

'THERE ARE NO LONGER THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THE PAST'

When we examine the development of the South, we are faced with a mysterious conundrum, especially when it comes to sustainable development, as it implies a strong responsibility to future generations to maintain a complex ecosystem for years to come.

Despite the progress achieved in recent years, there remains, on closer inspection, a large regional performance gap.

The levels of expenditure earmarked for investment in key sectors are always significantly higher in the Centre-North than in the South. The most significant gaps between the two macro-areas concern essential services: social policies, labour, health, infrastructure networks, mobility, to which must be added the critical issues related to the efficiency of the administrative-institutional system.

These aspects strongly influence overall productivity and in their analysis lies one of the keys to solving the development conundrum.

Additional resources, large funds and projects to close the large productivity gaps will not be sufficient to produce lasting effects for future generations without the accumulation of civic capital, cooperation, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, and without manoeuvres specifically dedicated to reducing the unemployment rate.

Youth unemployment in Italy and the European Union continues to be a significant challenge, especially following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, the proportion of unemployed young people reached an all-time high of 29.3 per cent.

Since then, the government has implemented various initiatives and programmes to curb the problem, but despite the efforts undertaken to improve the situation, young people still continue to face difficulties in entering the labour market and building a solid career.

Tackling youth unemployment requires an integrated and targeted approach involving governments, institutions, the private sector and civil society.

It is necessary to start as soon as possible with programmes that include investment in training and vocational education, promotion of youth entrepreneurship, facilitation of the school-to-work transition and access to apprenticeships and in-company internships, and increased supply/opportunities for quality work.

More and more young people are leaving Italy in search of work abroad.

There are few 20-year-olds left in our country and those few, although better educated than their brothers and fathers, hardly find stable employment. Generations are bound together by ethical and financial reciprocity. This awareness must be an essential part of the country's regeneration process.

Today's "twenty-year-olds" number just over 600 thousand every year when, just ten years ago, there were 800 thousand and twenty years earlier almost 1 million. There are fewer of them, but they are better educated than they used to be, yet their placement seems like an insoluble problem. The data tell us that for younger people unemployment is at 35 percent and that, among those who work, one in three is precarious.

The number of working men and (few) women has risen only slightly in the last twenty years, and the increase is largely due to immigrants; but since the latter do not insist on the best professions, one deduces that the 'young' have entered into competition with many 'old' people with glittering careers, perhaps

exaggerated in relation to their professional merits. Such copious collective ascension turns out to be an act of force since, excellence (and mediocrity) being normally distributed across the generations, if too many people of the same age make a career, then, inevitably, someone who does not deserve it is making it, with the result of distorting the value of labour in the market and producing dross that is difficult to dispose of (public debt, social security imbalances, mediocre management).

The current labour market, moreover, is only nominal since 40 per cent of job opportunities in reality do not even pass through the market as a result of informal intermediation (personal networks). This inhibits the instruments of social emancipation (first and foremost education) and generates inefficiencies that are all the greater the more relevant the jobs that are given by signal. Indeed, to the cost of remuneration (or pension) must be added the much higher opportunity cost of not having the best in the most important positions. The country is becoming increasingly polarised between those who have rents (home, work, networks, representation, etc.) and those who do not, and this generates growing social tensions, generally inversely proportional to social mobility.

But is it a coincidence that the deterioration in employment is so concentrated on the youngest?

Just think of two recent problems: the exodus workers and the precarious/unemployed. Two issues that deserve appropriate answers because they leave so many fellow citizens in despair. The former, however, have moved all the political and trade union leaders, who have made peremptory statements; the latter, on the other hand, have obtained the usual declarations of intent. The former number 100-200 thousand, the latter several million. How do we explain the attention in inverse proportion to the social relevance of the phenomenon? The exodus workers are basically between 50 and 65 years old, while the precarious and unemployed are 20 to 40 years old. But there is more, the exodus workers have benefited from an equivocal pact that contradicts the spirit of a season of social security reforms (bipartisan, another rarity) that are gradually (perhaps too gradually) moving towards a contributory regime (without ifs and buts) in which the pension is proportional to the contributions paid and therefore explicitly excludes the use of early retirement to resolve company crises (which deserve other types of intervention).

Instead, young people, at the centre of all declarations of intent, get no discounts.

It is in no way intended to set the young against the old, rather - with the exception of the poor of yesterday and today - it is suggested that the old who have had too much, give something to the young who have had too little.

In short, we have kept fathers and mothers in offices and businesses longer without creating new spaces for sons and daughters, with a paradoxical result: a significant reduction in the youngest segment of the workforce. The numbers do not lie: the employment rate of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 has dramatically contracted in over fifteen years, falling from 25.7% in 2005 to 16.8% in 2020 (from 74.5% in 2005 to 66.9% in 2020 in the 30-34 age group), while that of workers between the ages of 55 and 64 has risen by over 23 percentage points from 31.4% in 2005 to 54.2% in 2019. A piece of the responsibility also lies in the shortcomings of vocational training, which fails to bridge the 'mismatch' with the needs and demands of the productive sectors, and the non-existence of active labour policies.

The job placement of the majority of young Italians today passes through informal channels by exploiting family networks. In the European comparison, the new generations in Italy are smaller in number, less trained, less valued by the production system, and more dependent on families or public welfare!

In addition to 'needs', the report also points to the long stay of the youngest in the family of origin, an aspect obviously linked to not working, not training and not being involved in other initiatives. While more than two decades ago coexistence with parents was motivated by a free personal choice on the part of

young people, today the reasons are more related to housing and employment difficulties, as highlighted by the Rapporto Giovani 2021 by the Toniolo Institute, and to the contextual protective function of the family of origin. Surprisingly, those who suffer and risk the most are young adults between the ages of 30 and 34,

"who suffer prolonged periods of unemployment and have a poor economic situation in the phase of full entry into adult life". This segment of 'neets is the most dissatisfied with their lives and is most willing to accept any job in the immediate future, exposing themselves to the risk of work irregularity or exploitation.

Thus, in some ways fuelling another vicious circle, albeit obviously in contingent necessity. While, paradoxically, those who are trained do not find an adequate and sufficient offer of employment.

An alarm bell is indeed the dimension assumed by the phenomenon of youth over-education: in mid-2020, more than one in three young people, between the ages of 25 and 34, was engaged in a professional activity that required a qualification lower than the one possessed. These are prospects that drive more and more young people - at least 112,000 graduates in the 2010-2019 decade - to leave Italy in search of better opportunities and, above all, compromise the country's development trajectory, which thus loses the most precious resources for the present and the future whose education, among other things, it has paid for.

Young people need to be better trained, adequate entry channels into the world of work (vocational, training and work orientation), decent unemployment benefits for them during periods when they leave the labour market, with accompanying pathways for their return, retraining programmes, and adequate housing policies (support for rents and the purchase of a first home, social housing) that enable young people, among others, to start a cycle of wealth accumulation: these are the policies that are needed and in which our country is structurally deficient.

Therefore, after the emergency phase, we need a (re)constituent season to overcome the culture of not falling is already a step forward. New impetus is needed: ideas, culture, ethics and a little courage are needed to make those who have been in the front row for many seasons sit a little further back.

LATTARULO ANNABELLA