

# *Welfare and active inclusion as tools for sustainability: the Italian case*

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The transition phase of the development model that is underway requires a move towards an economic and social system that is sustainable for the environment and for people. This landing involves not a simple integration or updating of current value creation models, but a real paradigm shift. The role of work and social inclusion systems in this dimension is central because the relationship between society and the economy takes place precisely through the function of work and welfare. Policies and interventions to promote sustainability therefore pass through a revision of labour and social security systems and in the affirmation of the ‘human-centric’ dimension of the use of technologies and artificial intelligence in particular. In this perspective, it becomes interesting to analyse the choices and policies promoted in Italy, a nation that is experiencing this transition phase while having to manage the impact of a critical demographic trend.

*Keywords:* sustainability; welfare; transition; work; inclusion; development.

## **Introduction**

Like all transitions, the current dual transition (ecological and digital) and sustainability are open to different outcomes. Every transition is neither zero-cost nor equally distributed, in terms of risks and opportunities, among the social groups affected by it. Above all, every transition undermines old paradigms and institutions, bringing about a sense of insecurity and a sense that pervades society but which is not automatically, to quote Karl Polanyi (1974), able to find an answer in new paradigms, alternatives to the old ones that no longer work and can no longer return. The current transition does not escape this dynamic or “double movement”, following Polanyi again (*ibidem*). On the one hand, the expansion of markets, the ecological and digital transition, offer new opportunities for the modernisation of economic and social systems. On the other hand, new fractures, social tensions and inequalities emerge that risk precarising pre-existing social and institu-

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tional balances, with reactions or counter-movements as Polanyi calls them (ibidem) that are open to different outcomes, but above all uncontrollable (Benassi *et al.*, 2021). Of course, the influence of path dependency should not be underestimated (Pierson, 2001), in this as in any other transition. Institutions have a latency, they are resistant to change. One fact, however, is certain. Neither mere technological determinism nor the animal spirits of the market are sufficient to guarantee new forms of social cohesion, nor institutions capable of providing new responses to changing needs. This is certainly not new.

Already Emile Durkheim in “The Division of Social Work” (1893) pointed out how capitalist modernisation, while in itself leading to an increasing specialisation of labour, also exposed modern societies to phenomena of anomie and social disintegration. But if the old no longer works and the new is still late in arriving, how can we look today at the profound transformations impacting labour and welfare systems as they have evolved in recent decades? The sociological literature on welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) has long wondered about the growth-social cohesion nexus, i.e. how to guarantee growth and equality in societies highly exposed to competitive tensions and strong pressures to reduce public spending. In this framework, the Social Investment paradigm (Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002; Hemerijck, 2013; 2017) had emerged in the first part of the 2000s as the frame of a renewed social agenda aimed at combining growth and social cohesion through long-term investments in human capital (Stock), active labour, care and reconciliation policies to increase labour market participation as much as possible (Flow), and finally, generous and inclusive income support instruments (Buffer) in times of crisis and employment shocks. Whether and to what extent all this is sufficient today to meet the challenges of the double transition and to strengthen resilience and adaptability to ongoing economic transformations is a matter of intense debate, particularly if we consider the emerging problems affecting the most vulnerable and fragile segments of the labour market.

The future of work is built with the choices we make, the perspective we intend to support and the investments and services we promote, and must necessarily pass through the relationship between innovation and inclusion. This relationship places work at the centre of the relationship between economic growth and social development. For this to be possible, it is necessary to be able to design and support a development model based on the sustainability of the economy, both environmentally and socially. The conditions that need to be defined to promote employment must be defined in the sense of sustainability, in the relationship between innovation and in-

clusion, elements that both the economy and society need and must be able to promote.

The promotion of this perspective is defined in the relationship between State and regions and passes through the ability to implement effective tools, services and investments for skills, active inclusion, safety and health, digital technologies and artificial intelligence, corporate welfare and active ageing: only the ability to support, stimulate and promote these interventions determines the conditions for innovation and inclusion that can give work a sustainable future. The perspective for Western nations passes through sustainability, which coincides with an added value generated above all by the quality of goods and services and not by mere quantity. The challenge today is to bring all components of the economy into a position to generate value through quality. In sustainable economies, value increasingly acts as an integrated value, generated by the relationship between economic value and social value. This challenge passes through the need to ensure quality in working conditions and in the processes of economic and social value creation. In this perspective, it also seems important to consider the relationship between the aspects of sustainable development and those of social convergence, as indicated in the institutional reference documentation (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024; Bank of Italy – annual report, 2024), which shows that within the European framework the situation between and within nations is still rather uneven.

