated to meal preparation and distribution, while others simultaneously host workshops, such as knife skills, which is a set of culinary techniques, or language lessons in

Italian/English. This communal area provides an inclusive environment where people from diverse backgrounds can come together, share food, and connect with one another.

In line with Mackenzie et al. (2019) and Iacovou et al. (2010), The Good Kitchen addresses multiple social challenges simultaneously. By providing essential services such as food rescue, community meals, and workshops, The Good Kitchen not only reduces food waste but also seeks to strengthen the social fabric of the community, contributing to both social welfare and community development. The integration of community engagement, volunteerism, and education makes it a comprehensive model for sustainable and inclusive community building. Danny aims to build an organic space that sustains itself by changing people's lives, thus encouraging them to continue being part of The Good Kitchen.

5.2 The town of Mussomeli and its social landscape

Mussomeli is a town in the central part of Sicily, situated in the Madonie mountain range with steep terrain, making navigation there challenging. The streets are narrow, and pedestrians often must press against the walls when cars pass. Cars are the primary mode of transportation, even for short trips, as the steep roads make walking difficult, particularly for older residents. With nearly one-third of the population over 50, the streets are mostly populated by the elderly, while younger people are typically seen in pubs and coffee shops. In Mussomeli, a midday break is observed from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM, during which everything shuts down for long lunches or rest. While similar to the traditional siesta, locals don't call it that. The only places open during this time are the Lidl supermarket and a few other shops, located about a 20-minute walk from the main piazza (square), just outside the town's official territory.

5.2.1 *Gendered nature of socialization*

A notable social pattern is the way men and women socialize differently. During the midday break, it is common to see groups of elderly men gathered in public spaces, chatting, playing cards, or simply spending time together in what I interpret as informal "gentlemen's clubs". However, according to one of my informants, there is no equivalent space for women. From a sociocultural perspective it is not as common for women to meet publicly in coffee shops or pubs; instead, they visit each other's homes for social gatherings. Clara, an anthropologist with Italian roots explained:

“In the South [of Italy], the infrastructure like the roads and railways isn't as developed. It can make you feel very isolated, especially in smaller places. [...] In these areas, gender roles are often quite rigid, with the home being the woman's place. It's common for women to stay at home, and historically, if a woman was seen outside the house, it was often assumed she might be a prostitute. This belief creates an expectation that if you're not with your husband, boyfriend, or fiancé, people might wonder, “What are you doing outside? Why aren't you at home?”.

From a sociocultural perspective, women's limited presence in public space is not simply a matter of preference but is deeply embedded in broader gender ideologies and historical norms of honor. Fazio (2004), in his study of the modern Sicilian nuclear family, comprising parents and children rather than extended kin, notes that while this family model offers a form of protection for women, particularly in terms of safeguarding their honor, it also restricts their spatial mobility and reinforces traditional gender roles.

In this context, honor is not fixed but dynamic and socially constructed and negotiated within the community. A family's loss of honor, particularly through the perceived failure to control and protect its female members, is interpreted as a sign of weakness and vulnerability. This results in a gendered division of space, where women are expected to socialize within domestic environments and build support networks with female relatives and neighbors. These practices are shaped by prevailing cultural norms around sexual conduct, respectability, and the preservation of honor, especially in rural areas where infrastructure is limited, and traditional gender expectations remain strong.

In rural areas with limited infrastructure, women continue to experience isolation due to rigid gender expectations that tie them to the home, where their honor and respectability are closely monitored. The Good Kitchen positions itself as a space of inclusivity and subtle resistance to traditional gender norms. In doing so, it creates an alternative to the dominant gender division of public and private spheres. The Women's Circle, a weekly workshop held every Friday, providing a public yet informal setting for women to come together, share experiences, and spend time in a communal space free from the constraints of domestic responsibilities or familial obligations. In contrast to traditional spaces, which often confine women to private spheres, The Good Kitchen offers a neutral ground that encourages social interaction and solidarity.

