

Index

The Origins

The context: the neighborhood and the market	7
OffCampus Nolo	9
Spesa Sospesa Nolo	10
Polisocial Award 2021	13

SOSpesa

Co-design	14
Mapping the neighborhood network	16

Prototyping

Service definition	18
First phase	20
Second phase	26
Overall results	34

Future scenarios	36
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The origins

The context: the neighborhood and the market

SOSpesa originated in the Nolo neighbourhood, an acronym for “Nord Loreto”, meaning North of Piazzale Loreto. It is a district of Milan located just outside the city centre, and has become the protagonist of a renewal process sparked by its proactive community of residents, who generate activities and projects, building a network of virtuous initiatives.

The “Nolo Social District” is a social street founded in 2016, managed by the neighbourhood’s residents through a Facebook group with more than 13,000 members. This group virtually connects neighbours, also with the aim of moving beyond the online network to meet offline. Activities range from organising neighbourhood breakfasts to co-designing new urban spaces, showing Nolo as an example of the regenerative power of active citizenship.

Within the neighbourhood is the covered Municipal Market of Viale Monza 54, a commercial gallery built in 1933 and one of the first covered markets in Milan. The building, made entirely of reinforced concrete, was distinguished by its open and bright interior layout (today altered by some later additions). Thanks to its distinctive arched architectural shape, it remains one of the neighbourhood’s landmarks.

Today, the Market presents itself as a hybrid reality, with sales areas and communal corridors that often host cultural, social, and community events. While awaiting investment to relaunch its services and restore its architectural structure, the market serves as a stage for social gatherings.



Off Campus Nolo

The Off Campus network is an initiative promoted by Polisocial, the social responsibility programme of Politecnico di Milano, which aims to create a more responsible university, attentive to social challenges, and open and close to local areas and communities.

Off Campus Nolo was established in the Nolo neighbourhood, within the Municipal Market at Viale Monza 54. The space promotes social innovation within the local community through research activities, co-design, and local engagement to develop pilot projects for the transformation of the Municipal Market and surrounding areas.

In addition to designing spaces and services with residents, it promotes a cultural and educational offering open to the city, which also includes innovative teaching activities through workshops and courses, internships, and degree theses involving Politecnico students.

The space also houses a neighbourhood archive, public and accessible, which collects texts, documents, and materials as a heritage for the neighbourhood and the city.

Off Campus Nolo is a neighbourhood laboratory that makes polytechnic expertise available to develop projects with local stakeholders and strengthen the university's presence outside its campuses. Thanks to the scientific coordination of the Polimi DESIS Lab of the Department of Design, and in collaboration with the School of Design and the School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering, activities and projects have been developed in the area over time.

Spesa Sospesa Nolo

Spesa Sospesa Nolo is a solidarity initiative created by an interaction designer and local resident, Alberto Andreetto, in collaboration with Daniele Dodaro, founder of the Nolo Social District.

The idea arose and developed almost spontaneously in March 2020, during the first Italian lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this serious and extraordinary situation, non-essential work was suspended and, as a result, all bars, restaurants, and shops were closed: people were only allowed to leave their homes for grocery shopping or emergencies. In this context, Andreetto was fortunate enough to keep his job, which he could do remotely, but this was not the case for everyone. In fact, many of his friends and acquaintances suddenly lost their jobs overnight. Andreetto decided he wanted to help another family in the neighbourhood who had not been as fortunate. He expressed this intention with a post on the main communication channel of the neighbourhood, the Nolo Social District Facebook page. Many people responded to his post, joining the

04. Volunteers during the preparation of food boxes, 2020



initiative and offering to donate money to help families in difficulty. Andreetto then created a simple Google form to match donors and recipients, offering three options:

- I would like to receive groceries as help;
- I would like to donate groceries;
- I would like to help someone financially with their shopping.

The aim of the initiative was not so much to provide economic help, but rather social support. The project, in fact, was not able to offer real financial assistance, but certainly provided relational support. With the help of Daniele Dodaro, the form was published on the Nolo Social District Facebook page, collecting thousands of responses in just two weeks.

A platform was created, complete with a website and logo, which made it possible to filter requests by postcode, narrowing the area of intervention to the Nolo neighbourhood and its surroundings, and facilitating the creation of matches.

