

■ ITALY

Italy: No Country for Young People

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The global economic crisis has affected the weakest members of Italian society, and especially those dependent on the welfare system, which is being threatened by cuts as part of the Government's public debt reduction policy. These cuts will extend the number of people suffering from poverty and exclusion. But there is a deeper and structural form of exclusion in Italy, one that challenges our future. It is the exclusion of young people – all young people, beyond membership of any social group. Their number is constantly decreasing and they are being increasingly marginalised. If we do not take action soon, our future will be at risk.

Introduction

Life expectancy in Italy has increased: men now live to 78.3 years on average and women to 83.8. According to Istat, in 2050, Europeans could have a life expectancy of 86 years. Over the last century, life expectancy has already almost doubled in Italy. One out of five Italians is now over 65, and the so-called 'great elderly' (over 80 years) represent 5.3% of the Italian population. This is definitely a positive achievement based on an increase in living standards; between 1981 and 2007 alone the average age has increased by more than 5 years. However, this achievement is accompanied by a low birth rate and Istat projects that by 2050 young people (up to 14 years) will make up only 12.9% of the population, the active population will shrink to 54.2% and the population over 64 will increase to one in three. In short, the "elderly dependency ratio will double" (Istat 2010a, pp 181–182).

Many of today's young people, who will be tomorrow's elderly, do not work, do not pay contributions to pensions and insurance schemes, and still live with their parents even when they become adults. Statisticians have coined an acronym to define them: NEET meaning, not in education, employment or training. In 2009, the number of NEETs had grown to over 2 million – 21.2% of the 15 to 29 year-old population (Istat 2010a, p 186)

According to the latest data published by Istat in June 2010, youth unemployment in the first quarter of 2010 has reached 30%, an increase of more than 3% compared to March 2009. There are also 3 million people engaged

in informal or irregular employment, many of whom are in the agricultural sector, but also in services, trade and tourism. Many of these people are young. It is clear that the economic crisis has worsened the problems of the labour market and penalised young people in particular as holders of precarious and short-term labour contracts. The inactivity rate is also growing, standing at 37.6% in 2009. This rate not only includes students and homemakers, but also "the discouraged, those who have no fixed or temporary employment, but are not even trying to get one" (Istat 2010a, p 120). These are alarming figures, and well describe the fatigue of the younger generation in finding a path to autonomy that allows them full participation in community life.

Young Italian graduates are struggling to find employment. The findings of Almalaurea for the first two months of 2009 show a decrease of 23% in the demand for graduates. Young people are often employed in short-term, informal collaborations, which do not necessarily lead to a permanent position: 73.1% of young people who at the end of 2006 were employed under a precarious contract of collaboration were still in the same position after one year (Almalaurea 2010). Young people also tend to earn less, and the gap in earnings is increasing. A report released by the National Youth Forum and CNEL found that in 2003 the average gross earnings of young people aged between 24 and 30 years was €20,252, compared with €25,032 earned by people over 50; in 2007, the gap widened significantly to €22,121 for young people under 30 and €29,976 for people over 50 (Forum Nazionale dei Giovani and CNEL 2009).

Among temporary workers, youth and women earn wages below two-thirds of the median. This is the identikit of the 'working poor': low-wage earners who are highly vulnerable in economic and contractual terms. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, there are 3 million working poor in Italy, approximately 15% of the total number employed.

Atypical contracts, combined with low wages and the lack of support offered by the Italian State in the event of unemployment, are creating insecurity. The family has become the only social safety net for young people, which is having considerable impact on their autonomy and on the loss of social ties. It is no coincidence that the prolonged cohabitation of children with their parents is largely for economic reasons

(40.2%): in 1983 the proportion of youth aged 18 to 34, unmarried, still living with their families was 49%; in 2000 it increased to 60.2%, standing at 58.6% in 2009 (Istat 2010a, pp 183–184).

The situation will persist until family income levels allow it to change. But what happens when the layoffs of the 'fathers' becomes unemployment or, worse, inactivity? More and more unemployed people are becoming 'inactive' (i.e., they are no longer looking for work). In 2009, 37 to 44% of those categorised as unemployed became inactive, and inactivity increased more than unemployment (by 329,000 people). The fall in household disposable income¹ (2.8% in 2009) has already had consequences: between 2008 and 2009 the proportion of "families unable to deal with unforeseen costs" increased from 32 to 33.4%, those in arrears with the payment of debts other than mortgages from 10.5 to 13.6% (among those who have debts) and those who are in debt from 14.8 to 16.4% (Istat 2010a, p 155).

No wonder a growing number of young people are going abroad to seek employment or to obtain jobs that fit their skills, acquired through years of study, and that offer adequate remuneration. Fondazione Migrantes reports that over half of Italians abroad – about 2 million people – are under 35 years and have a rewarding working and social life. Fondazione Migrantes also reported that 5 years after graduation, 52 out of 100 Italians working abroad consider returning to Italy "very unlikely" (Fondazione Migrantes 2008).

Other processes of exclusion linked to social status also contribute to the social exclusion of youth. The introduction of compulsory education has cancelled social differences in the achievement of high school education. But, as noted by Istat, the achievement of higher education levels continues to be hampered by a strong inequality linked to social class of family of origin (Istat 2010a, p 190). Neither the school, therefore, nor new technologies help young people break the mechanism of a locked society.

Young migrants and second generation migrants excluded by law

'Second generation immigrants', i.e. children of immigrants, often born in Italy, are slightly more likely to be among the vulnerable youth. Eyed

¹ Disposable income refers to the amount of income that remains after taxes have been paid.

with hope as a way of mitigating the progressive ageing of the population, children of foreign origin in Italy numbered 862,453 in 2008, representing 22.2% of the total foreign population in the country and this number is growing.