5.2.2 *Socialization among teenagers*

On my first day, I noticed that it is quite normal for teenagers (specifically boys) to drink alcohol at coffee shops and bars. When discussing this with my informants, I learned that while this practice is generally accepted, it is also influenced by the lack of social spaces and activities for young people. Clara explained:

“I mean, I grew up in a town of 3,000 people, and I was pretty bored, so I started drinking when I was 15. I think it’s a common experience for people from small towns. Then, when I went to university and started meeting people from Rome, [...], I saw how different their experience was. They didn’t drink as much; they didn’t go out to parties or stay out late. For me, staying out until 2 AM when I was 16 or 17 was totally normal, because, well, nothing really happens in a small town, right? But when you grow up in Rome, you’re probably home by 11, especially when you’re that young. I saw this huge difference, and I was like, “Oh my God, you’ve never been out?””.

Rolando et al. (2012) note that in Italy, children are often introduced to alcohol, particularly wine, at a young age, around 7-8 years old, during family meals. While the legal drinking age is 18, this gradual exposure in family settings has historically been accepted, though it has become less common in recent years. In the past, young people typically had their first drink with parents, making alcohol a familiar and ordinary part of their lives. However, peer pressure among teenagers today has led to increased alcohol consumption, particularly binge drinking during social gatherings, resulting in a rise in episodes of intoxication. From observations made by Valeria, a volunteer from Ukraine who has been living in Mussomeli for one and a half years, as well as Laura, a local, I learned that there are not many places for people to socialize. Laura explained:

“That’s a bit sad, actually. A lot of the younger people here, especially in this small town, drink a lot, and there aren’t many options for them to do something else. When I was younger, we had a lot more outdoor activity. We’d play outside, ride our bikes, and run around. But now, a lot of kids just stay on their phones. ... They prefer hanging out at the pub, eating outside, and having drinks...”.

The issue here is not the drinking itself, but the lack of spaces where young people can socialize. There are few playgrounds and not many outdoor activities available in the town. So, alcohol

is not the main issue; rather, it is a consequence of a bigger problem. Onya et al. (2012) argues that the community plays a crucial role in socializing individuals, so for interventions to effectively prevent or delay adolescent drinking, they must also address substance use and anti-social behaviors among adults in the community. This aligns with studies, which clearly show a connection between the perceived neighborhood environment and substance use among adolescents (ibid.). The lack of places for teenagers to gather might explain why drinking in public venues has become a common way for them to socialize. Prevention programs should focus on promoting pro-social behaviors in adolescents, improving their perceptions of their neighborhood, fostering a positive outlook for the future, and reducing anti-social behavior among adults in the community (ibid.).

The Good Kitchen provides an effective response to the challenges faced by young people in the community, particularly the lack of space for socialization. Rather than focusing solely on the prevention of negative behaviors, the organization fosters positive, inclusive environments where youth can engage in constructive social interactions. By offering a variety of programs (see Appendix, Figure 4) and creating communal spaces, The Good Kitchen aligns with the principles outlined by Eccles and Gootman (2002), who emphasize the importance of community programs that facilitate youth development. These types of programs, they argue, play a crucial role in promoting social competencies, fostering supportive relationships, and providing opportunities for personal growth. The Good Kitchen's initiatives, therefore, contribute to the development of a more positive and engaged youth community, helping to reduce isolation and support pro-social behavior.

5.2.3 Inclusion and the combat against isolation

Hauge (1998) highlights the challenges posed by traditional educational frameworks that often overlook informal learning. Simultaneity, Callanan et al. (2011) define informal learning as unintentional, contextual, and occurring in real-world environments outside structured classrooms. Informal learning emphasizes collaboration over individual study and is driven by learners' interests and initiatives. Callanan et al. (2011 p. 646-647, 648) outline five key dimensions of informal learning:

1. Didactic Teaching – The role of formal instruction.
2. Social Collaboration – Learning through social interactions.
3. Embeddedness in Meaningful Activity – Learning tied to significant activities.

4. Initiation by Learner's Interest – Learning driven by personal choices.
5. External Assessment – The presence or absence of formal assessments.