Donations were made through the platform, and volunteers who signed up via the website purchased and delivered groceries to those who had requested help. The platform enabled the creation of over 250 matches between people in the same neighbourhood, some of whom even lived in the same building, and groceries worth a total of 8,000 euros were purchased.

From the very beginning, the project needed a support space in the neighbourhood where volunteers could gather and provide concrete help to vulnerable groups. Off Campus Nolo recognised this need and offered itself as the ideal place to activate the neighbourhood support network. Once the health emergency phase of COVID-19 ended, with the lifting



05. Volunteers during the preparation of food boxes, 2020

of the lockdown in June 2020, the project was paused. In September 2020, with the opening of the Off Campus Nolo space, lecturers and researchers from the Polimi DESIS Lab offered to host the service in their premises, taking on the project with the support of the Radio Nolo association. In March 2022, Spesa Sospesa Nolo became SOSpesa, thanks to the research project of the same name funded by the Polisocial Award.

Polisocial Award 2021

The “Polisocial Award” supports research projects with social aims at the Politecnico di Milano. The winning projects are funded through the 5 per mille IRPEF contributions collected by the university.

The Award encourages the development and advancement of scientific research, both basic and applied, with significant social impact. It values multidisciplinary research capable of creating synergies between different departments and research groups, both within the university and with other institutions. It also promotes the involvement of external collaborators and partners interested in supporting the projects, their outcomes, and their social impact.

The 2022 call saw a wealth of multidisciplinary project proposals, among which “SOSpesa – Equity and Recovery Around the Corner”, proposed by the Polimi DESIS Lab (Department of Design) in collaboration with the Departments of Management Engineering (DIG) and Electronics, Information and Bioengineering (DEIB), was also awarded.

SOSpesa aims not only to promote and redistribute surplus food to vulnerable groups, but also aspires to establish a neighbourhood network (volunteers, local shops, initiatives) that can create a virtuous circle, encouraging a micro-economy for market traders and supporting vulnerable groups in the neighbourhood.

SOSpesa

Co-design

The research project included a substantial phase of co-designing the service, involving volunteers, other neighbourhood associations active in food aid services (mostly part of the Qubì Loreto network), as well as students and researchers from the Departments of Management Engineering (DIG) and Electronics, Information and Bioengineering (DEIB), in the process of redefining the brief.

The volunteers were fundamental as the first activators of the service; their experience made it possible to set up the prototyping phase by drawing on the previous activities of Spesa Sospesa Nolo, understanding the needs, assessments, and opinions of the initiative's main experts.

The research and experience of the departments then made it possible to formulate a feasible model for the service prototyping.

06. Volunteers co-design session, Off Campus Nolo 2022





07. Volunteers co-design session, Off Campus Nolo 2022

Co-design 1

The first session was held at Off Campus Nolo on 11 June 2022, involving volunteers in a brainstorming activity aimed at gathering ideas and initiatives useful for optimising the project.

Co-design 2

Once the various inputs had been collected, on 15 June 2022, researchers from the three departments involved met to redefine the project brief, each bringing their previous experience in different fields.

Co-design 3

The third session aimed to implement and consolidate the project brief with the network of local partners, including traders from the Municipal Market and proactive businesses in the Qubi network and the traders' association.

On 24 June 2022, the research group met again with the volunteers to share and validate the new brief with neighbourhood experts, at Off Campus Nolo.

Mapping of the neighborhood network

During the pandemic, there were two phenomena that SOSpesa identified: **the increase in people on the brink of poverty**, and an economy moving at very different speeds for small and medium-sized traders (local shops, mini-markets). This highlighted the importance of neighbourhood networks, not only as a form of **solidarity** but also as a model for short-range purchasing.

SOSpesa connects various actors at both local and municipal levels, working to promote a healthy, sustainable, and **accessible diet for all**, as well as supporting the local economy:

Milan Municipality | Food Policy Office

Its priorities are to guarantee healthy food for all, the sustainability of the food system, food education, the fight against waste, and the promotion and support of scientific research in the agri-food sector.

MEMO54

The traders' association of the Municipal Market in Viale Monza.

Casa Nolo

An association for the promotion of social networks in Nolo.

