

## **Youth Policy Brief**

Under the III World Higher Education Conference (WHEC 2022)

### **Towards Sustainable Futures**

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[Anticipating Systems]

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### **Abstract**

The Italian Alliance For Sustainable Development Group on Youth organizations intend to collaborate, according to the UNESCO guidelines, to create holistic youth policies in order to address social, environmental and economic problems according to the values of Sustainable Development. In particular, the goal is to share and develop the culture of the future on the basis of programs aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue, universal access to new information and communication technologies, as well as the dissemination of scientific knowledge necessary to prevent the negative effects of climate change.

In this context, it is urgent to promote and share methods and tools to orient possible and preferable futures, in order to broaden the perspective of today's young people and establish a structured dialogue for the Alpha generation and the future ones.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on progress towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals throughout the world. Therefore, three lines of proposals are outlined: social, economic and participatory and democratic development policies' proposals.

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on progress towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals throughout the world. The social and economic repercussions have been exacerbated over the past two years: inequalities within and between countries are increasing and pose a further risk to the multilateral actions needed to ensure greater sustainability for all. We can no longer waste time, and we need to marshal all our efforts to bring about change. The primary objective of sustainable development is to preserve our planet and its people, and to protect their wellbeing, including on behalf of future generations. Human society is running into serious constraints: regarding the economic system, unjust and unequal social structures, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. To address these constraints, we need a transition - indeed several transitions - towards greater economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Our responsibility to guarantee a state of planetary health that safeguards our own future and that of future generations must be a priority objective for everyone. The choices we make today can ensure a truly sustainable future for our societies, but the time available to reverse the trend is, unfortunately, increasingly short.

Europe has launched the Green Deal, with the stated aim that the rest of the world should follow in a sustainable and socially just transition. The von der Leyen Commission has placed the 2030 Agenda at the heart of its action, and with the launch of Next Generation EU has equipped itself with new financial instruments to support the Union in combating climate change and in the digital modernisation of the industrial system and society. The approval of the new Climate Law by the European Council and Parliament has set targets for the decarbonisation process, which will be implemented via precise and stringent measures. The Afghan and Ukraine tragedies have also triggered an important reflection on the role Europe should play in the global arena, giving substance to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Also, the G20 summit's Italian presidency chose to focus attention on "People, Planet, Prosperity", in keeping up with the 2030 Agenda and with the aim of guaranteeing a sustainable, inclusive recovery from the crisis caused by the pandemic and responding to the challenges of climate change and global inequality.

In this picture, the work of UNESCO is fundamental. In particular, its commitment to build the conditions to guarantee international peace and the prosperity of peoples by promoting intercultural dialogue, respect for the environment and good practices related to sustainable development. Today, UNESCO works to create holistic policies capable of addressing social, environmental and economic problems according to the values of Sustainable Development through programs aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue, universal access to new information and communication technologies and the dissemination of scientific knowledge, in order to prevent the negative effects of climate change.

## Educational Poverty: a Definition

The global health emergency has had, as noted above, a great impact on children and young people, often producing a condition of educational poverty that is bound to affect learning, increasing inequality and school dropout.

By educational poverty, we mean the process that limits children's right to an education, thereby depriving them of the opportunity to learn and to master skills necessary for their own future. It is a concept closely linked to that of material poverty. Many children who come from families in difficulty often struggle to do well at school and find themselves with fewer opportunities to participate in cultural, social and recreational activities.

Educational poverty is an invisible poverty, never denounced, but present and affecting the ability of each child to discover and cultivate his or her own inclinations and talents. The consequences are in the children's learning and therefore in the risk of entering the vicious circle of poverty.