These dimensions highlight how informal learning is deeply tied to the learner's context and personal interests, making it more meaningful and relevant. This is particularly evident in initiatives run by local organizations like the NGO Strauss APS, which works closely with The Good kitchen and municipality to create opportunities for young people, especially those facing disadvantages. One of the volunteers, Roosì, 19, has been living in Mussomeli for the past 4 months, working with the Strauss NGO, explained that “Strauss focuses on informal learning”, meaning that they organize different workshops and informal activities both in school and outside of the school time. As Langmann et al. (2024) suggest, informal learning environments offer youth the flexibility to develop crucial social and emotional skills outside of formal structures. Strauss's work, which provides free spaces such as games nights, language workshops, and karaoke, reflects this principle by offering socialization opportunities that are structured yet informal.

The mission of Strauss is to meet the social, professional, cultural, and personal needs of young people, offering opportunities that guarantee social inclusion. As noted by the European Commission (n.d.), Strauss primarily targets youth aged 13 to 30, with a focus on those in challenging situations. Through their work, Strauss provides alternative spaces for socialization, free from alcohol, where young people can engage in activities that foster both community engagement and self-improvement. Valeria, a former volunteer at Strauss APS, which works closely with The Good Kitchen, says these initiatives are important for creating spaces where people can interact positively. She shared how, in recent years, the town of Mussomeli has become more diverse and globalized, with English learning gaining more relevance due to the influx of foreigners. Valeria explained:

“Also, I see it with my local friends. They've gotten used to the idea that they need to speak English. It's very cute when they try to talk to you in English because they want to communicate, but they don't know how, and you don't know Italian. They really try to make an effort, and you can see that they're trying.”.

This shift towards a more multicultural community illustrates how informal learning environments can foster adaptability and intercultural awareness. Valeria also highlighted that, while the typical age for drinking in bars is around 16 or 17, Strauss is actively working to

change this norm. Their efforts include organizing activities that offer alternatives to alcohol-centered socializing.

“[Because] They don’t have a special place for socialization. Strauss made a project. Once a week, we organize some things. For example, we organized a board game night three times already. We gather, not to drink, but to play board games. Last week, we had karaoke. We organized it at the municipality's rented building. We organized a disco. We sang songs, had tea, and coffee.” – Valeria.

The Kitchen has closely collaborated with the Strauss APS as well. Laura mentioned that they once hosted a karaoke event at The Good Kitchen, organized by Strauss. Danny himself has expressed that, since the kitchen is closed from Monday to Thursday, he wouldn’t mind having an even closer collaboration with Strauss. According to Danny:

“Perhaps we will work more closely with Strauss because we have the space not being used on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Maybe they could host a related workshop with volunteers, so it could be a collaboration between The Good Kitchen and Strauss.”

The partnership between The Good Kitchen and Strauss highlights how local organizations can combine their resources to foster environments that encourage social inclusion and support positive youth development. This collaborative approach aligns with Langmann et al. (2024), who discuss how community capacity building by non-governmental organizations NGOs can enhance local development. According to Langmann et al., such collaborations are essential in creating sustainable, inclusive environments where social cohesion and individual growth are prioritized, reflecting the role of local organizations in fostering community engagement and resilience, reducing reliance on governmental support.

5.3 The Good Kitchen as the Third Place

When I began my research, my focus was to explore how the kitchen combats food poverty in a rural area of Italy, particularly through the efforts of someone with no ties to the local community. However, through my time here, observing and interviewing people, I have learned from Danny that: “The kitchen is 40% about food poverty and 60% about people.”

The Good Kitchen is designed with a long, spacious main hall that leads to a smaller room at the end. This smaller room is neatly organized with shelves stocked with water bottles, salsa, and various canned goods. There's also a sink for washing dishes and two fridges for storing food. The main hall is a corridor, with the first half featuring long kitchen tables along one side, at the end of which stands a large display cabinet. On the opposite side, a few chairs and a coffee table create a cozy yet functional space. At the end of the hall, on the right side, there is a small alcove with another table where the main food preparation takes place. Behind this table, a spice rack holds various seasonings, and a fridge is dedicated to storing pasta. In the middle of the large hall, near the end, sits a couch where people gather every Sunday. The kitchen is minimalistic yet cozy. Although the space isn't large, it is used in a very practical way, making the most of every corner (see Appendix).