Qubi Loreto

A network of associations supporting food aid, education, listening, and community activities in the area.

RECUP

An association fighting food waste by recovering unsold food from markets and redistributing it to charitable organisations.

La terra che non c'è

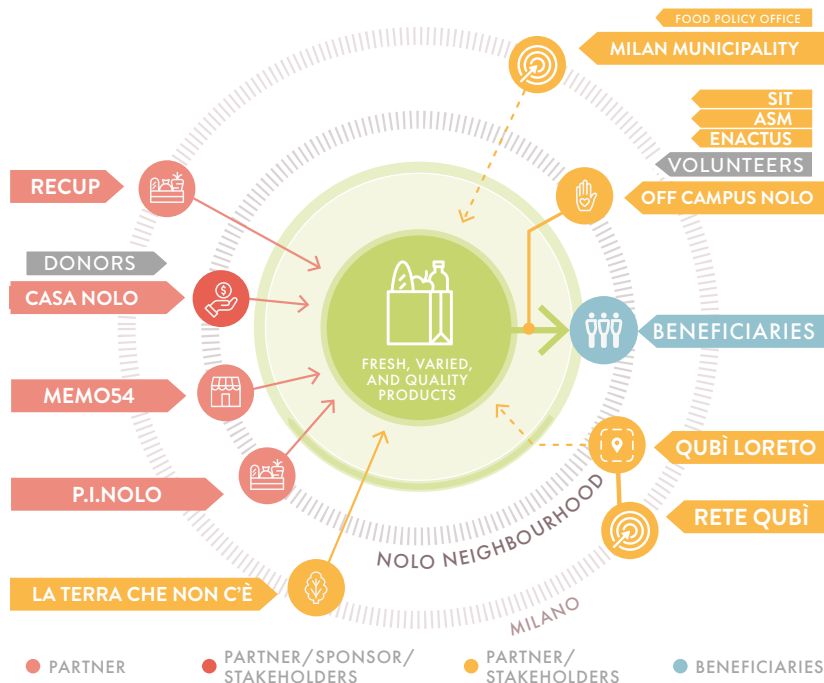
A social urban gardening project supporting solidarity initiatives, located in Via Padova.

P.I.Nolo

The traders' association of the Nolo neighbourhood.

Gorillas

The online supermarket with a neighbourhood hub, based in Nolo (this partner has now ceased operations).



Prototyping

Service definition

SOSpesa is a service for creating a network of local solidarity actors who, supported by a digital platform, enable the mapping of food product flows and fundraising, to offer free grocery packages with an appropriate food mix. This is achieved by recovering surplus food, transforming unsold goods, and using stock at controlled prices, in favor of vulnerable groups within the Off Campus Nolo spaces at the Covered Market on Viale Monza 54. The packaging and distribution of grocery packages takes place every Friday from 2 pm to 6 pm.

Following the co-design sessions, the prototyping phase lasted a total of 29 weeks, from October 7, 2022, to June 16, 2023, and is divided into two phases:

- The **first phase** covered the initial 10 weeks, from October 7, 2022, to December 16, 2022;
- The **second phase** lasted 12 weeks, from January 13, 2023, to March 28, 2023, and was extended by an additional 7 weeks until June 16, for a total of 19 weeks.

The prototyping was structured in sequential steps to gradually introduce the service changes suggested by the outputs of the co-design sessions. SOSpesa distributes 20 grocery packages each week to 20 families:

- 10 packages (“Complete Grocery”) consist of fresh food purchased at controlled prices at the Viale Monza Municipal Market thanks to private donations, with a value of 30 euros.



Complete Grocery

PRODOTTI ACQUISTATI ALL'INTERNO DEL MERCATO COMUNALE DI VIALE MONZA 54 A **PREZZO CALIMERATO**

7KG FRUTTA E VERDURA
1 FILONE DI PANE
500G DI PASTA FRESCA
1 POLLO

500G TRITA DI MANZO
6 UOVA
1L DI LATTE
1KG DI FARINA



Light Grocery

FRUTTA E VERDURA/PRODOTTI IN **ECCEDEXENZA**, DONATI, RECUPERATI E REDISTRIBUITI GRAZIE ALLA COLLABORAZIONE CON:

RECUP
PI.NOLO
CASA NOLO

LA TERRA CHE NON C'È
QUBÌ LORETO

- 10 packages (“Light Grocery”) consist of unsold seasonal fruit and vegetables recovered from the open-air municipal market on Via Termopili and/or the Ortomercato, thanks to collaboration with the Recup association, as well as unsold food donated by local shops.