## **Evaluating the Impact of Public Policies to Support Youth Development**

### **Sustainable Development in the Italian Constitution**

The ordinary and extraordinary intervention of the government to deal with what can no longer be defined as just a temporary youth emergency, implies a preliminary measurement not only of the fragility of the system in which the young person finds himself fighting, but also of the persistence and intensity of the factors that contribute to generating it. On February 2021, Italy's Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, reaffirmed the commitment to insert sustainable development in the Italian constitution, as proposed by the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS) since its foundation: one year later, the Alliance has welcomed with great satisfaction the introduction in the Italian Constitution of fundamental principles for the protection of the environment and of future generations. The Chamber of Deputies definitively approved, on february 2022, the amendment of Articles 9 and 41 of the Constitution. Article 9 states that "The Republic (...) protects the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of future generations" and that "the law of the State governs the ways and forms of animal protection". In article 41 it is now stated that "Private economic initiative (...) cannot be carried out in contrast with social utility or in such a way as to damage security, freedom, human dignity, health, the environment" and that "the law determines the appropriate programs and controls so that public and private economic activity can be directed and coordinated for social and environmental purposes". Commitment to this constitutional amendment has always been one of ASviS's flagship proposals, reaffirmed in every annual report since the Alliance was set up. Specifically, as it has already taken place in various other countries, this reform enshrines the Principle of Intergenerational Justice in the constitution itself, as a general legal basis on which to direct public policy.

### **Measures for Younger Generations in the Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)**

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan recalls the enormous responsibility of allocations and the necessary qualitative implementation of interventions and reforms towards the young and very young generations, present and future, for recovery and reduction of the generation gap. Even more so if we add that the vast majority of resources will be drawn from "debt". Out of 191.5 billion euros, only about 69 billion will be disbursed as grants. So, as the European Commission says, "the choices we make today will define the future of the next generation" and "the massive investments needed to revive our economies must lighten the burden on them, not weigh it down".

However, the issue of responsibility for present and future generations is not just a mere principle that applies and should inspire the entire Plan. On January 22, 2021, the European Commission defined a set of guidelines, created to be made available to Member States and to allow a coherent and systemic drafting of National Recovery and Resilience Plans. These guidelines underlined in particular a system of articulation of the plans by thematic pillars, which in our NRRP are similar to the now well-known "Six Missions". However, Italy's NRP lacks a fundamental pillar. Among the missions included in the Italian NRP, none is specifically dedicated to policies for the next generation since youth, like the South and gender equality, are generically considered in the Plan as cross-cutting priorities, while some interventions coming from missions 1, 2, 4 and 5 have been indicated as "direct interventions in support of youth employment" or "indirect interventions that will produce transversal benefits also in the generational sphere".

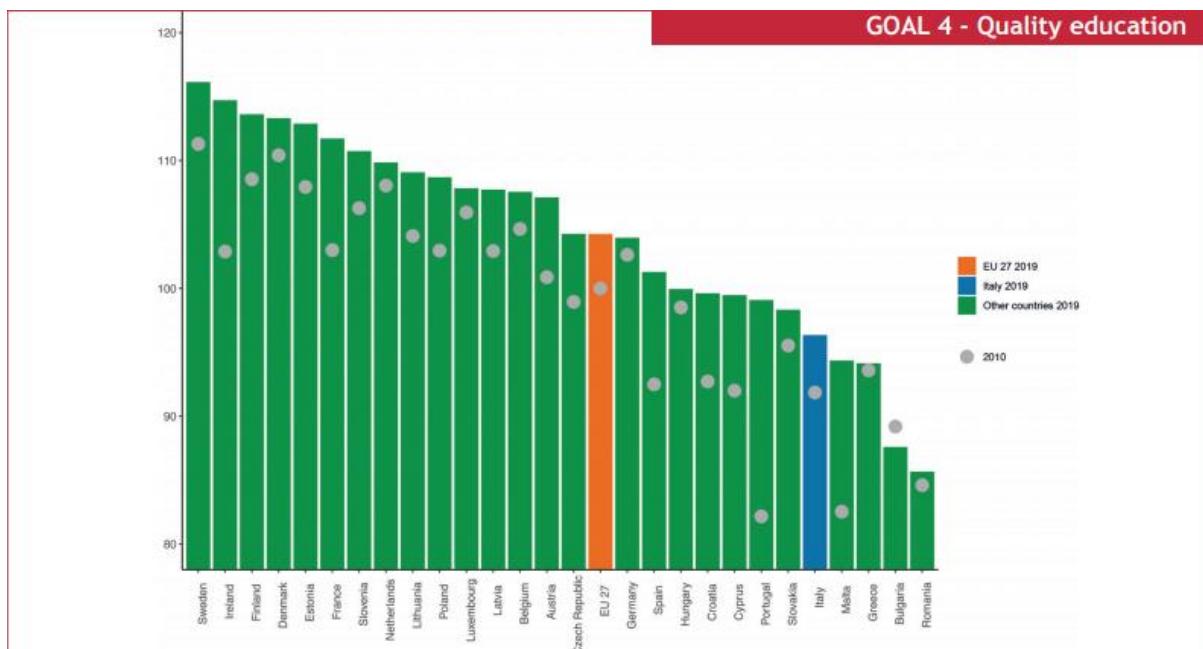
On the other hand, the pandemic emergency itself has highlighted how there is a pre-existing generational criticality that the health crisis has only made even more evident and, in some ways, even more profound. While the health consequences have had and continue to have a greater impact on the older segment of the population, the socio-economic effects of the pandemic are - and will be - more evident for the younger generations. This conclusion is also supported by a study conducted by the OECD, which highlights the so-called "generational asymmetry" of the Covid-19 crisis in social and economic terms.