Initially, I perceived the kitchen primarily as a means of redistributing food that would otherwise go to waste. However, its true impact goes beyond food distribution. The kitchen serves as a space where people can form meaningful connections, aligning with Oldenburg's (1999) concept of "Third Place," where social experiences take precedence over the physical space itself. Through multiple interviews, it was observed that the kitchen functions as a social hub for the rural community, offering a place where individuals can express themselves and engage with others. On my first week there, Danny hosted a lunch on a Wednesday, which isn't something that usually happens. Although we expected about six people, we ended up with around 15 at the table. Two brothers who were cycling through Sicily decided to drop by after hearing about the kitchen from someone else in Palermo. While we were having lunch, two more cyclists joined us simply because they saw the brothers' bikes and recognized them. At first, they thought the kitchen was a restaurant, but Danny reassured them that we were just hosting lunch for free, and that everyone was welcome to join, eat, and chat with others.

One key feature of "Third Places" is conversation. Engaging dialogue is the dominant activity, creating a lively and inviting atmosphere where people can share stories, ideas, and experiences. In his book "The Great Good Place," Oldenburg (1999) also notes that third places are typically modest and unpretentious in appearance, contributing to their comfort and ease. These spaces are not flashy or polished, which contrasts with more commercial, high-end establishments that often feel formal or transactional. This unassuming aesthetic helps visitors feel at home and fosters a sense of belonging, building relationships and strengthening

community ties. The Good Kitchen embodies these characteristics both socially and aesthetically, providing a welcoming environment for people to connect and engage.

For example, “Women’s Circle” workshops that are hosted by The Good Kitchen, provide a space for participants to express their emotions through art or conversations. As Valeria explained, “The idea is to invite women, to hang out, discuss something [for example, some problems] ... The last time we did art, art techniques for self-expression, for emotions, for writing.”. When I inquired about the motivation behind creating a space for women, Laura explained:

“Behind the Women’s Circle, my idea was mostly to create something that can help us. And to create something that can help our feminine energy. Because of the cultural stuff, we now need to be more masculine in our energy. We need to do [domestic work], we need to be productive, we need to always be doing a lot of things, with a lot of responsibility. So, I was thinking that doing something like this for women could be helpful to just sit down, receive, communicate, speak with each other, and share what we think”.

Later, she elaborated on the process, explaining:

“We are doing that one day a week, and it’s going amazingly. Not many people show up because sometimes progress is slow, and people need to understand it better [the idea of the women’s circle] and get more comfortable. But it’s okay to start slowly. I’m so happy and proud because even with the few girls who show up, they are amazing. They are creating friendships, and they are opening up.”

She shared an intimate experience, recounting how the opportunity for girls and women to express themselves allowed them to be vulnerable and embrace their feminine energy. Laura recalled an experience where a young woman, about 20 years old, opened up about her struggles, and the two shared a tearful moment, creating a bond that helped the young woman feel safe and heard:

“And there was one [girl], I think she was very, very lonely and judged by people here. But now I can see her more smiley, she’s more open. She opened up so much. She said something so private in the last session. She really opened up, and there were tears. The atmosphere that was created there made her feel more courageous to get through whatever she’s going through.”

“Third places” across various cultures share several key features that significantly contribute to their role as informal public gathering spaces. One of the most notable characteristics is their function as neutral ground, where individuals can come together without the pressures associated with home or work. This aspect fosters a sense of social equality, allowing people from diverse backgrounds to interact freely, without the constraints of formal hierarchies.

These spaces are also marked by their accessibility. They often have flexible hours, making it easy for individuals to drop by at their convenience. This flexibility is essential because it encourages spontaneous visits and accommodates those looking to unwind after a long day or seeking social interaction outside of their regular routines (Oldenburg, 1999).

