

The organizational effectiveness of third sector organizations: A dialogic-participatory action research in a regional food bank¹

Costanza Martin

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

Luca Pesenti

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

CORRESPONDENCE:

Luca Pesenti

e-mail: luca.pesenti@unicatt.it

Abstract

The study of organizational effectiveness (OE) within nonprofit organizations is a well-established area of inquiry in international scholarly literature. This focus is particularly crucial in organizations where internal relational dynamics may sometimes be overshadowed by a strong mission- and values-driven identity. This article proposes a relational analysis of OE, employing this interpretive framework to examine the specific organizational context of food banks, complex entities operating at multiple levels with a specialized role in food recovery for charities addressing food poverty. Drawing on evidence from a dialogic-participatory action research conducted within an Italian regional food bank, the study pursued a dual objective. Firstly, it aimed to facilitate the collective construction of knowledge, promoting a cohesive environment for sharing and integrating knowledge to address real-world challenges effectively. Secondly, it sought to empower participants by providing them with opportunities for active engagement in effecting changes and improvements through participatory reflection, thus devising actionable strategies to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Keywords

Organizational effectiveness, third sector, food bank, action research.

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Introduction

Within the field of analyses concerning third sector organizations, in specific those active in addressing social needs, a research area has developed over time aimed at understanding the relevant factors for evaluating their effectiveness, namely the empirically measurable coherence between the explicit mission and the outcomes determined by the organization. This is a topic of great significance primarily due to the nature of these organizations, classically described as entities whose actions and commitments are primarily value-driven (Etzioni, 1961). The well-known theory on the social origins of the third sector (Salamon & Anheier, 1998) has subsequently allowed for understanding the existing link between the development of the nonprofit sector and specific contexts, networks of relationships, and shared systems of meaning and value.

Subsequent historical development has had to contend with the emergence of increasingly complex forms, up to the most recent hybrid organizational modalities (Haigh & Hoffman, 2012), namely entities that blur the boundary between profit and nonprofit while simultaneously considering a social mission and income generation from commercial activities to pursue their mission, aiming to achieve systemic transformative effects of a social, environmental, cultural nature and so on. This development has shown how the identity and organizational practices of these entities do not exclusively follow value-driven construction processes but also present strategic traits that represent a challenge to the sustainability of identity dimensions (Jäger & Schröer, 2013).

It is within this reflection that the theme of organizational effectiveness (OE) in nonprofit organizations has emerged, a concept of broad scope that aims to measure the ability of nonprofit organizations to achieve their objectives in terms of outcomes and increasingly also impacts. The article proposes a relational interpretation of this concept, applying it, particularly to the analysis of an Italian regional «Food Bank,» a third sector organization whose purpose is to collect and distribute food to local charitable organizations for assistance to people in poverty. The specific aim of the article is to show the results of an intervention research that developed within this «Food Bank,» aimed at enhancing the organizational capacities and relationships of the individuals involved.

Food banks as multi-level third sector organizations

Since its inception in 1967 in Phoenix, Arizona, the idea of organizing the retrieval and subsequent distribution of surplus food to individuals facing food insecurity has gained global traction. Food banks, as non-profit entities, have emerged as instrumental organizations committed to the collection and distribution of food resources, encompassing both raw ingredients and prepared meals. The acquisition of raw materials predominantly relies on a donation system, comprising contributions from private individuals,

corporations, and institutions, alongside financial support earmarked for procuring items at favorable prices.

The introduction of the food bank model in Europe, in 1984, originating in France and subsequently proliferating across Spain, Belgium, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Poland, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Hungary, and Germany, marked a pivotal expansion. Presently, the European landscape hosts 351 active food banks in 30 countries, while dozens of others are present in Latin America, South Africa, and Australia.

Food banks are characterized by their adoption of less formalized methods for food retrieval and redistribution compared to interventions by public institutions. Specifically, they function as interconnected networks capable of integrating with, and occasionally supplanting, institutional intervention programs.

In Italy, the experience of a food bank began in 1989, under the name «Banco Alimentare», later becoming the «Fondazione Banco Alimentare». The activity of Banco Alimentare can be summarized in three fundamental elements: i) identifying sources of «waste» in the agro-food chain, ii) collecting and storing goods in their regional warehouses, and iii) distributing products to charitable organizations affiliated.

From an organizational analysis perspective, Fondazione Banco Alimentare (FBA) falls within the category of «multi-level organizations» (Rossi & Boccacin, 2006), which bring together a plurality of associative realities, connecting them through stable relationships and variable functions, representing a higher level of coordination (at least secondary) with respect to them.

Structurally, the coordinating body «possesses characteristics different from affiliates, having different functions and cross-purposes compared to first-level organizations» (Rossi & Boccacin, 2006, p. 22). These functions generally include programmatic activities, service agencies, promotion of solidarity-oriented cultural themes, and political and institutional representation (Rossi & Boccacin, 2006, pp. 22-23).