Even though there is no specific "mission" dedicated specifically to the younger generations, in the NRRP young people are the recipients of particular direct or transversal and indirect interventions that are part of several missions included in the same document.

### Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. A Focus on Goal 4 and Goal 8

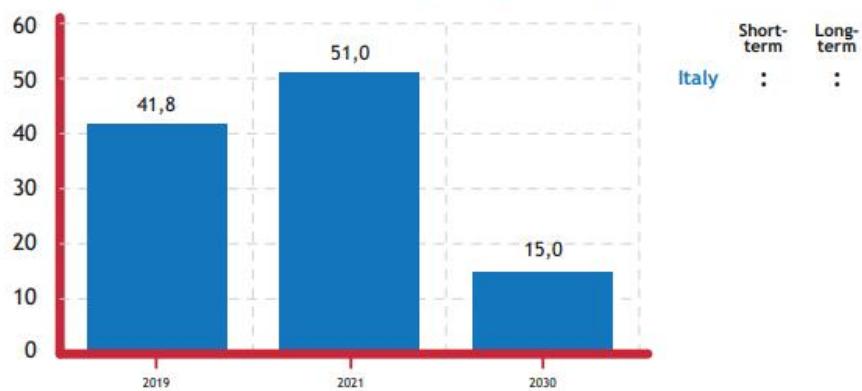
#### Goal 4

Goal 4 shows large disparities between countries, with a gap of 30.5 points between the best (Sweden) and the worst (Romania) European countries. Portugal registers the most significant improvement due to a large reduction in early school leaving. Bulgaria, on the other hand, is the only country to register a poorer performance in 2019 than in 2010, due to a deterioration in students' skills, which stood at 46% in 2018, more than double the European average. In 2019, Italy registered one of the most critical situations in the EU, mainly due to a lower share of university graduates (around 28 % compared to the EU average of around 39%) and a higher share of people without a high school diploma (37.8% in Italy compared to the EU average of 21.6%).



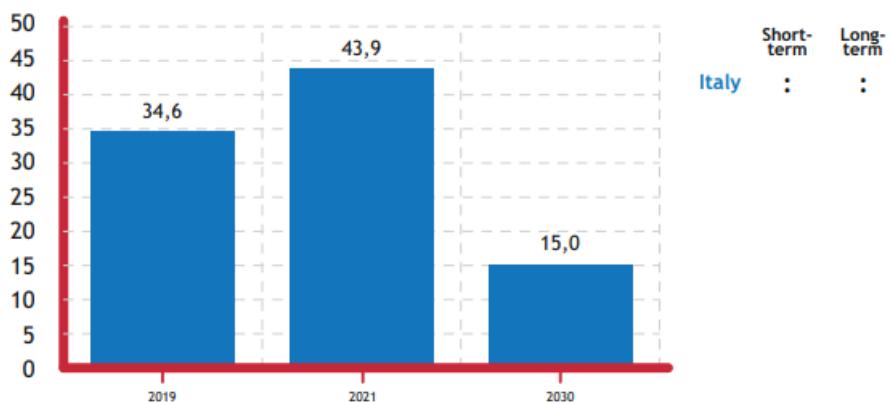
Between 2019 and 2021, in Italy there has been a worrying increase in the proportion of students of 18 and 19 years old who fail to attain basic numeracy and reading skills (up 9.2 percentage points in the case of numeracy skills and 9.3 percentage points in the case of reading skills). This reflects the negative impact of remote learning. Although it is not possible, given the lack of historical data series, to assess Italy's progress towards achieving the European targets, it is clear that, if the increase seen between 2019 and 2021 continues in future years, Italy will not only fail to achieve the targets but will actually head in the opposite direction.