The Good Kitchen, as a third place, helps break the isolation often faced by women in Sicily, where social and cultural norms can limit their interactions outside the family. By offering a welcoming space, it allows women to connect, share stories, and build relationships, empowering them and fostering a sense of community beyond traditional gender roles. In this way, I would categorize The Good Kitchen not only as a "social third place" but also as a physical manifestation of the “third place” concept. It is a space where people can simply be and coexist with others, without the need to engage in conversation or feel pressured to participate in social activities. The Good Kitchen embodies the essence of third place, providing an environment that invites relaxation and connection on one's own terms.

An example of how people perceive The Good Kitchen as third place comes from Giuseppe, who is around 20 and regularly visits the kitchen to receive food. Giuseppe’s father was placed under house arrest, which led Giuseppe to start working for the municipality. Due to his position, the municipality did not permit him to have another legal job with a formal contract, so he occasionally takes on side hustles. It was his cousin who introduced him to the Good Kitchen, by telling him that they were giving out vegetables and food (see Appendix, Figure 5). Giuseppe said, “We were short on money, so I said, ‘Let’s give it a try.’”. When his father was finally free, it became a habit for him to still come to the Good Kitchen. When I asked Giuseppe how he felt the first time he came here, and he said:

“I felt like just giving it a try. If I succeed, well [that’s] good; if not, nothing changes. When I first came here, I told them my story and what I was doing. They said, ‘Don’t worry, we can help.’”

When I asked if his first time was on a Thursday or Sunday, he said Sunday. I then asked if he stayed for lunch, which is usually hosted every Sunday. He said, “Not the first time. They gave me some cooked pasta, and I went home.” But he added, “After that time, I met a girl here at the kitchen, ..., it was more reason to come to the kitchen.” Later, he added, “Today she’s not here because she is away... [in another city].” During the three weeks I observed him at the kitchen, he would come every Sunday, 2–3 hours before the food was served. Most of the time, he would just sit with his phone, but occasionally he helped a little in the kitchen, though he didn’t actively engage in conversations with others. Nevertheless, each time, he would spend a few hours at the kitchen. Usually, he would wait for the food to be ready, fills his lunch boxes, and then go home. Observing him and a few other individuals simply being in the kitchen without engaging with anyone, it became clear that the kitchen is a place where people like to be without needing a specific reason to be there. Their presence alone reflects that the kitchen is an open, welcoming space. It reinforces the idea that they are always welcome, regardless of whether they are actively participating in conversations or activities. This reinforces the kitchen’s role as a communal space where people can simply "be," fostering a sense of belonging and community, typical for a “third place”.

5.4 Communitas and belonging at The Good Kitchen

During our interview I asked one of the informants who is receiving aid from the kitchen, Giuseppe, how he feels being in the kitchen, whether he enjoys hanging out with others or if he just spends his time there:

“I feel different, how should I say it? You’ll see later today [it was my first Sunday lunch at the kitchen]. When everyone comes here, there are all kinds of people from all around the world. Everyone has their problems, which are neither bigger nor smaller than our own. They are problems that affect us differently, but they all have the same importance. And that fills this emptiness inside of me. I feel at ease here. ... It’s like being naked. If everyone is naked, you don’t feel ashamed to be naked.”

Giuseppe's example reflects a broader theme of shared experiences and belonging. According to Turner (1969), *communitas* refers to a sense of unity and equality experienced during rituals or shared events, often during transitional life moments. This stands in contrast to stigmatization, which marks individuals as different, leading to discrimination and isolation. While *communitas* fosters inclusivity and equality, stigmatization deepens societal hierarchies and marginalizes individuals. From my ethnography, I observed that The Good Kitchen is a place free from stigmatization and hierarchy, where everyone is treated equally. Its weekly ritual of sharing food together creates a sense of *communitas* among participants, reinforcing collective identity and belonging (see Appendix, Figure 6).