The collection of unsold goods, assembly, and distribution of the packages is handled by volunteers and members of Off Campus Nolo, who prepare and distribute the boxes.

The beneficiaries, who live in the neighborhood or nearby areas, change every week and are selected on a rotating basis from a pool of **140 users**, thanks to the essential help of SIT (Social Innovation Team, a student association from Politecnico di Milano). Every other week, project participants are contacted to receive either the complete or the light grocery package.

Beneficiaries join the service through referrals from local charitable associations or by word of mouth.



08. Vasca idroponica orizzontale negli orti di via Padova. Ph Zoe Vincenti

The supplier network was further enhanced by the project *La terra che non c'è*, which produces **hydroponic growing tanks** and walls within the neighbourhood through citizen-led participatory self-construction activities in public spaces. **La terra che non c'è** donated hydroponically grown lettuce to SOSpesa during weeks 4 and 10, which was added to the basket of products offered in the “light grocery” scheme.

Throughout this first phase, 25 retail outlets across the Nolo/via Padova area were explored to assess the potential for further expansion of the network: 7 grocery shops, 1 delicatessen, 7 restaurants, 2 cafés, 2 bakeries, 4 patisseries, 1 ice cream parlour, and 1 pizza-by-the-slice shop. Business owners were interviewed, and the following insights emerged:

- **There is no significant surplus** of goods that would incentivise shops to participate based solely on excess stock;
- There is interest and willingness to participate as suppliers offering products at **controlled prices for vulnerable groups**;
- Occasional **surplus may present an opportunity**, with some businesses open to contributing as ad hoc surplus suppliers.



09. Jam produced by Fòla using recovered fruit and vegetables, labelled with the SOSpesa sticker.

During the trial period, it was observed that the unpredictable quantities of produce recovered from the Ortomercato often resulted in an excess of fruit or vegetables, which could not always be distributed solely to families. As a response, the activation of a transformation and sales process was identified as a way to prevent further waste.

Through two commercial establishments within the Pi.Nolo network, certain dishes and processed products incorporating some of the recovered ingredients were sold, initiating a circular economy capable of generating funds to purchase complete grocery packages.

Fòla

A patisserie located on Via Luigi Varanini

The collaboration resulted in: 153 savoury solidarity dishes sold

157 sweet items/preserves/creams sold

1 solidarity event held

465€ total donation raised

Cunza

A delicatessen located inside the Municipal Market, Viale Monza 54

The collaboration resulted in: 16 jars of orange marmalade produced

16€ total donation raised

Prima fase | comunicazione territoriale

During the first phase, a local communication strategy was developed, which proved essential for fundraising and raising awareness of the project within the neighbourhood.

Following the creation of the SOSpesa logo, the project was promoted through various materials distributed across the market and surrounding area:

- **Promotional postcards** in 10 local shops
- **Banners and posters** displayed at the Municipal Market
- **Donation boxes** placed in 10 participating shops
- **Window stickers** for participating shops
- **SOSpesa vest** for volunteers on duty (10 units)
- **SOSpesa labels** applied to processed products sold by the two pilot shops (09)

10. Davide, a volunteer, wearing the branded bib, with promotional postcards and the donation box.





First phase | Events

During the first phase, new forms of self-funding and/or project promotion were tested.

Thanks to a neighbourhood mapping effort carried out by the research team, SOSpesa established contact with Il Vespaio, a network of professionals specialising in ecodesign, design for all, and sustainability. Active in the area for years, Il Vespaio develops educational projects on environmental issues, engaging companies, institutions, communities, schools, and families to generate shared value.

SOSpesa and Il Vespaio collaborated on a day of activities at the Municipal Market on Viale Monza, held on 15 October 2022, as part of the programme for the Festival dello Sviluppo Sostenibile (11).

On 26 November 2022, Fòla hosted La Castagnata, an event made possible by a surplus of chestnuts collected during the weekly Recup round. During the event, roasted chestnuts and mulled wine were sold, with 50% of the proceeds donated to fund the purchase of complete grocery packages (12).