**Target 4.1 - By 2030, reduce the share of students who have not attained basic mathematical skills to below 15% (18-19 year olds)**



Target source: European education area | Source: ISTAT | Unit of measurement: %

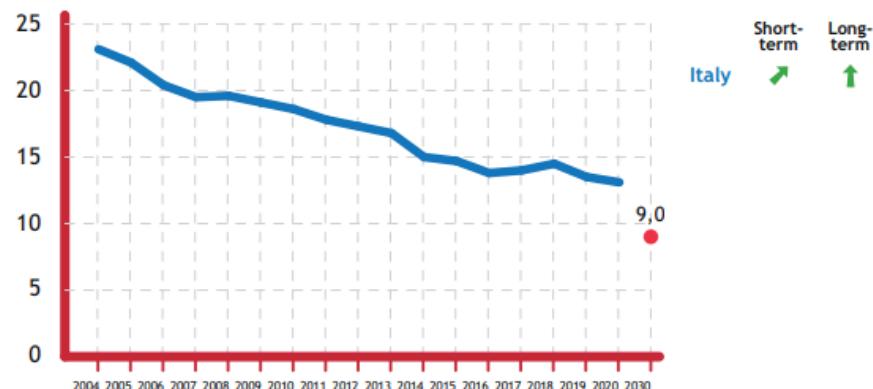
**Target 4.1 - By 2030, reduce the share of students who have not attained basic reading skills to below 15% (18-19 year olds)**



Target source: European education area | Source: ISTAT | Unit of measurement: %

Another key Target for this Goal regards the aim of reducing the share of students who leave education and training early by 9%, a target set for the first time in the European strategy for 2020 and reconfirmed in the National Reform Programme. Italy has shown continuous improvement in this indicator throughout the period in question. Between 2004 and 2020, early leaver rate is down 10 percentage points and is on track to achieve the Target set. As noted above, the pandemic and the resulting use of remote learning have not had a negative impact on this indicator, but have had a particularly negative impact on students' skills.

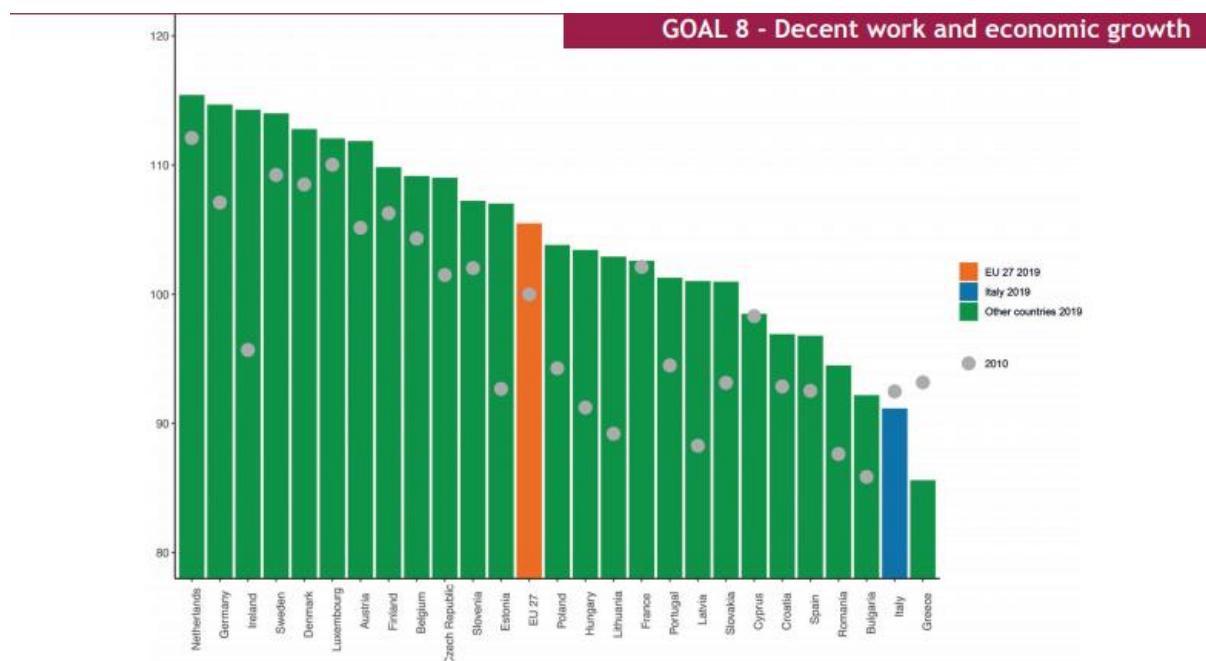
**Target 4.1 - By 2030, reduce the share of students who are early leavers from education and training to below 9% (18-24 year olds)**