The experiences shared by visitors at The Good Kitchen reflect the concept of *communitas*, an intense feeling of togetherness and equality that can emerge in shared spaces, particularly during liminal moments or outside of structured social roles (Turner, 1969). There is a small Argentinian diaspora in the town, typically in their late twenties to early thirties, and The Good Kitchen has become a space for them to meet, share meals, and catch up each week. At The Good Kitchen, people like Antonia, a volunteer at the good kitchen, speak of feeling "at home" and describe the place as being "out of time," which illustrates a temporary suspension of the formalities and hierarchies of everyday life. "I felt like I arrived home; it's like being out of time here. You never know what time you arrive or leave.", she said. The sense of belonging, emotional connection, and shared purpose among the small Argentinian diaspora echoes this idea. The act of cooking and eating together creates a horizontal social field where individuals connect through shared cultural practices, supporting Hage's (1998) view of home as a felt experience, and Holtzman's (2006) idea of food as a tool for preserving identity. The Good Kitchen thus becomes a site of *communitas*, where strangers become kin through collective, meaningful experiences.

5.5. Leadership and organization of The Good Kitchen

Tsai et al. (2022) state that brand stories are powerful marketing tools that create emotional connections with consumers. Many charitable organizations use the personal biographies of their founders to inspire and mobilize support. These stories help build emotional ties, making the message more relatable and enhancing the effectiveness of advertisements. This can be seen with The Good Kitchen as well. Danny's book, "Good Kitchen" (McCubbin, 2024) narrates how an idea transformed into a thriving reality. The story of the kitchen's journey from concept

to execution mirrors the power of brand storytelling in charitable organizations. However, this can lead to a challenge where the brand becomes more strongly associated with an individual rather than the organization itself.

Max Weber (1968) argues that charismatic authority is fundamental to understanding how charismatic leaders can create, transform, or stabilize institutions. Weber suggests that charismatic leadership can lead to the creation of new institutions or the revitalization of existing ones, such as in the case of the institution of charity. However, charismatic authority is inherently unstable because it depends on the personal qualities of the leader. Over time, charismatic leadership can become "routinized," meaning it is institutionalized into a form of traditional authority. In the case of The Good Kitchen, this traditional authority (though not necessarily tied to an official position) seems to be deeply rooted in long-standing customs and practices centered around the founder's persona, which still appears to be the most dominant influence. Traditional authority underscores the organization's reliance on the founder's identity, making it a key factor in its continued influence and success.

I asked the volunteers and those who have worked extensively in the kitchen the same question each time: How do you think the kitchen will function if Danny fully retires or leaves? And what is his role in all of this? Most people gave similar answers. Valeria put it this way: "He is like the face, like the engine of the Good Kitchen." At the same time, Laura shared her perspective: "Danny is Danny, and no one can really replace that. But I do think we can still keep the same atmosphere, absolutely."

Danny himself acknowledges that he is "the face" of the kitchen, but his goal is to change that. As much as he loves the kitchen and will always care about it, his long-term plan is to move back to Australia within five years, visiting Mussomeli only three months per year. His main concern right now is ensuring that people come to the kitchen not just because of him but for what the kitchen itself has to offer. Danny says, "[I want for] people to come to the kitchen not just because of me to have lunch, but for the kitchen itself and what it can offer". He elaborates on his vision:

"It was always my dream to have a project that I one day don't need to be here all the time and that I don't need to be a decision-maker and not have to be the face of the kitchen. ... So, I set up the processes where the kitchen can run without me." – Danny

Danny points out that the kitchen has already proven its ability to function as a food distributor. This winter, he was away for two months, and the kitchen continued to run smoothly. However, he acknowledges that when it comes to the social aspect, the kitchen is not yet ready to operate independently without his supervision. Danny says “It [the kitchen] will run [itself], but it will be just a service [of distributing food].”. Therefore, he reflects on the challenge of announcing his absence “Because we have 33,000 followers on the kitchen’s Instagram now, ... We get a lot of support and community because of me [being here]. So, I have to be careful to say I’m not at the kitchen anymore,” says Danny.