## 1. Sustainability and skills

The first aspect of the various dimensions of social sustainability concerns the need to strengthen skills, to raise the knowledge, skills and competences of young people, the unemployed and workers. Some recent analyses promoted by Inapp and the evaluations of OECD data on skills (Mineo, Amendola, 2018; OECD, 2023; OECD, 2024a; 2024b) highlight two aspects: we have a significant increase in literacy and schooling among young Italians, but there persists, especially in the southern regions, a serious decline in basic skills among adults, even among workers.

The issue of skills mismatch in the economy is a central issue for Italian development. From the increase in productivity to that of wages, from the increased competitiveness of companies to the demographic trend itself, everything revolves around the central axis of the need for Italians to strengthen skills, knowledge, abilities and competences. This makes train-

ing linked to active policies crucial: the majority of young neets, i.e. those not working or studying, but also the majority of unemployed Italians need refresher training or often genuine retraining in order to find a job. These are more than four million people, who need to be trained, prepared and accompanied to work, so that Italy can reach the 68 per cent employment rate that is the minimum level needed to sustain public accounts and welfare against the corresponding figure of demographic trends, which see the areas with fewer people in employment than those who are not working steadily increasing. The main difference in Italy's demographic, social and economic resilience compared to Germany and France has much to do with the comparison of the current 62.5 per cent employed compared to 70 per cent employed in France or Germany. Increasing employment by responding to business demand is therefore crucial for a sustainable development model. However, in addition to intervening to strengthen the skills of the unemployed, it is also necessary to secure the skills of the Italian employed. The picture that emerges each year from the analyses of the PIIAC survey on adult skills (OECD, 2024a; 2024b) is not positive and offers clear indications on the need to support and improve the skills of employed workers, in order to prevent their risk of exclusion.

If we consider the OECD surveys and the reports drawn up for the Ministry of Labour by Inapp on the PIIAC surveys on adult skills (OECD, 2024a; 2024b) a basic datum emerges: where the economy is weaker, less work is created and the work that is created is generally poorer also because of a greater presence of low-skilled workers. Another aspect of sustainability is that of territorial gaps. The territorial differences in terms of opportunities in Italy are still wide and must be addressed through a strategy to consolidate employment, especially in the southern and in inland areas. The low skills of workers depend above all on the fact that they work in a local economy, in sectors or activities with low added value, innovation and productive capacity. The strengthening of labour and that of economic activities necessarily proceed together and require a strategy, policies and instruments of reference and shared. Weak workers always correspond to a weak economy and vice versa.

Let us consider the information on the learning of the employed and the unemployed that is obtained thanks to the surveys of Inapp and the Ministry of Labour (Mereu, 2024; Inapp, 2022). The Italian employed and unemployed were on average 35.7 per cent in training in 2022. This figure is determined by an average training of 44 per cent for the employed and 21 per cent for the unemployed. If we consider the start of the GOL programme of active policies during the following two-year period 2023-2024, the figure

for the percentage of the unemployed in training (upskilling and reskilling) rises to around 28 per cent in 2024, but does not go beyond that. There are contradictions and delays to be dealt with, but also important signals coming to us from reading the data and the ongoing phenomena. First of all, the fact that employment status affects participation in lifelong learning. This is the first paradox: the unemployed in Italy have decidedly less access to training activities (20.5%, figure updated to 28% in 2024) than the employed (44.1%), as do those employed in low-skilled professions compared to those in more skilled professions (62.6% for executives, entrepreneurs and freelancers against 24.6% for low-skilled workers). Those who would be most in need of acquiring, developing and updating skills, in order to keep pace with changes in the labour market and thus reduce the risk of exit, are therefore precisely those who train the least. In Italy, moreover, the disadvantage of the unemployed compared to the employed is decidedly more pronounced than the average of European countries. An unemployed person who does not train risks remaining unemployed for longer and hinders the objective of getting him or her into work. The distance with Europe narrows among those employed in high-skilled jobs: among managers, entrepreneurs and freelancers, the incidence of participation in Italy is 63.1%, just 5.6 percentage points lower than the European average. The Italian skills paradox is as follows: in Italy, those who are more competent train and update their skills, while those who work with lower skills or are unemployed tend to train less or not at all, unless they are obliged to. The unemployed or those employed with low-skilled profiles who have not done any kind of training declare more often than men that they have not done so because of costs and family responsibilities: among women, in fact, the share of those who do not train to take care of the family is almost four times higher than among men (19.0% against 5.3%) and represents a brake on access and progression towards more skilled jobs. This phenomenon too offers very important cues for reconciliation policies and corporate welfare to be promoted as a precondition for stimulating employment, but also career paths for women. Moreover, the territorial differences in terms of participation in formal and non-formal training activities remain evident: more than eleven percentage points separate the North-East from the South (39.7 per cent and 28.3 per cent respectively), also as a result of the different age structure of the population and the employment situation. It emerges from the data that in Italy company training for the employed and for the job placement of the unemployed is done less precisely in the places and conditions where it is most needed. The national statistics institute Istat (Istat Adult Education Survey 2024) explains that this happens not only for