Target source: European education area | Source: ISTAT | Unit of measurement: %

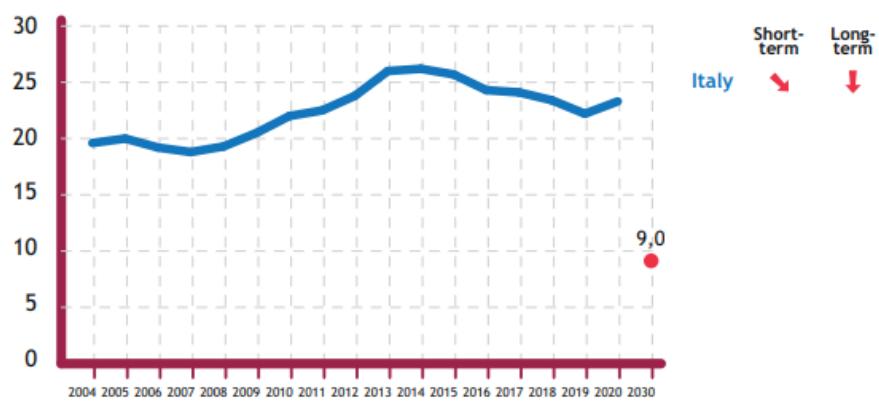
## Goal 8

Goal 8 shows a large disparity of 29.8 points between the best (the Netherlands) and the worst (Greece) European country. Ireland shows the most significant improvement thanks to an increase in GDP per capita (up 63.8% from 2010 to 2019) and a reduction in the share of NEETs (down 10.3 percentage points). On the other hand, critical issues were revealed in Greece, which saw deterioration of almost all the indicators analysed. Italy, together with Greece, is the only European country to register a lower level in 2019 than in 2010, ranking it in second to last position in the last year observed. This is due to higher shares of NEETs (22.2% in 2019 compared with the EU average of 12.6%) and involuntary part-time workers (65.8% compared with the EU average of 26.5%) registered in Italy, and a lower employment rate (63.5% in 2019 compared with the EU average of 73.2%).



In particular, in Italy Target 8.6 envisaged as an intermediate objective for 2020 to "substantially reduce the percentage of unemployed young people who are not in education or training".

**Target 8.6 - By 2030, reduce the number of NEETs to below 9% (15-29 year olds)**



Target source: European pillar of social rights | Source: ISTAT | Unit of measurement: %

The share of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not in education or in employment has risen over time. Between 2004 and 2020, the ratio worsened by 3.7 percentage points, moving Italy away from the European target. From 2014 to 2019, there was a trend reversal that reduced the ratio by 4 percentage points. It remains to be seen if the increase in the ratio (up 1.1 percentage points) in 2020, due to the negative impact of the pandemic, will be reversed by the economic recovery in progress in 2021. This will determine whether or not the short-term assessment will be positive or negative.

### Designing a National Youth Employment Plan

The problem of youth unemployment and, more generally, of the consistent generation gap in Italy remains very serious, with the number of young NEETs (who do not study, are not trained and do not work) extremely high, both in absolute terms and relative to the population and phenomena of brain drain increasingly consistent, especially in the southern regions.

This situation has heavy social repercussions, which extend beyond the numbers of employment and loss of economic output: unemployed young people aggravate the already precarious situation in Italy in terms of poverty and inequality (which are part of Goals 1 and 10 of the 2030 Agenda), in addition to not contributing to social security, increasing the burden on active workers and the overall economic and social system (Eurofound data).

In addition, there are significant differences in terms of gender (which falls under Goal 5 of the Agenda) and territory, with peaks in youth unemployment concentrated in southern Italy. Lastly, the increasingly difficult transition from school to work has a direct impact on Goal 4 of the Agenda.