Second generation immigrants face various problems related to the relationship between their families and the communities in which they live. Almost always they have interests, lifestyles and aspirations quite similar to their native Italian peers. They usually do not accept the socioeconomic position of their parents and target highly skilled jobs, trying to gain social recognition, which may have eluded their families. Although feeling equal to other children of the same age, they have specificities arising from their family cultural system. Even though their unique conditions can give rise to opportunities for wealth and social mobility, they also produce discomfort. Second generation immigrants often face complex problems relating to solitude while constructing their identity and are at greater risk of school failure. With regards to employment, they face an imbalance between their expectations and their ability to realise them, mainly because of discrimination, weak educational processes and a shortage of social capital. They also face difficulties in accessing opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. In particular, the negation of citizenship and lack of political representation of immigrants in Italy are obstacles to the social inclusion of second generation migrant youth.

The integration of these young people into the social fabric of the country depends on various factors and is a challenge that can only be addressed through farsighted and well-timed policies. As integration policies seem to be more effective during childhood and adolescence, schools play a vital role in creating a truly inclusive society. However, the messages conveyed by the Government about the path of social integration are not encouraging. In many cases, the presence of immigrants' children in schools is considered more as a problem to be solved than an opportunity to create cross-cultural communities.

Although the European Parliament has recommended to its Member States to "avoid the creation of schools as ghettos, or the creation of special classes only for immigrants' children", the Italian Parliament approved in October 2008 a motion (I-00033 Cota) of the Northern League party relating to the admission at school of foreign students who do not speak Italian or speak it poorly. The motion approved at the Deputies Chamber of the Italian Parliament, contains some very controversial aspects and binds the Government to:

...review the access system of foreign students to the school system at any level, promoting their entrance by having to pass tests and specific evaluations. In addition, to establish 'introductory classes', which allow the students who do not pass the above mentioned tests to learn Italian, in order to prepare their entry in permanent classes.

This text also binds the Government to "a distribution of foreign students proportional to the total number of alumni per class". To establish a fixed or low percentage as maximum allowed per class could have completely contrary effects to integration, but the measure was paradoxically presented to the public as a useful way to promote "full integration" and "to avoid the risk" of classes made up of only foreign alumni. This provision has yet to be approved by the Senate, the second Chamber of the Italian Parliament.

At the same time, the law that regulates the acquisition of citizenship for the children of immigrants reflects problems relating to the conception of social inclusion by the Italian State. For the second generation, obtaining citizenship is a long and complicated journey. Law no. 91 of 1992 provides that:

- Children who are born in Italy to non Italian parents who are legal residents can obtain Italian citizenship if registered at the Registry and if they have legally resided in Italy until reaching 18. In this case they have to submit to the Registry a relevant declaration requesting Italian citizenship before the age of 19. If they do not comply with the above-mentioned terms, they will have to apply for residence and reside in Italy for at least 3 years.
- Children who are not born in Italy to non Italian parents obtain citizenship by residence (10 years minimum plus a proof of income), or by getting married to an Italian citizen.

It is expected that children of immigrants can receive Italian citizenship if their parents manage to obtain it, but only if the child is still a minor when the parent becomes Italian and if the two live in Italy. Immigrants who live in Italy are not entitled to vote, a further denial of their rights and a noticeable factor in social exclusion.

Youth participation in an ageing society

As a large proportion of Italy's youth are unemployed, or at best work in marginal positions earning little, leadership in recent years has aged relentlessly. An analysis conducted on the 'Who's who' database of top public and private

managers indicates a significant increase in the age of the Italian ruling class: it went from an average of 56.8 years to 60.8 years. The power system is ageing year by year in all areas: new members of parliament have an average age of 51 years. Since 1992, members of the Deputies Chamber of the Italian Parliament under 35 years have never reached the threshold of 10% of those elected to the House (except for in the XII Legislature, 12.4%). Indeed, in the 1990s, there seemed to be a momentum for young people, but in the current decade it has definitely been broken. In Parliament, youth between 25 to 35 years old, who constitute 18.7% of the adult population, are represented only by one third. (Forum Nazionale dei Giovani and CNEL 2009)

Is this a cause or a consequence of the fact that among young people there is also a growing distrust of politics? In just 12 months, the number of those who "never inform themselves on politics" upturned sharply. Among 18 to 19 year olds it increased three and a half points: 32 to 35.4%. Increases between ages 20 to 24 and 25 to 34 were less marked, although significant. Most of them are "not interested in politics". Many made their "distrust in politics" explicit (28.3% of 25–34 years old), and consider politics "too complicated" (Istat 2010b).

Despite these attitudes, forms of participation such as 'active citizenship', in particular in associations, seem to be able to stimulate the individual growth of young people and foster a greater responsibility and awareness of the problems of the community. In short, active citizenship allows young people to become aware citizens and contribute to political, social and economic life. Young people are becoming increasingly involved in volunteering, youth exchange and associations, conscious of the value of these experiences.

On the other hand, compared to formal education, which is increasingly losing its character as 'universal' and is only interested in providing young people with technical expertise for their future recruitment in companies, informal education is playing a progressively important role in fostering the formation of critical knowledge and human growth, and in empowering people.

According to the Foundation for Italian volunteers (FIVOL), 12.5% of people under 30 dedicate themselves to volunteer work in Italy, representing 21.5% of all volunteers. However, their participation, both as individuals and in associated forms, is not fully recognised and supported by institutions (FIVOL 2006).

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