Understanding that this is a gradual process, Danny wants to expand the "kitchen family" by bringing in more like-minded people who are deeply invested in the project. In conclusion, he states the true vision of the kitchen is about connection and inclusivity. To achieve that, he believes it is essential to have people who share his passion and commitment to carry on the work.

The case of The Good Kitchen illustrates the tension between charismatic leadership and the need for institutionalization. Danny’s personal involvement has undeniably shaped the kitchen’s identity and success, reflecting Weber's idea of charismatic authority, where the leader’s influence becomes central to the organization. However, this creates a challenge for long-term sustainability, as the kitchen risks becoming too dependent on Danny as an individual. Danny’s vision of shifting the kitchen from being reliant on his presence to a more self-sustaining model is a gradual process that involves building a committed team and fostering a collective identity. This transition, while necessary for the kitchen’s continued growth, highlights the complex dynamic between individual-centered and community-centered organizations, and the delicate process of routinization that many charitable organizations face when transitioning from charismatic leadership to institutionalized practices.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The Good Kitchen is a unique example of a non-governmental organization (NGO) that operates independently of state funding, sustained instead by volunteer work, donations, and the sale of a book written by its founder, Danny McCubbin (2024). While many NGOs rely heavily on governmental support, The Good Kitchen combines grassroots fundraising with

partnerships from organizations such as Strauss APS and Banco Alimentare, enabling both food redistribution and social outreach. Functioning as a hybrid initiative without formal hierarchical leadership, the kitchen embodies a collaborative model that merges food assistance with community building. In practice, The Good Kitchen redistributes surplus food from local supermarkets and transforms it into shared meals, creating a hub of both nutritional support and social interaction. This is particularly visible in its day-to-day operations, where informal gatherings foster solidarity among participants. The initiative not only addresses food insecurity but also promotes social sustainability through collective activities and interpersonal connection. The Good Kitchen responds to the social fabric of Mussomeli, marked by rigid gender norms and limited youth engagement. Through initiatives such as the Women's Circle and youth programs developed in collaboration with Strauss APS, The Good Kitchen offers inclusive spaces for learning, empowerment, and community engagement.

The Good Kitchen is a neutral, egalitarian space outside the domains of home and work. Here, individuals of diverse backgrounds; residents, migrants from Argentina and Ukraine, or expats of Italian heritage can interact without formal roles or social expectations. These interactions help dissolve cultural boundaries and foster mutual understanding. Furthermore, Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* serves to interpretate the profound sense of belonging and temporary equality experienced during communal meals and rituals in the kitchen. These moments of connection blur social distinctions and contribute to greater social inclusion. Although The Good Kitchen is closely associated with its charismatic founder, it is important to emphasize McCubbin's efforts to institutionalize the organization in a way that ensures its sustainability beyond his active involvement. This challenge reflects a common dilemma in nonprofit leadership: transitioning from founder-driven operations to long-term organizational stability. In summary, The Good Kitchen is more than a food aid program. It is a socially integrative initiative that counters exclusion, loneliness, and fragmentation. By cultivating a safe and welcoming environment for interpersonal exchange, it contributes to a more cohesive and inclusive local community.

A compelling direction for future research would be to examine the transferability of The Good Kitchen's model to other socio-economically marginalized contexts. Future studies could shed light on how local cultural frameworks, resource availability, and levels of social cohesion influence how easily such grassroots initiatives can be adapted and how effective they are. Additionally, research could assess the broader social impact of community kitchens,

particularly in terms of fostering social capital, enhancing well-being, and mitigating exclusion. From an organizational perspective, further inquiry into models of leadership transition, from founder-led to collectively governed structures, would contribute to the understanding of long-term sustainability in community-based NGOs.

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Appendix



Figure 1 Danny founder of The Good kitchen. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad.



Figure 2. Lidl, which is part of the Banco Alimentare. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad.



Figure 3. Volunteer preparing lunch boxes. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad



Figure 4. Table at one of the language workshops. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad



Figure 5. Prepared food boxes. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad.



Figure 6. Table at the Sunday lunch. Photograph by Ilya Attarnizhad