Multi-level organizations are characterized by their ability to produce and reproduce numerous types attributable to the broader category of social capital. Within the organization, organizational network allows for enhancing the circulation of goods, services, and information otherwise not easily accessible by each network member, thus enhancing the capacity for action. Externally, multi-level organization allows for greater effectiveness in reaching specific targets, stimulates the overcoming of particularistic logic typical of third-sector organizations, and promotes a culture of solidarity oriented towards «societal citizenship» more forcefully (Donati, 1993).

Applying this category to FBA — articulated in an original way considering that organizations participating in the network are not «attached» to the Foundation, but relate to it through a system of conventions — appears particularly relevant and readily introduces the interpretation of food banks in general and FBA specifically as one of the most significant forms of social innovation emerged in recent decades.

From an organizational analysis perspective, two elements of substantial novelty can be identified. At the macro level, the network was formed following a polycentric/federative model, structured on strong but informal ties between the center and regional associations. In recent years, this model has become more institutionalized, transforming into an associative/foundational sense through a greater formalization of relationships between the center and the periphery. At the micro level, however, the entities participating in each regional network are not «attached» to the regional association but relate to it through a system of conventions in which the service relationship is articulated without affecting the identity and purposes of the entity itself.

What are the effects that such an organization manages to determine? And above all, how does this organization innovate the response to social needs? The theme evidently concerns the relationship between objectives (the mission) and the operational results that are achieved.

These entities aim to facilitate the collection of food surpluses generated along the agri-food chain, increasing efficiency and effectiveness in redistributing them to the network of nonprofit entities directly in contact with people in poverty. The explicit objective is therefore to improve efficiency in food collection and distribution, thus allowing an increase in responsiveness to expressed needs. Food banks rely primarily on their ability to create a network connection between for-profit actors (agri-food companies) and non-profit actors (organizations distributing essential goods to the poor): the main resource is therefore organizational, and particular interest lies in analyzing its organizational effectiveness.

Organizational Effectiveness and Third Sector

Definition of Organizational Effectiveness

Measuring the effectiveness of non-profit organizations (NPOs) is a complex task and its complex to be achieved with a single metric. Some authors pointed out the need to integrate financial, social, and institutional mission performance as essential elements for evaluating NPO effectiveness (Brown, 2005; Herman & Renz, 2008; Monteduro et al., 2016). The concept usually includes the capacity for effectiveness, as introduced by Eisinger (2002), incorporating factors such as paid staff presence and the use of computer systems for data management. For this reason, OE is often included in the field of performance measurement (Zollo et al., 2019), such that OE is commonly referred to when speaking of organizations that — in fact — have achieved the highest degree of performance. The latter, to quote Shahzad et al. (2012), refers to the degree to which the organizational mission is achieved in the workplace, which constitutes an employee's job.

Such a definition, however, appears unsatisfactory to us. In our opinion, when analyzing organizational effectiveness, it is important to not only consider *what* an organization produces, but also *how* it produces it: this shift in focus allows consideration of not only the result in terms of performance, but also the internal and external processes that contribute to it. In summary, it appears crucial for us to examine the organizational processes that determine performance, rather than just the performance itself. For this reason, we believe that assessing the effectiveness of an organization should not be limited to considering only the outcomes, but also the relationships that generate it and are generated from it. To achieve this, it is important to engage internal stakeholders throughout the organizational life cycle, especially during development plans. This approach allows participatory evaluations that seek to improve evaluation outcomes (Bezzi, 2001).

Evaluating effectiveness in non-profit organizations

Evaluating effectiveness is a fundamental process for NPOs, as it allows them to monitor the results achieved and identify possible areas for improvement. The theme appears particularly relevant especially in a phase, like the current one, in which the traditional *mission-and-value-oriented* approach must deal with the need to take on an entrepreneurial approach at the same time (Stock et al., 2024). However, it is important to remember that evaluating effectiveness is not only a matter of individual subjectivity but also a collective construction of shared realities (Cumming, 2008; Kelley et al., 2005; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Recognizing organizational effectiveness as a social construct emphasizes the significance of understanding how internal stakeholders shape their assessments (Herman & Renz, 2008). This underlines the importance of involving all members of the organization in the effectiveness evaluation to fully understand the different perspectives and concerns.

A paradoxical observation emerges that the proposed guidelines for measuring the effectiveness of NPOs are rarely all satisfied in a single study, emphasizing the need to consider the specific context and adapt practices appropriately to adequately account for their potential value (Lecy et al., 2012; Jun & Shiau, 2012). Furthermore, considering what has been discussed so far, there is a strong need to delve into the analysis of stakeholders' perceptions regarding OE and, specifically, its determinants through an interpretative model that «broadens» participation in the definition of effectiveness to address the diverse interests and viewpoints of distinct stakeholder groups and consider different interpretative levels of OE.