The first phase of prototyping concluded near the Christmas holidays with the launch of the SOSpesa Xmas Day initiative, held on 17 December 2022. The usual 20 suspended grocery packages were accompanied by donated gifts. During the event, Christmas postcards were sold to raise funds (13).

11. Il Vespaio presents the operation of its plastic recycling machinery – 15 October 2022.

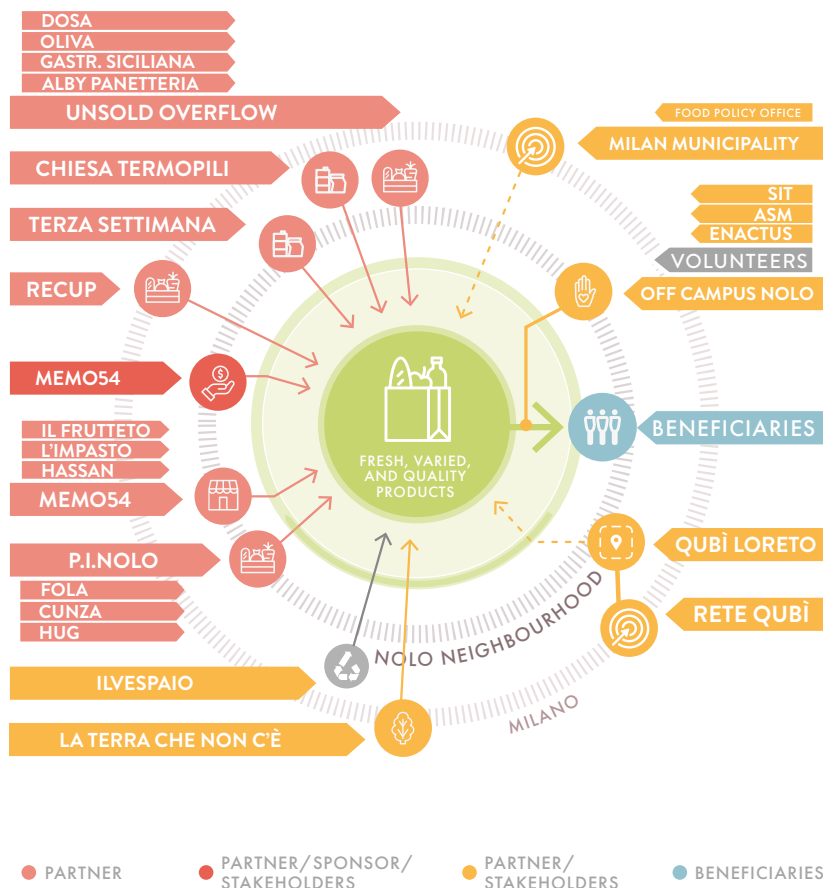
12. Chestnut Festival at Fòla – 26 November 2022.

13. SOSpesa Christmas Day at the Municipal Market on Viale Monza – 17 December 2022.

Second phase

Expansion of the Neighborhood Network

The second prototyping phase enables the neighbourhood network to grow and expand. As the system becomes more complex, four clusters are defined to describe the different types of donations.



Cluster A - Commercial Activities

Type of Donation: Surplus

A.1 – Unsold Pastry and Deli Products

Oliva Turkish Mediterraneo – Cooked products

DO.SA – Pastry

A.2 – Unsold Bakery Products

La Vera Gastronomia Siciliana – Baked goods

Alby Panetteria – Baked goods

Cluster B - Associations / Redistribution Services Organisations

Type of Donation: Surplus

B.1 – Surplus Fruit and Vegetables

Associazione RECUP – Recovered produce from the wholesale market

Associazione Terza Settimana – Recovered produce

La Terra che non c'è – Hydroponic salad

B.2 – Surplus Packaged Products

Caritas, Church on Via Termopili – Packaged food recovered from Banco Alimentare

Cluster C - Commercial Activities – Transformation

Type of Donation: Financial

Fòla – Preserves, community meals, events

Cunza – Jams

Hug – Community meals

Cluster D - Commercial Activities – Donation Boxes

Type of Donation: Donated Products (Not Surplus)

Celiachia Milano – Packaged products

During the second phase of prototyping, collaboration with Fòla was consolidated, opening up new opportunities to expand the network for transforming products recovered from the wholesale fruit and vegetable market (Ortomercato).