The definition of a Pact for youth employment is the basis for the only indicator foreseen for target 8. b of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This indicator aims to ascertain the existence and implementation of a national strategy for youth employment, either as a specific strategy or as part of a more general strategy for employment. In 2008, the ILO published the corresponding guide for promoting and implementing the Pact. (Guide for the preparation of National Action Plans on Youth Employment.)

In turn, ISTAT provides two sub-indicators of "share of public spending on employment measures and social protection of the unemployed in relation to public spending" and "in relation to GDP", in fact not addressing the specific issue of youth employment but the more general phenomenon.

Finally, as of 2021 the Italian Court of Auditors devotes a specific section to government expenditure (less operating expenses) aimed at achieving the individual targets of Agenda 2030, therefore also Target 8.6, to which only 285 million euros of appropriation has been allocated for 2020, i.e. just over three per thousand of the resources allocated to Goal 8 "decent work and economic growth: encouraging lasting, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all".

As called for in the ILO Plan of Action, it is also necessary to create a more ambitious and comprehensive policy package so that no young person is left behind. A framework of clear and systematized measures from employment to employability, from specific labor market policies to the promotion of entrepreneurship to rights at work.

During the fifth edition of the Sustainable Development Festival, the annual national awareness-raising campaign launched by the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development to promote and spread a culture of sustainability among the Italian society, the Italian Minister on Labour and Social Policies Andrea Orlando committed to initiating work on the Youth Employment Table. He argued in favour of a Pact for Youth Employment as a tool to rationalize and systematize measures with generational impact, to promote an integrated approach to youth strategy and youth policy making. Policies and interventions that can be monitored and evaluated in order to encourage the development of new youth measures and positively influence local policy and planning.

### **European Year of Youth: What More Needs to Be Done?**

The far-reaching effects of the pandemic crisis, coupled with limited access to income support benefits, may further exacerbate the plight of young people who are persistently experiencing a decline in income.

Thus, there is a need to design public administration tools for policymakers to integrate the principle of intergenerational justice into rulemaking and public spending decisions.

According to ASViS, young people, women and all citizens are the actual beneficiaries of any intervention or response. The Alliance will make every effort to act as a spur, as we believe in the universal value of democracy and reaffirm our existential purpose to promote and support the only possible way forward, namely full achievement of the 2030 Agenda. This section includes cross-cutting recommendations that we believe meet this challenge. In addition to these recommendations, we should not neglect the importance of achieving the 21 Targets in the 2030 Agenda, which Italy had committed to achieving by 2020. This was made a priority by all the political forces and for the country as a whole, in order to give substance to the actions of public institutions. A comprehensive and integrated plan is thus urgently needed, including the adoption of a set timetable of actions to make up for lost time.

### **Key Social Proposals**

Ensure that the issue of youth, which is referred to in the Italian NRRP as a cross-cutting theme, is actually considered in the design of all policies. In this regard, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the impact on young people of various measures should be assessed ex ante, with a particular focus on the issue of employment. All legislation should be designed with the interests of

future generations in mind, thereby meeting the ambition of Next Generation EU. Moreover, the National Youth Council should become more important, acting as a catalyst for recommendations on the issue.

### Key Economic Proposals

- Create a working group by the end of this year to draw up a National Employment Plan by the end of 2022, with a priority focus on youth employment, women's employment, and employment in southern Italy, involving key stakeholders from the public and private sectors. The plan should ultimately be inspired by the targets outlined at European level: an employment rate among the adult population of at least 78%, and a number of young NEETs amounting to less than 9%, backed up by the objectives and skills development measures set out below.
- Establish guidelines to achieve the ambitious quantitative targets for skills development (improvement of existing skills) and retraining (training to acquire new skills), defined at European level as the participation of at least 60% of adults in training courses each year. The aim would be to: guide young people into the world of work by promoting learning programmes during and after compulsory schooling, improving the training offered by universities and working closely with the private sector to ensure that training pathways meet labour market needs and are geared to the green, digital and demographic transitions; introduce lifelong learning services to ensure that all age groups have the opportunity to receive the tools they need to re-enter the labour market, thereby reducing the number of so-called "disheartened" people who are unemployed and not looking for work; train and inform citizens about sustainable development issues and basic digital skills.