organisational and cost reasons, but also due to inadequate awareness on the part of workers and employers. For this reason, the Italian Ministry of Labour, after having published the rules for the validation, attestation and certification of training in 2024, intervened through a new Fund, called “competences for innovation fund”, which expands continuing training opportunities for small enterprises and enterprise networks.

## 2. Sustainability, safety and health

Social sustainability of the economy and work also means stronger safety and health. Occupational safety is a crucial aspect of the sustainability of the economy from a social, but also economic point of view. Creating the conditions for safe and healthy working, limiting any factor of exposure to the risk of accidents, is not only a fundamental ethical objective to be guaranteed in economic processes, but also an investment necessary for innovation and labor productivity. It is no coincidence that in Italy too, most accidents occur in sectors which are often at the edge of the value chain. Supporting investments for the safety of companies, construction sites and jobs, both in the locations where it takes place and in the transfer from home to work, is therefore a decisive action that is part of the wider effort to “put quality” of Italian work and therefore sustainability. The need for the economy and the various production activities to make the leap forward required by the current transition, especially in terms of environmental and social sustainability, also depends on the ability to reduce accidents, support a wider awareness of the need to prevent risk factors, including those arising from new technologies, and spread, starting in schools, a culture of prevention that is present in a renewed ethics and work culture. At the same time it is clear that if in too many contexts we have inadequate safety conditions and risk factors do not go down, this means that the idea of work which is still present in many places, in many companies and sometimes even among the workers themselves, It is not based on a work ethic, on a shared culture that puts the human condition at the centre.

The increase in accidents in 2024 in Italy mainly concerns those “on the way”, that is to say, on the way from home to work, while the number of fatal accidents remains stable, and points out that the growth of the economy and of employment is not yet accompanied by an adequate improvement in sustainability and therefore in the quality of working conditions. Italian law has also introduced in the assessment of accident reports accidents on the road, which many countries do not consider and do not protect,

and accidents involving students. The Italian government has intervened to combat accidents with new provisions for strengthening and aggravating the sanctions regime in the field of health protection and safety at work, and prevention and combating of illegal work. As of 1 October 2024, a new system for the qualification of companies and self-employed workers was introduced for safety on construction sites (c.d. points card), compulsory for companies and self-employed workers who intend to work on construction sites.

### **3. Sustainability and digital technologies**

#### *3.1. The sustainability of the digital transition*

The promotion of active inclusion and labour market policies must also at this stage consider the substantial changes that have been introduced by the digital and technological transition. These changes, analysed by a vast scientific literature (Castells, 1996; Zuboff, 2019), bring about a change in the very function and concept of work and introduce increasing risks of marginalisation and social exclusion. The ongoing transition, like any phase transition, is guided and determined by the “technological leap”. Digital technologies, which were slower until the pandemic and then more pervasive during the pandemic and in the following phase, are no longer just a reference tool for economic, social and labour relations. They have become the reference environment in which most economic, social and labour relations take place. This progressive evolution of the role of digital technologies has opened up a strong debate, a reflection that is ongoing and which also animated the G7 nations during 2024, under the Italian Presidency, that they have the theme of the government of artificial intelligence, ie the possibility of giving limits, references and aims to the use of digital technologies able to maintain artificial intelligence as a tool at the service of man and the promotion of the human factor. G7 nations shared a technical paper and subsequent declaration of intent by Labour Ministers (G7 Italia Labour and Employment Issue notes, 2024) which calls for concrete policies and actions.