Based on the considerations outlined above, it can be argued that the OE of NPOs goes well beyond mere goal attainment and efficient resource utilization. Its effectiveness is also determined by the quality of «relational goods,» which require interaction between those who provide them and those who receive them, as well as the interconnectedness

among these sides, serving as the basis for performance (Donati, 2009). For the purposes of the this analysis presented in this article, a relational approach has been particularly useful, as it closely aligns with the specific context and objectives at hand. This paradigm advocates for methodologies and techniques tailored to consistently recognize that an organization is essentially a network of relationships.

A relational approach to OE

Effectiveness is considered a social construction based on the judgments of individuals or groups participating in organizational life, which therefore depends on the mediations between different perceptions of stakeholders (Levin, 2000). To achieve effectiveness, an organization must prioritize interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and the positive social impact generated by the work of non-profit organizations and their people. These elements are central to the analysis of the dynamics of NPOs, given their capacity to generate social value, which - given the intrinsically relational nature of these realities - is achievable through the involvement of people and the development of networks of positive relationships that lead to overall organizational growth, not only in terms of mission but also in the promotion of personal development paths.

According to Zollo et al. (2019), EO should be analyzed from two perspectives: organizational responsiveness (Herman & Renz, 2004) and social effectiveness (Brown, 2005). While social effectiveness expresses the ability of NPOs to achieve social goals, organizational responsiveness is crucial for analyzing the ability to meet stakeholder expectations and pursue NPO objectives, which are mainly characterized by the ability a) to produce relational goods (with/for the beneficiaries of the services), and b) to generate social capital (with/in the community of reference) (Colozzi, 2006).

NPO's are characterized by flexibility and creativity of work: the human presence is essential and irreplaceable and is a place of creation of relational (immaterial) goods that generate utility only if shared with others. It is also characterized by a type of work that is constituted in a subsidiary or auxiliary activity that seeks to direct development towards human ends through forms of «relational guidance». ONP's and the phenomena that occur within it can be defined as «emerging» (Donati, 2006), i.e. elements that are not visible to the naked eye and cannot be assessed using static indicators, as they have far-reaching and largely unpredictable effects, highlighting the dynamic (or morphogenetic) nature of TS, which is constantly in evolution (as it is composed of morphogenetic elements). This dynamism affects both organizational structures and the ways in which work activities are carried out, as well as the meanings and cultural representations associated with work. The latter should therefore be considered as a unique and original social relationship, and therefore not replaceable). Work is thus understood as a «morphogenetic phenomenon» that includes structural, agential and cultural aspects (Donati, 2017).

Furthermore, work should be viewed as a product of individuals seeking meaningful social relationships to engage in social exchanges that aim to improve the well-being of all those involved in the production of goods and services. The relational lens seems to be a functional tool for analyzing many of the elements highlighted. In fact, it allows the researcher to highlight a social fact (in this case, a non-profit organization that is driven by the desire to increase its effectiveness) as the product of the combination not only of objective, static factors (such as those related to the organization's structures, the demographics of its members and some monetary indicators), but also of other more transversal OE factors (such as behavior, interactions, attitude or values assessed coherently and comparably at several points in time, so that they can be accumulated over time). In addition, the relational lens, seems particularly advantageous in terms of subsequent comparison and monitoring over time, and in terms of inclusion and subjectivities with which one interfaces.

A relational approach to OE in practice: The case of an Italian regional food bank

The workflow in brief

Considering the theoretical assumptions presented so far, we will discuss below the results of participatory dialogic action research carried out during the first half of 2023, having as its object the strengthening of the OE in an Italian regional food bank (FB).² A dialogical-participatory action-research, by its very nature, conducts an evaluation with the main objective of addressing and attempting to solve practical problems in the relevant field of investigation in a participatory manner (Fontani, 2012). The specific purpose is an analysis of the relational context of the organization in relation to the situational objective to be achieved, i.e. increasing the effectiveness of the organization.

In general, the aim of both the study carried out and the relational analysis was to reorganize and enhance resources, activate networks, promote the renewal of actors' expectations, and contribute to the recovery or upgrading of reference values. The research project aimed to develop future perspectives within the organization through dialogical-participatory evaluative research practices, focusing on organizational development and the enhancement of professional skills within the FB. The intervention was targeted at five management figures of the organization, to improve individual and organizational skills to optimize the management of activities and respond to current needs.

² The research team was methodologically coordinated by Mara Gorli as part of a broader intervention carried out under the scientific supervision of Luca Pesenti.

The ODG system of intervention

The analysis of relationships within the food bank aimed to support social action to change undesirable situations, seen as the result of a relational context. The methodology adopted is based on an intervention-oriented research perspective, called «Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance» (ODG) (Donati, 2009), which seeks to generate practical directions to promote social action and change factors that hinder the process (Donati, 2022). From this perspective, it is useful to remember that purposive research requires an intervention-oriented approach from the outset (Donati, 2009): this implies a way of doing research that integrates observation, diagnosis and guidance (Donati, 2009). Thus, ODG systems allow the researcher to move from the cognitive to the operational level (Donati, 2022), i.e. - in sociological terms - such systems allow supporting social action that can change the context in which relationships are established (Martignani, 2016). In the action-research described here, ODG systems are relevant in the operational phase (stages 2 and 3) and in knowledge production (stage 4) (Martignani, 2016).