Several innovations were introduced:

Fòla - A memorandum of understanding was defined and signed to regulate the transformation process between Fòla, Recup, and Memo54.

Hug Milano - A cultural association hosting a bistro joined the SOSpesa initiative. The staff selects one or more ingredients from the fruit and vegetables recovered through collaboration with Recup. These are transformed and sold as complete dishes or side dishes. For each solidarity dish or product sold, €1 is donated to SOSpesa.

Recup - From 24 April 2023, Recup began offering surplus collection at the Ortomercato on Fridays instead of Thursdays. This change allows SOSpesa to provide fresher and better-quality fruit and vegetables, optimising logistics.

14. Verdura fresca recuperata grazie a Recup.





15. Voucher solidale per il ritiro da DO.SA.

As highlighted during interviews in the first phase, neighbourhood shops do not generate significant surplus. Even when excess products are available, they are not predictable in advance.

A system was therefore introduced allowing shopkeepers to notify on Thursday evening or Friday morning if they have unsold goods, activating the volunteer collection service with the following shops:

- La Vera Gastronomia Siciliana – Baked goods, Viale Monza
- Alby Panetteria – Bakery, Viale Monza

Solidarity Voucher

Occasional surplus collections, when quantities are minimal, require disproportionate effort from volunteers. To address this, the solidarity voucher was introduced.

The voucher is handed directly to the beneficiary, who then collects the unsold portion directly from the shop. This solution reduces resource waste and delegates HACCP compliance to the shopkeeper, who already meets hygiene standards for product handling.

Participating shops include:

- DO.SA – Pastry shop, Via Venini
- Oliva Turkish Mediterraneo – Kebab shop, Viale Monza

Second phase | service management

As the research project approached its conclusion, the final phase of prototyping focused on defining how the SOSpesa initiative could be managed beyond the experimental stage.

Over the years, the group of volunteers has grown stronger and more cohesive; some participants have been involved since SOSpesa was a neighbourhood initiative during the pandemic.

Throughout the process, several meetings were held to communicate the progress of the project and to gather **feedback and suggestions** from the volunteers, with the aim of optimising the service.

The group demonstrated a **proactive attitude** throughout the entire period, leading to the decision to initiate a process of **volunteer empowerment**.

A **co-design meeting** (16) was organised with the volunteers to collaboratively build the activity schedule and to begin assigning roles for weekly tasks, encouraging active participation and shared responsibility for the back-office operations that enable SOSpesa to run every Friday.

16. Volunteers during the distribution of grocery boxes.



Second phase | fair price



Thanks to the cost assessment of the full grocery parcel carried out by DIG, a recalibration was made to achieve a fair price.

Discussions with traders at the Municipal Market on Viale Monza 54 revealed that, despite ongoing communication, the concept of reactivating a sustainable and circular economy within the market was not clearly understood. The analysis showed that the price at which vendors were offering their goods was not regulated, but rather set below the amount needed to cover production costs. This choice stemmed from their desire to personally contribute to supporting vulnerable groups in the neighbourhood.

For this reason, from 5 May 2023, the cost of a full grocery parcel was adjusted **from €30 to €35 per parcel** — a fair price defined by DIG's cost analysis. It is considered fair as it represents the minimum amount that allows traders to break even on expenses related to purchasing, transport, and labour.



16



17



18

Second phase | Events

SOSpesa Open Doors - Event held as part of the “Week Against Food Waste” programme by Polimi, on 10 February 2023.

Pineapple Party - Fòla, in collaboration with SOSpesa, organises an event to consume pineapples recovered from the wholesale market – 4 March 2023 (16).

SanNolo Festival - The project is presented during the semi-final of the SanNolo neighbourhood music festival – 24 March 2023.

Exploring the Circularity City Across Human and Non-Human Worlds - Talk – the project is presented during an event within the Open Polifactory programme, hosted at Off Campus – 4 April 2023.

Discovering Islamic Culture - Open lecture for the neighbourhood – 15 April 2023. Entry by donation in support of SOSpesa, organised in collaboration with the Muslim Students Association of Politecnico.