### Participatory and Democratic Development Policies

- Create effective civil society participation mechanisms, with a special focus on young people, by promoting and coordinating the various civil society participation and consultation bodies already in place, such as the SNSvS review, the Conference on the Future of Europe, and the participatory measures provided for by the European Climate Law, the European Climate Pact and the European Skills Pact. In particular, Parliament has provided for ministries to consult on the NRRP. This innovation should be taken on board and extended to include, among others, the areas mentioned above
- Ensure people's engagement and awareness, with a special focus on young people, by conducting public information and communication initiatives on the importance of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, to be carried out in collaboration with universities, cultural and scientific institutions, associations and private entities involved, in order to accelerate Italy's cultural shift towards sustainable development, to be implemented nationwide, as part of the European Skills Agenda.

### Guidance for Sustainable Futures

It is considered appropriate to activate processes of orientation towards the future through strategic forecasting methods and tools (*Strategic Foresight*) in the contexts that we find inherent in the UNESCO mission, such as:

- *education*, so that every little girl, boy, boy or girl has access to quality education as a fundamental human right and as an essential requirement for the development of personality;
- *intercultural understanding*, also through the protection and safeguarding of sites of exceptional value and beauty registered in the World Heritage Site;
- *scientific cooperation*, to strengthen links between nations and societies in order to monitor and prevent environmental disasters and manage the planet's natural resources;
- *freedom of expression* as an essential condition to guarantee democracy, development and the protection of human dignity.

Specifically, our aim is to promote and share methods and tools to orient possible and preferable futures, in order to broaden the perspective of today's young people and establish a structured dialogue for the Alpha generation and the future ones.

The orientation towards possible and preferable futures will be conveyed by the Strategic Foresight methods imparted by the University of Trento (UNESCO chair) in Italy. Young people are inclined to think in terms of the future, but they need to introduce contexts and ways at least to experience it.

The attitude to think about the future can be developed in the context of heterogeneous working groups, made up of young people of different ages (from 18 to 40 years, according to the EU definition): sharing and the aptitude to work in groups is a basic skills to work with the future through exercises, the application of scientific methods and the use of available data on the various themes identified in this call (environmental, economic and social). Today we live in a world in continuous and very rapid evolution in which the new generations are constantly affected by changed living conditions, needs, motivations. For large numbers of young people, this makes impossible any medium and long-term existential planning (marginality risk).

The proposal is based on **education**, considered a common basis for a heterogeneous group in terms of age and origin of young people. The paths must guide the future young people to work with the future, to decide the policies for their generation and for the future ones. This is also because of the decision that the epochal transition undertaken in the era of innovative and digital technologies must be governed.

Young people and digital natives must participate in the policies that will have to govern the proximity to *transhumanism*; furthermore, considering the informal learning modalities, it is necessary to channel this formula towards a shared and structured awareness to see beyond the present and innovate for a common future. The proposal is based on the belief that it is essential to invest in human capital from childhood, to try to read the future of the new generations (James Heckman, Nobel Prize in Economics 2000)

For this reason, the proposal is based on the activation of training courses aimed at orienting towards the future.

In particular, strengthened by the holistic vision of sustainable development, it will first be a question of making heterogeneous working groups share the aptitude for complexity and systemic thinking. It is also considered formative to get used to analyzing and taking into consideration the **changes** and **complexity** which characterize our contemporary societies: for this reason, secondly, it

will be necessary to activate training modules on the recognition, analysis and integrated evaluation of **macrotrends, explorations** and **trends** of events characterizing the current and global era.

As far as **future** is concerned, a different scenario opens up for those who work around the heritage of the **skills** and **competences** of students of all ages, attacking the heart of the problem, that is, the way in which the learner faces the future, the roads along which he can **become aware** of the construction of tomorrow, of the uncertainties, of the constraints and of its potential. For this reason, it will be useful in the third place to develop training courses on **competences**: soft skills, learning, citizenship

Because of the pandemic, we have learned that there is a need for new categories as well as the **difficulty of reading youth phenomena**. For this reason, it will be necessary, fourthly, to do exercises choosing among the future methods (3 horizons, wild card, backcasting, future wheel, etc.) that allow to arrive at scenarios, visions, frameworks. Through them, it is possible to identify solutions to develop awareness to think and work with the future, the aptitude to innovate and formulate proposals for collaborative contexts, a new governance of relationships, activate transnational value chains.

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