Observation (first phase)

Relational observation is seen as the ability to interpret a social fact as a problematic relation, highlighting how the organizational context is intrinsically linked to relationships (Donati, 2009). Considering social facts as the result of human actions, relational analysis begins with an empirical investigation to understand the origins and effects of social events (Martignani, 2016).

The purpose is the identification of organizational objectives and the analysis of the knowledge, skills and characteristics needed to perform effectively in the organizational positions assigned. To achieve this purpose, the tools used were self-assessment, dialogical individual assessment (supported by a participatory competence assessment tool, the so-called «Competence Wheel») and participant observation. The objective was therefore to create individual spaces for reflection and dialogue with area managers, with the aim of gaining the deepest possible understanding of people's experiences and behavior in their natural working context.

The observation highlighted several critical issues from the point of view of organization, internal communication and organizational culture within the organization under review. From an organizational point of view, there was an overload of work in certain areas and at particular times, a centralization of functions and a low capacity to delegate, and a lack of processes for assessing competencies and professional development paths. This scenario fostered an internal culture that did not adequately value employees and volunteers, which hinders the generation of constructive feedback and affects both internal relationship dynamics and operational activities.

In terms of internal communication, there were problems of exchange between different offices and a general lack of know-how circulation. This indicates the need to improve communication channels and knowledge sharing within the organization.

In terms of organizational culture, practices are imbued with values outlining a faith-based organization. This results in a distinctive language and practices, which serve as an element of people retention and as a strong brand identity. However, such values can also create barriers for those who do not share the membership, potentially creating forms of exclusion.

The interpretative scheme

In order to analyze the causal factors (Xi) and the significance of the phenomenon, the observation was guided by the AGIL scheme (Donati, 2006), exploring the internal social environment of the FB through four dimensions (Figure 1): adaptation (A), i.e. the resources (human resources, skills and capabilities) available within the group; goal attainment (G), i.e. the mission understood as the characteristic distinctiveness of the organization (which is translated, analytically, into organizational effectiveness); integration (I), i.e. the set of social norms, rules and relationships, which in the context of the FB can be identified as commitment, sacrifice, dedicated time, availability and altruistic motivations; latency (L), i.e. the value structure, like gratuitousness, sharing, solidarity, trust. In light of this interpretive scheme, the organizational environment includes resources and opportunities that can be used to achieve goals, within a framework of norms and values capable of accommodating ultimate interests and producing distinctions and connections.

The action-research activity brought out some elements of interest when viewed in light of this pattern. In the exploration of opportunities, several avenues for advancement have been discerned. Firstly, there lies a promising prospect in investing resources towards fostering growth pathways. Moreover, it has been recognized that there exists significant potential in cultivating greater synergy and coordination among individuals within the group by fostering a collaborative environment where individuals can seamlessly align their efforts toward common goals. Furthermore, the importance of supporting knowledge and skills-sharing processes has been underscored. Encouraging the dissemination of expertise and insights amongst members not only enriches the collective pool of knowledge but also empowers individuals to continually evolve and adapt in a dynamic environment. Additionally, it has been highlighted that providing opportunities for cultural, leisure, and communication activities within the group can foster a sense of cohesion and camaraderie among members. Lastly, there is a pressing need to support a culture of evaluation.

