

Foreword

The Bes Report is an in-depth portrait of the state of the country, carefully portrayed by official statistics from the perspective of the well-being of its citizens.

Well-being is, or should be, the ultimate goal of policies.

A challenging, sometimes arduous goal, especially when circumstances are adverse: a devastating pandemic, an environmental crisis, threats to peace in Europe.

Created in continuity with the experiences of the influential Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission of 2009, Eurostat's *Beyond GDP* programme and the OECD's *Better Life Index*, as a widely-participated project, the BES, with its indicators on Italy which have now reached the considerable figure of 153, represents a fine and comprehensive tool for measuring the degree to which policies actually produce changes in people's lives.

The data are organised in the major domains of health, education and training, labour, economic well-being, social relations, politics and institutions, safety, subjective well-being, landscape and cultural heritage, environment, innovation, research and creativity, and quality of services.

The BES project, which has led the country to have a continuously evolving system of measures of real progress, broken down by age group, gender, increasingly detailed territories, by educational qualification, makes it possible to give timely and comprehensive answers to the simple yet very difficult question, "What is life like in Italy?".

Above all, it makes it possible to highlight areas where inequalities do emerge and to identify the most disadvantaged groups, thereby addressing the demand for targeted policies on the basis of solid evidence.

The overall picture is rather complex and still overshadowed by the pandemic, both in demographic terms, with a significant reduction in life expectancy at birth in 2020 at the national level, which has reached dramatic peaks in some territories and, as far as the economy is concerned (one example for all is the sharp drop in employment in cultural and creative activities). In terms of the environment, there has been a reduction in CO₂ emissions as a result of the prolonged closure of economic activities and the reduction in PM_{2.5} pollution, which remains, however, high and without significant improvement. Many gaps have been maintained, or even widened: from life expectancy at birth, which recovers to a large extent in the North in 2021 but decreases again in the South and Islands, to avoidable mortality, which remains higher in many Southern regions; from expenditure of Municipalities for culture, for which the territorial gap is markedly in favour of the Centre-North, to the impact of forest fires and illegal building, which is stronger in the Southern regions.

The pandemic has mostly resulted in the deterioration of well-being of the female population e.g., in levels of mental well-being and employment, especially for mothers with young children.

But it has also been the children, adolescents and the very young who have paid a very high tribute to the pandemic and the restrictions imposed to fight infection. They are the ones who require the greatest attention from policies today and in the years to come, and in this sense the data and corresponding indicators leave no doubt.

The psychological well-being of 14-19-year-olds worsened in 2021. The score for this age group (measured on a scale of hundredths) fell to 66.6 for girls (- 4.6 points compared to 2020) and 74.1 for boys (- 2.4 points compared to 2020).

In the pandemic years, the 14-19-year-olds experienced a significant deterioration in life satisfaction, with the percentage of the very satisfied falling from 56.9% in 2019 to 52.3% in 2021.

While dissatisfied adolescents with a low mental health score were 3.2% of the total in 2019, by 2021 this percentage had doubled (6.2%). This is about 220,000 14-19-year-olds who say they are dissatisfied with their lives and, at the same time, are in a condition of low psychological well-being. On the other hand, the same phenomena of bullying, violence, and vandalism by the very young - which took centre-stage in the news in recent months - are extreme manifestations of widespread and, perhaps, not transitory suffering and restlessness.

In this same age group, sedentary behaviour has risen from 18.6 to 20.9%, due to the inability of many to engage in continuous sporting activity. In addition, high proportions of alcohol consumers at risk were observed among 14-17-year-olds (23.6%).

Among young people, for whom peer relationships are of the utmost importance for harmonious development, satisfaction with relationships with friends has also tangibly decreased. The share of 14-19-year-olds who are very satisfied has lost 6.5 points in two years. Between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of 14-24-year-olds who say they meet up with friends at least once a week dropped from 89.8% to 73.8%. In this age group, the percentage of those who say they are very satisfied with their family relations also fell (- 4 points). It is not difficult to guess the reasons for this disaffection. In 2021, the prolonged difficulties for parents and children in sharing home spaces - even for working and attending classes -, the reduced possibility of spending time with study companions due to the alternation of face-to-face and distance learning for a good part of the school or academic year, the limitations in the possibility of doing sports and recreational activities have contributed to a sort of desertification of affection, which has eroded the foundations of young people's satisfaction.

The decrease (from 86.1% to 78.3%) in the share of 14-19-year-olds in the regions of Southern Italy - who say they have relatives, friends or neighbours they can rely on - is striking and disheartening. Above all, for young people in this age group the possibility of counting on friends has decreased from 78.4% to 74.8%.

Voluntary activity, which had remained stable in the first year of the pandemic, declined by almost 5 points among 14-19-year-olds in 2021. Between 2019 and 2021, social participation also fell sharply, by about 11 points in the 14-24 age group.

On the eve of the pandemic, Italy had not yet recovered from the deep losses in terms of the youth employment rate linked to the economic recession and it had increased the gap with the European average. In 2019, in fact, the employment rate of 25-34 year-olds in Italy continued to remain the lowest of all European countries, with a particularly wide gap for girls. With the arrival of the pandemic, the situation of young people in the labour market has deteriorated further, especially for women, whose employment rate has suffered the greatest losses.

Italy has a sad record in Europe for the number of young people between 15 and 29 years old who are no longer in education or training or even engaged in a job, known as NEET: *Not in Employment, Education or Training*. Another critical factor is represented by the high number of early leavers: the share of young people aged 18-24 who leave the education and training system without having obtained a diploma or qualification, also known as *Early*

Leavers from Education and Training (ELET), in 2021 was 12.7% in Italy, a higher value than the one set as a maximum limit at European level (10%), already reached on average by the EU27.

For the most educated and qualified young people, Italy still does not offer adequate opportunities. That is why, despite the restrictions on mobility imposed during the first year of the pandemic and the uncertainty that characterised 2020, emigrations abroad by young Italian graduates have intensified compared to 2019, in stark contrast to the transfers of residence of the population as a whole. The main directions of the flows of young graduates continue to be towards foreign countries and from the South to the Centre and North. The migration balance of Italian citizens aged 25-39 with a university degree closes with a balance of transfers of residence to and from abroad of - 14,528 units. In particular, the South and Islands lost 21,782 young graduates in 2020 alone.

Youth policies, in an ageing country like Italy, have rarely received priority attention and adequate resources. The picture provided by the Bes indicators suggests that it is time to change strategy. Outside any rhetoric, it can be said that policies for the welfare of young people are, today more than ever, policies for the welfare of the whole country. The interventions to be implemented cannot, by definition, be emergency ones, but, on the contrary, they must rebuild the structural foundations of the well-being of children and young people. Alongside a serious investment in the entire school and university system - not only for buildings or equipment, which in any case need to be brought up to acceptable levels of quality, but also and above all to support the employees and their skills - it is certainly essential to act to support and strengthen the networks of territorial services for culture, sport and leisure time to be lived as part of sociality and shared civic responsibilities. And, *last but not least*, the issue of employment, especially for young women, can no longer be postponed.

The opportunities offered by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to systematically address this deep demand for change are unprecedented in the country's recent past.

Our hope is that policies will respond with intelligence, generosity and systematicity, making it possible, as early as the next edition of the Bes, for the indicators on well-being to measure a widespread improvement, especially for our young people, to whom we are socially and morally indebted.

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