VISION STATEMENT

20th
**Anniversary
Right to Food
Voluntary
Guidelines**

Right to food and welfare to transform the food system

Foreword

The vision paper of the Observatory on Food Insecurity and Poverty (OIPA) is intended to provide a statement on understanding, assessing and tackling poverty and food insecurity in Italy. The document is a follow-up to the 2024 Report, released on the 16th of October, and it is presented on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the FAO Right to Food Guidelines.

In 2023, OIPA proposed 10 policy recommendation points to address the phenomenon, which are to be seen as complementary to this report. The vision document is addressed to a variety of actors: policymakers, public administration, civil society, associations, individuals, researchers and all those interested in the issue, with the intention of promoting a systemic and inclusive approach to fighting food poverty.

Understanding food insecurity

The phenomenon of food insecurity, or food poverty, is complex and multidimensional. It is not limited to material or economic deprivation, nor does it end with malnutrition, but involves aspects of social, relational and physical exclusion, as well as affecting psychological well-being, causing stigma and compromising people's dignity. It should also be considered as one of the many forms of poverty, often associated with other conditions of deprivation such as housing, health, educational, employment and energy poverty.

Food insecurity, in a broader sense, also includes forms of malnutrition influenced by poor food environments, which may include high costs of healthy and ecological food, poor nutritional education and food deserts. Such barriers make it difficult for the entire population to access a well-balanced and quality diet.

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Measuring food insecurity

To measure food insecurity, it is necessary to adopt a multidisciplinary approach and consider all of the dimensions listed above. It is necessary to assess economic, physical and relational access to food, nutritional and psychological effects, social exclusion and decent access to food. The measurement should guide policy choices, enabling informed and targeted interventions. It is crucial that the public sector contributes, directly or indirectly, to the regular collection of these data (not only to occasional investigations) and that this information becomes public and accessible to everyone.

Tackling food insecurity

The ways to address food insecurity must be multiple but guided by a unified vision. First and foremost, it is essential to affirm the **right to food**, understood as the right to an adequate and decent diet that respects nutritional and socio-cultural needs and contributes to the fulfilment of individual desires and capacities. This right must be the guiding principle for transforming the entire food system making it sustainable for the environment and fair for the people.

Currently, our food system is "broken" or "sick" as it is often enunciated in major international contexts such as the United Nations. The cheapest products are often those with the greatest environmental impact, largely due to intensive farming practices that exploit workers to reduce production costs. These same foods are also detrimental to health, contributing to problems such as overweight and obesity.

From this perspective, the strategy to guarantee the right to food must go beyond the assistance approach, which is limited to the distribution of basic necessities. It must be understood as a re-shaping of the paradigms of production and consumption, guaranteeing a fair and sustainable food system.

It is necessary to pursue the construction of a **food welfare**, an integrated system of tools and policies that guarantee the entire population access to healthy and sustainable food, with the aim of solving the structural problem of food poverty, not just mitigating it. Inspired by the Italian healthcare model, it must operate on several levels, with **political actions that start at the national level and extend to the local one**, in a subsidiarity perspective.

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Among the **economic measures** to be taken, food welfare should intervene with income support policies, such as the introduction of a universal food income or a "purchasing card". In parallel, action should be taken on improving the **food environment**, for example through:

- Increasing the quality of food in public contexts: improve the food supply and distribution of meals in school, hospital and prison canteens.
- Increasing access points to healthy food: expanding the presence of public canteens, restaurants, bars, markets and supermarkets that are accessible to all and non-stigmatising, i.e. not reserved only for people in economic difficulty. These places should offer healthy and sustainable food at affordable prices throughout the territory, avoiding the formation of food deserts.
- Reduction of food waste: in public spaces, surplus food could be redistributed to the entire population, helping to reduce waste.
- Provision of "food services": create spaces where the population can access services such as nutrition and psychological desks, food education courses and collective kitchens for workshop activities.

Food welfare can become an engine of transformation for the entire food system of a territory, by favouring the use of local, short-chain, fresh and sustainable products, reducing waste, and promoting food education.

The implementation of an effective food welfare will contribute significantly to poverty reduction, easing the burden on current forms of food assistance. With a system that ensures access to healthy and sustainable food for all, the need for social assistance interventions such as food distributions or social canteens will decrease.

Current forms of assistance, such as the distribution of food parcels, solidarity emporiums and social canteens, should be reserved for emergency situations (such as crises or catastrophes) or extreme poverty, becoming targeted instruments rather than structural responses to the management of widespread poverty. However, these tools need profound improvement to guarantee people's dignity. It is crucial to offer beneficiaries a choice of food, to expand the offer with healthier, local, fresh, culturally appropriate and sustainable products, overcoming the stigmatising link with food surpluses.

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Initiatives should evolve towards the form of solidarity emporiums, trying to avoid them becoming places exclusively dedicated to the vulnerable population. The public sector has a key role to play in supporting these activities, contributing with logistical resources, space, personnel, purchase of food and coordination of interventions, to avoid the formation of possible "solidarity deserts".

A necessary action is the reformulation of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the National Deprived Fund (Fondo Nazionale Indigenti - FNI) to ensure sufficient, varied, culturally appropriate, sustainable and nutritionally adequate food distribution. Furthermore, the unpredictability of distributions must be avoided. Local governments can supplement the food supply with complementary purchases, thus favouring local agricultural enterprises.

Food assistance must evolve into a pathway aimed at re-establishing people's autonomy. It is not simply a matter of providing food, but of developing tools that, integrated with job opportunities and social reintegration measures, make it possible to overcome the condition of poverty with a view to a holistic care approach. In this context, food takes on a crucial role: from a simple material support to a lever for individual and collective **empowerment**. It becomes a means of actively involving beneficiaries, for instance through participation in activities related to food production, distribution or processing.

These activities should not fall entirely on the non-profit and voluntary sectors but be supported by the public sector to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. An integrated territorial welfare requires the strengthening of links between food interventions and social services to create a structured network. By easing the administrative burden on the non-profit sector, the latter will be able to focus on social promotion and innovation of initiatives, rather than filling the gaps of public policies.

References

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FOOD WELFARE

1 INCOME

Food welfare should integrate economic measures with interventions aimed at improving the food environment. Economic measures include the establishment of a universal food income or a "food purchasing card".

2 FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Increase the quality of food in public places (schools, hospitals, prisons), create accessible supply chains, reduce food waste by redistributing surpluses to citizens, create 'food services' (food education courses, collective kitchens, etc.)

3 INNOVATING THE STATUS QUO

Current forms of assistance should be reserved for emergency situations, while evolving in modalities that ensure dignity and provide healthy, local, culturally appropriate and sustainable food.

4 EMPOWERMENT

Food assistance should be part of a pathway to re-establish the person's autonomy. Food becomes a tool for empowerment, involving the beneficiaries in food activities.

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