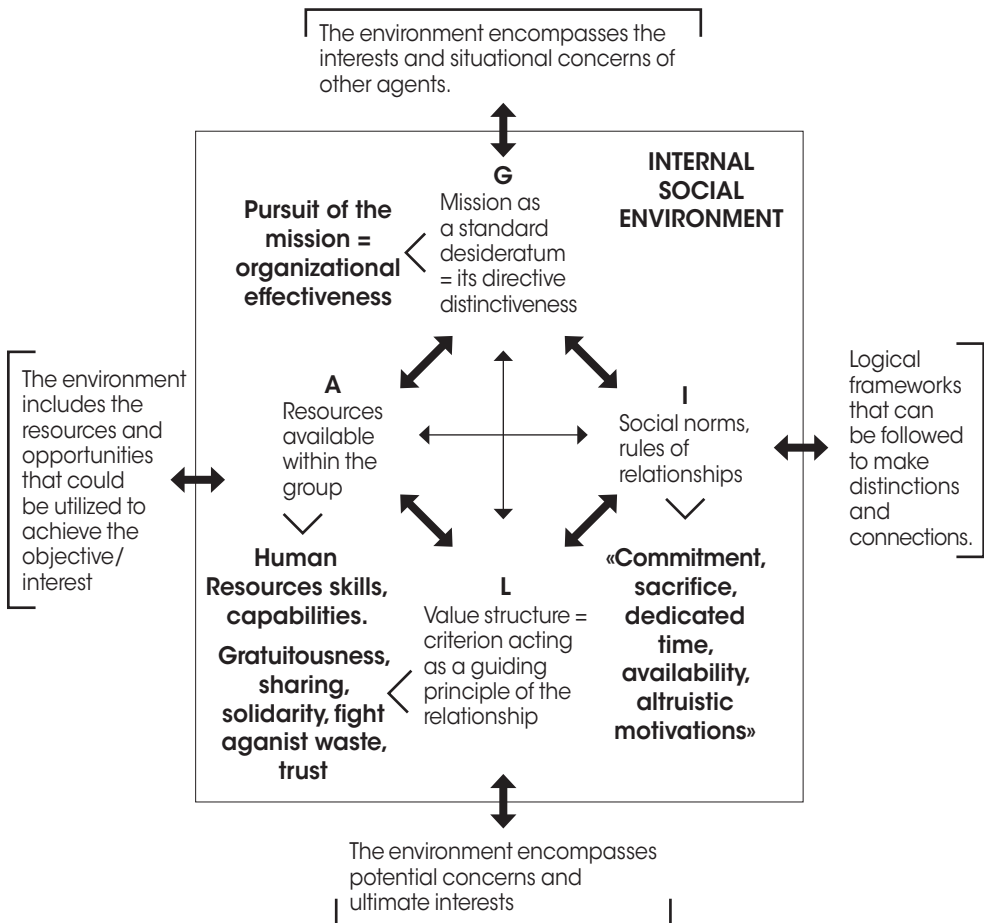


Figure 1 Initial AGIL diagram of phenomenon Y (organizational context of the food bank).

The research-action encompassed a set of distinct, yet interconnected work objectives aimed at enhancing organizational effectiveness and individual performance within the context of assigned roles. Firstly, there was a deliberate focus on conducting a comprehensive analysis of the knowledge, skills, and practices essential for successful task execution within the designated organizational positions. This analysis serves as a foundation for understanding the intricacies of each role and the competencies required to fulfill responsibilities effectively. Moreover, a key objective was the identification of both individual and organizational strengths, alongside areas necessitating development. This process of introspection enables stakeholders to capitalize on existing strengths while addressing weaknesses, thereby fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Furthermore, the development of internal self-assessment and evaluation tools emerged

as a critical component in supporting the diverse roles present within the organization. By implementing such tools, individuals can engage in regular reflection and evaluation of their performance, facilitating personal growth and professional development. Simultaneously, these tools enable organizational leaders to gain insights into the collective strengths and areas for enhancement across various functions. Lastly, the formation of a collaborative working group comprising the five participants signified a concerted effort towards achieving the research-action objectives. Through collaboration and collective input, participants can leverage their diverse perspectives and expertise to drive meaningful outcomes, ultimately contributing to the overall success of the initiative.

In summary, the outlined work objectives underscore a holistic approach towards optimizing organizational performance and individual efficacy, emphasizing the importance of thorough analysis, introspection, tool development, and collaborative efforts in driving positive organizational change.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis corresponds to the introduction of a judgment into the observed state (as a relationship) (Donati, 2006). In this case, reference was made to the contribution of an evaluative distinction between effective and ineffective.

This step corresponds to the phase of the definition of the research design.

The purpose of this phase is: (a) to identify the set of causal factors (Xi), (b) to construct the «black box» and (c) to configure the phenomenon as an emergent social relationship.

Identification of a set of causal factors

The aim of the identification of relevant causal factors (Xi) was to understand a given phenomenon and translate it into indicators by identifying relevant causal factors (Xi). Among the factors identified there are poor delegation skills and overburdened workloads, lack of a competence evaluation system, lack of professional and career development pathways, ineffective communication and poor sharing of know-how, a corporate culture that does not value people, and a heterogeneous organizational culture with integration difficulties and possible exclusion phenomena.

Construction of a «black box»

The construction of a «black box» is essentially aimed at understanding a social phenomenon. Once the factors (Xi) that may have an influence on the phenomenon have been

identified, they are placed inside the black box in order to observe their interactions. This black box is considered «complex». This is because the inputs and processes that lead to the phenomenon are not directly observable but have dynamics that require detailed study.