SOSpesa Meets Painting - Natural painting activity using leftover fruit and vegetables, held with children on 19 May 2023 during the Sustainable Development Festival (17).

Service Design Drinks - On 13 June 2023, the project is presented during a gathering with 45 guests including students, researchers, and designers (18).

16. *Pineapple Party Fola*, 4/03/2023.

17. *SOSpesa incontra la pittura* 19/05/2023.

18. *Service Design Drinks* 13/06/2023.

Results

The prototyping period spans a total of **19 weeks**, from 7 October 2022 to 16 June 2023.

During the first phase, lasting **10 weeks**, from 7 October 2022 to 16 December 2022, a total of **190 packages** are distributed, of which 90 are complete and 100 are light.

The second phase takes place from 13 January 2023 to 16 June 2023, with a duration of 19 weeks, during which **185 light groceries** and **150 complete groceries** are distributed.

The overall results of the project:



139 beneficiaries supported
by the project

THE USERS RESIDE IN THE NOLO DISTRICT OR IN THE SURROUNDING AREAS.



27 volunteers involved in the project

20 VOLUNTEERS FROM THE NOLO DISTRICT
AND 7 OFFCAMPUSERS



1133 euro of donations
resulting from transformation

1025 EURO FROM FÒLA
92 EURO FROM HUG
16 EURO FROM CUNZA

240 Complete groceries boxes



€7,500 TOTAL

€2,700 – FIRST PHASE

90 PACKAGES AT €30 EACH

€4,800 – SECOND PHASE

90 PACKAGES AT €30 EACH

60 PACKAGES AT €35 EACH

1,680 KG OF FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

240 BREAD

120 KG OF FRESH PASTA

240 CHICKENS

120 KG OF MINCED BEEF

1,440 EGGS

240 LITRES OF MILK

240 KG OF FLOUR



285 Light groceries boxes

133 CRATES OF FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

2,097 KG OF RECOVERED PRODUCE

1,681.1 KG OF PRODUCE BY RECUP

412.6 KG OF PRODUCE BY TERZA SETTIMANA

203 KG OF SURPLUS FOOD

65.79 KG OF PACKAGED GOODS FROM

ROM CARITAS – CHIESA TERMOPILI

67 KG FROM ALBY BAKERY

32.22 KG OF PACKAGED GLUTEN-FREE PRODUCTS

FROM CELIACHIA MILANO

10 KG OF BAKED GOODS FROM LA VERA GASTRONOMIA

SICILIANA

5.9 KG PLUS 2 SOLIDARITY VOUCHERS

FROM PASTICCERIA DOSA

5.15 KG PLUS 1 SOLIDARITY VOUCHER FROM

OLIVA TURKISH MEDITERRANEO

18 KG OF PANETTONI FROM COVA

Future Scenarios

Following the conclusion of the prototyping phase, the research team presented three distinct scenarios for the potential continuation of SOSpesa.

Scenario A

The first scenario includes **only light grocery boxes**, sourced from surplus or end-of-life products, involving Recup, Terza Settimana, and local shops that are part of the current neighbourhood network, with the possibility of expanding the network further.

Donations resulting from transformation or last-minute sales are useful for supporting activities aimed at vulnerable groups, or for reinvestment into the project to cover ordinary administrative expenses, such as the purchase of bags, label printing, or communication efforts.

Scenario B

The second scenario envisages a **mix of light and complete grocery boxes**, with a profit margin for the participating retailers on the latter, and with products of declared quality.

This scenario includes the consolidation of fundraising methods through stronger connections with neighbourhood events, the loyalty of shops that carry out dedicated activities (such as Ghe Pensi Mi, Fola, etc.), and the possibility of engaging a limited number of major donors (e.g. Alumni).

Scenario C

The third scenario includes **only complete grocery boxes**, with a profit margin for the participating retailers and products of declared quality.

The recovery of surplus food is maintained thanks to the support of associations such as Recup, Terza Settimana, and local shops, with the recovered products being used exclusively for the preparation of solidarity meals or for public events.

There is a strong emphasis on crowdfunding and communication, both within the neighbourhood and across university and city-wide networks in Milan, ensuring sufficient income to cover the costs of the grocery boxes.