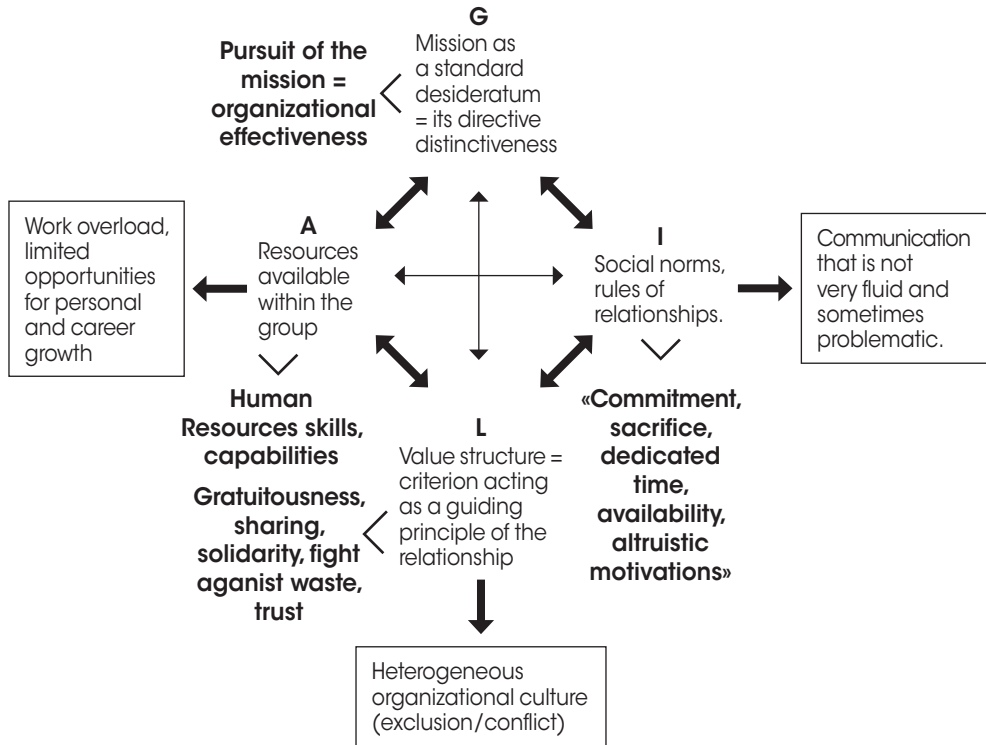


Figure 2 Black box configuration.

We will now consider each of the dimensions concerned. We focus on the analysis of a black box as a system, focusing on four dimensions (Figure 2):

- G, which considers the system as a system that establishes its internal relations on the basis of a situated goal, identifying a desired standard, in this case represented by the OE;
- A, which observes that the system contains means that are inadequate in relation to its purpose, causing problems such as poor delegation capacity, work overload, lack of competence assessment and professional development paths, with negative consequences for communication within the group and overall satisfaction;
- I, which emphasizes specific norms for relationship management, such as commitment, sacrifice and altruistic motivation;
- L, which emphasizes the cultural model of the value of the desired object, used to evaluate relationships; however, this is subject to individual variations and

influenced by the cultural heterogeneity of the organizational environment. This mismatch between the internal model and the external environment can lead to a negotiation of meanings between subjects, which can result in cooperation or conflict. The latter, given the nature of the organization, can have a negative impact on the achievement of objectives.

Configuration the phenomenon as an emergent social relationship

It has finally been analyzed the configuration of the phenomenon as an emerging social relation through the morphogenetic analysis of the black box. This analysis shows that the organization under study emerges as a phenomenon that is:

- Non-aggregative: that is, it cannot be understood exclusively through the sum of its parts; this is evident from the impossibility of understanding the phenomenon by considering only the economic aspect without considering the internal relations.
- Not particularly decomposable into discrete parts: i.e. it is not possible to fully understand the phenomenon by analyzing its individual components, which makes it difficult to replace or modify parts (subjects and/or processes) without affecting the overall objective (G) of the system. This phenomenon seems to explain the strong centralization of competences and responsibilities in certain roles, making it difficult to replace competent individuals and undermining the sustainability of the organization in the event of a lack of such competences.
- Composed of functions that cannot be localized but, on the contrary, are «distributed» at two levels: (a) its low geographical localization is due to the operational nature of providing food resources to different organizations at regional level, while (b) its functions are distributed transversally, not limited to specific roles and therefore not attributable to individual components. This transversal distribution suggests an organization with flexible and adaptable hybrid roles, but with a strong centralization of core competences that sometimes do not always support the roles filled with specific knowledge.
- Defined by a complex interaction of social actors: the phenomenon represents a network of complex and intricate relationships, not easily predictable, with a strong emphasis on relating to others. This characteristic can sometimes hinder the achievement of organizational objectives, making the process less fluid.

Main results

Our analysis is oriented towards discussing the nature of the internal system of relationships within the FB and characterise it as non-linear and unpredictable. This is

because internal relational dynamics cannot be seen as resulting from the individual actions of those involved, but rather as the product of mechanisms that operate beyond individual will and interaction (Terenzi, 2006). These mechanisms are the result of morphogenesis. This means that the relationship is both a symbolic reference (*refero*) and a structural link (*religo*). These elements act both as constraints and as resources: on one hand, they create social cohesion that facilitates collaboration within a system of expectations and rules (Donati, 2017); on the other hand, they can limit flexibility in technical, economic and/or cultural adaptation, endangering the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization (Selznick, 1957).

The analysis, visually summarized in the figure 2, is extended first of all along the vertical axis (*refero*, L-G), which represents the temporal dimension. According to Donati (2006), people's deepest values play a crucial role in shaping hidden value, referred to as «L» in the AGIL schema. In the specific case, the values of gift, gratuity, and altruism constitute the value criterion, which is linked to ultimate values derived from Catholic tradition; these act as guiding principles. This deep connection explains the centrality of help and busyness, but also the risk of exclusion for those who do not fully adhere to these values, with a negative impact on the pursuit of organizational goals.

This highlights how work is often conceived as a mission that goes beyond its immediate value, contributing to the definition of the organization as a place of mission and relationship. However, both in terms of resources (A) and in terms of relational rules and expectations (I), this strong connection with «ultimate realities» risks to lead to a limited capacity for delegation, a concentration of skills in a few individuals, with risk of limited organizational sustainability.

The deep connection is also reflected in the acceptance of requests, even if they are not in line with skills, which is a source of discomfort due to the lack of adequate means and skills. These material elements are linked to the spatial context (horizontal axis, *religo*, A-I), which refers to internal norms and finding adequate means to regulate relationships in the specific context. The analysis highlights the need to reconcile the mission (influenced by «ultimate values») with organizational sustainability.

Given the research objective (i.e. to undertake a social action) and in order to modify the phenomenon, once it was understood that the capacity to act effectively and influence the phenomenon existed, the research project was configured. Thus, the third phase of the sequence: the guidance phase.

Guidance (second and third of the research-action)

The guidance phase prioritizes social intervention to transform an organizational state considered for its suboptimal level of effectiveness. Relational guidance is defined as a set of social activities aimed at transforming an undesirable situation through the

modification of relational dynamics (Donati, 2009). This process involves the planning and implementation of a morphogenetic process aimed at producing a change in relationships to achieve a desired state of the situation (Donati, 2022).

In the second phase, our primary focus was on establishing clear roles, responsibilities, and required competencies for each of the five managers. This involved a thorough analysis of activities and practices, including the identification of objectives and indicators, assessment of the quality of execution, and the translation of these findings into actionable insights. Furthermore, we prioritized competence tracking, which encompassed evaluating the proficiency levels of the managers and interpreting observed outcomes. Additionally, for each individual, we outlined specific competencies and qualities that needed further development and enhancement to ensure effectiveness in their respective roles.

In the third phase the purpose was to strengthen the working group. A focus group of participants evaluated the internal aspects of the FB process, using a SWOT matrix representing the state of the internal FB process.

Understanding the Dynamics of the Organization: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Risks

One of the notable strengths of the organization lies in its ethos of viewing work as a vocation, marked by a commitment to assisting and diligently serving others. Moreover, the organizational structure is characterized by hybrid roles that possess adaptability to varying situations, requests, and contingencies, with role boundaries that are sufficiently permeable. Additionally, the organization serves as a place of fostering relationships and friendships, highlighting the importance of nurturing good interpersonal connections.

The organization presents an opportunity to establish alliances and build trust, fostering strong bonds among colleagues that facilitate the realization of their full potential.

Regarding weaknesses, one challenge faced by the organization is the difficulty in delegating tasks, particularly with volunteers, necessitating a high level of personal involvement. Furthermore, while the emphasis on relationships with others is a strength, it can sometimes impede the smooth achievement of organizational goals. Additionally, there is limited dissemination of core competencies, and roles may not always be adequately supported by specific knowledge and skills due to the heterogeneous nature of the organization's culture.

Finally, there is a risk associated with a reluctance to communicate with colleagues, leading to a lack of feedback systems, which can result in dissatisfaction and conflicts within the organization. Moreover, the organization may face low sustainability if individuals possessing crucial expertise depart, as they may be challenging to replace. Furthermore, if personal bonds among members are strained, it can adversely affect the attainment of organizational objectives.

Conclusion and suggestions (phase four)

During the observation, certain factors arising from the relational dynamic were identified as a symptom of the increase in problematic behavior among employees and volunteers. The relational orientation led by the researchers involved the five target employees and promoted participative dialogue. The facilitators used narrative methods and facilitated personal and social reflection through individual dialogues and focus groups. The personal observation, although uneven, is guided by the dialogical methodology.

The relational guidance (G) had the task of assisting participants in spontaneously identifying possible approaches to solving their problems based on what emerged from the relational dynamics (the We-relation) created within the group (Martignani, 2016). The practical solutions that were developed stemmed from reflexive transformations in individuals and, notably, in their interpersonal relationships (as evidenced by the action plan presented during the phase 4). From the perspective of relational sociology, this constitutes a «relational service» aimed at promoting individual well-being through the significance of relationships within a network that functions as a reflexive social entity (Donati, 2009).

The proposed shift from linear to circular communication aims to improve efficiency and activity planning within the organization. Communication is characterized as extemporaneous and lacking reflection, which fosters rapid exchanges but hampers monitoring capabilities. Implementing circular communication involves strategic planning discussions to construct monitoring indicators, utilizing a participatory approach at the group level. This approach facilitates better information dissemination not only through relational channels but also via a computer system that encourages tracking flows.

Additionally, it involves more sustainable activity management through organizational chart revisions, clearer role definitions, and professionalization efforts. Furthermore, it promotes increased sharing of expertise through the creation of «instruction manuals» for each position, mitigating the risk of knowledge loss.

It also emerged the growing necessity for a more expansive network of leadership skills within the organization. Currently, there's an overreliance on a limited number of individuals possessing key skills, which presents risks in terms of knowledge dispersion and potential disruptions in the event of their departure. Therefore, it emphasizes the significance of more evenly distributing activities across the organization, as well as bolstering the capacity for delegation. This approach is crucial for mitigating risks associated with talent concentration and ensuring continuity in operations and expertise.

The analysis of organizational dynamics has unveiled a significant gap between the chair and middle management within the organizational chart, signaling a culture that lacks emphasis on value creation. This structural separation adversely impacts communication, relationships, and work quality, ultimately undermining overall performance and fostering internal mistrust. This lack of cohesion is attributed to ineffective communication, resulting in dissatisfaction among members.

To address these issues and enhance the effectiveness, quality, and performance of services, the analysis shows the need for transition towards a more hierarchical and professional organizational structure. Such a structure would foster clearer lines of communication, promote stronger relationships, and ensure a more cohesive approach to decision-making and task execution.

The emergence of trust issues and relationship challenges among colleagues underscores the importance of establishing new criteria for recruiting, which must be balanced from the point of view of the organization's mission, influenced by its ultimate values, with its long-term sustainability.

The analysis also went deeper into defining roles and responsibilities, emphasizing the necessity of tracking competencies to pinpoint areas for improvement and the acquisition of new skills to enhance work effectiveness. Was also indicated the opportunity to propose specific training pathways tailored to address these needs. Some pathways concentrate on industry-specific topics like food industry practices and management software utilization, while others focus on broader skills such as human resource management, encompassing areas like communication and professional feedback management. These training initiatives aim to equip members with the necessary expertise to navigate their roles effectively and contribute to organizational success.

Concluding remarks

In the realm of relational sociology, the labor conducted within non-profit organizations is fundamentally grounded in interpersonal relationships and the active pursuit of interconnections, which concurrently manifest as «actions» and «functionings», reflecting intersubjectivity and an organized structure. These interconnections serve as pivotal focal points when analyzing a complex organizational framework primarily comprised of individuals and their relational dynamics. This analytical reflection aimed to enhance organizational effectiveness (OE), employing a case study methodology centered around a regional food bank necessitating transformative interventions concerning internal relationship dynamics, role distribution, and responsibilities. Utilizing a dialogic-participatory action research approach, the analysis corroborated certain insights garnered during the theoretical phase, while in some instances, offering further refinement.

The overarching objectives of this inquiry were twofold: i) to foster the collective construction of knowledge, thereby promoting a cohesive system of knowledge sharing and integration to address real-world challenges, and ii) to empower participants by providing them with the opportunity to actively engage in effecting change and improvement through participatory reflection aimed at devising actionable strategies. Notably, the analytical focus was directed towards elucidating the operational mechanisms through which non-profit organizations (NPOs) yield outcomes, thereby shifting emphasis from mere performance metrics to the underlying organizational processes.

The relational analysis presented in this article explored the structure of the organizational network, highlighting how individuals are connected within the organization. Special attention was paid to organizational culture in terms of social relations, encompassing norms, values, and organizational practices. These were considered not only as individual characteristics but also as outcomes of social interactions within the organization. Grounded in a dialogic approach, relational analysis underscored the nature of work relationships, emphasizing how collaboration and teamwork are influenced by social connections. Furthermore, guided by the research paradigm of organizational effectiveness (OE), the analysis aimed to explore how the structure of relationships impacts work effectiveness, team dynamics, and the achievement of organizational goals.

Viewed through the lens of relational sociology, this organizational relational analysis enabled a focus on five aspects that we deem necessary to highlight: (a) analysis of the organizational network structure revealed connections among individuals within the organization and their impact on information dissemination, decision-making processes, and the distribution of competencies and responsibilities; (b) organizational culture, including social relations, norms, values, and organizational practices, is considered a product of social interactions within the organization, suggesting the importance of monitoring this culture if the organization needs to revise its system of internal expectations; (c) analysis of internal communicative dimensions highlighted that it occurs through the organization's social networks and is influenced by internal culture and personnel valuation systems; (d) leadership study also highlighted how leadership itself is one of the elements dependent on social relations; finally (e) observations within the food bank indicated that the emotional commitment of paid employees and identification with the association's values, goals, and culture can influence the evaluation of OE, particularly when mediated by involvement in team-oriented behaviors.

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