The alternative is that new technologies should be used as instruments for controlling and subordinating human freedom, not as a stimulus and instrument for human development. In this phase we live contradictory trends, especially in the relationship between technologies, time and work organization: on the one hand we have a scaling up of the use of smart

working, after the use often forced during the pandemic, also because of the use of technologies only in the form of work from home or remotely and not as a tool for reconciling the management of working and living time, as it could have been. The evolution of the use of digital tools, social networks and artificial intelligence defines ways and means for the organization of work and production which are increasingly widespread and pervasive. Determining, together with the opportunities, also risk factors, resulting from hyperconnection, acceleration and difficulty in controlling time management. All this produces opportunities and risks that must be governed and managed. It is therefore necessary to face the fundamental contradiction of our times: the technological tools born at least to reduce, if not to free, man from excess work, have translated into the exact opposite, in instruments that are used to increase working times, control forms, pressure, acceleration and the demand for performance and results. Technology is neutral by nature and what can be used to improve can also be used to worsen human conditions. The ability to link innovation, technology and productivity is increasingly being achieved through rules and tools that promote skills at work and well-being, welfare in working conditions and the environment.

### *3.2. Contradictions to be addressed*

If we consider the digital environment as a reference in the field of work organization, it is now clear that the use of digital tools requires careful regulation, which constitutes an increasingly significant dimension of law, but also of corporate welfare and organizational well-being. The prospect of using technologies to be able to “personalize” the employment relationship in terms of timing and duration and increasingly place it in a performance dimension in which the achievement of the objective prevails over physical presence and control of the workstation is a prospect of absolute interest, which today however involves only a part of “knowledge workers” and professionals, but which can expand and grow due to the process of qualification and reorganization of work underway in the most advanced societies. This is an important prospect, but still far from being realized as an ordinary modality and which is not yet adequately available in the Italian economic system. To grasp this perspective it seems necessary to share a path, a strategy, capable of defining investments and building common policies at least at European and Western level. This was the intention of the Regulation Act approved by the European Parliament on the regulation of artificial intelligence in July 2024.

The spread of artificial intelligence in the world of work offers great opportunities, but generates ethical, regulatory and policy issues. Concerns include its potential impact on jobs and employment, the level and distribution of wages, workers' health and safety, working time management, on working conditions and the overall quality of work, as well as the role of artificial intelligence in the world of work. The use of AI in recruitment and management of the workforce and personnel raises issues related to data protection and privacy, non-discrimination, and broader concerns about labour market management practices, including the ethics of automated decision making. Governing and managing digital innovation becomes fundamental to be able to lay the foundations of a development that places “digital humanism” at the center and allows to put technologies at the service of man and strengthening his awareness.

#### **4. Sustainability and corporate welfare**

Innovation and inclusion mean supporting the improvement of working conditions, conciliation and participation. The new season of union bargaining is introducing new rights and tools in Italy, which also contribute to renewing the very idea of remuneration, introducing variable parts related to access to services and welfare instruments. Support for corporate welfare training plans is also one of the new features of the government Fund to support lifelong learning. Sustainable innovation generates higher productivity if you invest in the quality of work and in the company. Companies and territories that invest in corporate welfare, working conditions, organizational well-being, employee participation, in a word on “value of the person”, are stronger, more productive and competitive.

This awareness is spreading, even in small enterprises and in the regions lagging behind, but it is a path that must be supported with appropriate interventions and instruments, including specific public policies. The difference in this phase change that Italian economy is experiencing is the ability to make quality, to propose adequate working conditions, to support the welfare of the company and promote organizational models that can value and motivate employees and collaborators. The decisions of the Italian government have in these years promoted and made structural as an opportunity for all workers the facilities for the premiums of result and the fringe benefits.

## 5. Sustainability and active inclusion

### 5.1. Inclusion through work

The basic data for measuring the health of a nation's labour market and its capacity to include and be socially sustainable is above all that of participation in the labour market, which calculates the ratio of employed to unemployed (which together make up the "labour force") as a proportion of the total population of working age. 2024 was undoubtedly a positive year for Italy in terms of both employment and unemployment. These figures show a decrease in the number of unemployed (resulting in a reduction in the unemployment rate to 5.8%), an increase in the number of employed, with the employment rate at 62.5% and the overtaking of the share of 24 million employees. Other qualitative data should also be mentioned, such as the increase in open-ended jobs and the decline in part-time employment, the fall in youth unemployment and wage growth, due to the ongoing renewals. These are the data from which to start to promote active inclusion policies necessary to remove what is the bottom limit, in comparison with other developed countries, of the Italian labor market, that is the figure of participation of the workforce. The starting point is 66.3%: it is the rate of participation of the labour force in Italy as a proportion of the total population of working age, while the rate of inactivity is given by the remaining 33.6%, the percentage of the population of working age who are inactive. This is the figure that still sees Italy farthest from the European average, which stands around 74%, while Italy is eight points behind France and twelve points behind Germany (see Istat data December 2024 in Figure 1; Figure 2). If we move from the quantitative data to the analysis of phenomena, we must observe a significant phenomenon: while there is an obvious correlation between employed and unemployed, within the "labour force", there is no evidence of a significant relationship between the labour force and the inactive. It is as if there is a wall between these two conditions, which both the demand for work of the enterprises that the current policies do not succeed in adequately to affect. This phenomenon is dangerous in perspective and must be approached with two consciences:

- the demographic trend implies a need for a substantial increase in the number of people employed, which cannot be met only by reintegrating the current unemployed into employability training schemes; because the main requirement for a substantial increase in the rate of participation is now to reduce the number of inactive workers;

- current active labour policies have helped and supported the demand of enterprises to drive an increase in employment, but they do not appear still able to break the wall between the workforce and the inactive, the progressive transfer from the status of inactive to that of unemployed, leading to the status of employed.

This is a significant issue, because it is aggravated by the current demographic trend which sees a strong, constant and inevitable increase in the population placed in the group of people no longer in working age. It is quite clear that, by increasing the proportion of the population not of working age, a system which sees more than one third of the working age population outside the labour force, who are not seeking employment, cannot be sustained. As reported by the CNEL report on Demography and labour force (Rosina, 2024, p. 4 – CNEL – Report 2024): «If this transformation is not managed with a new approach and effective instruments, the risk is that of a downward slide in the possibilities of development, competitiveness, production of wealth, sustainability of the social system». The theme is therefore strategic and not only concerned with finalising active policies, it goes far beyond this and affects both integrated policies and governance between the state and regions in the areas of work, training and development. Western nations suffering, like Italy, from the consequences of the demographic crisis have to place the issue of labour market participation and active inclusion as key issues, as the main analyses point out (OECD, 2023; 2024c).

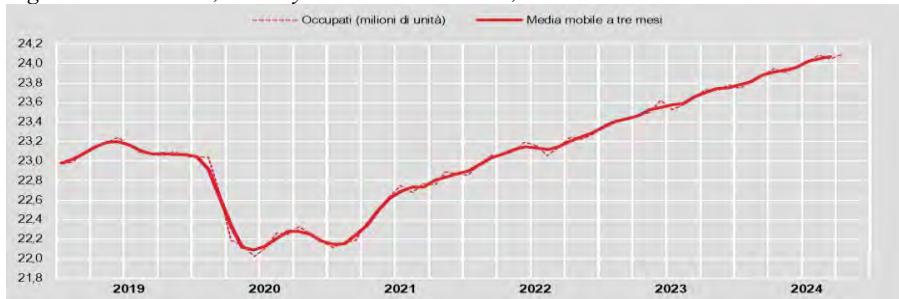
## *5.2. Policies to include the inactive people*

The conditions of the inactive intersect at least four dynamics requiring active and welfare policies to act in relation to:

- the motivations, assessing how the context of exclusion or difficulties has acted in creating the conviction in people that they cannot strengthen their autonomy in life through work, to help the inactive to motivate themselves;
- skills, recognizing that in these cases it is not a matter of updating, but most often to recover or intervene on the lack of skills, which affects mainly women and adults and some areas of early school leaving especially in the South;
- the social context, by targeting households in poverty or hardship, making effective active inclusion for example of inclusion allowance

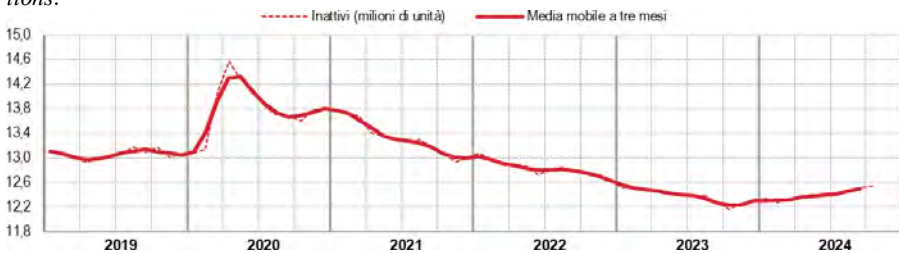
- holders and extending it to all those accessing social assistance treatment;
- work-life balance, because the culture still widespread, especially in the South and inland areas, where “the wife stays at home with the children”, is favoured by means of conciliation and family services not adequately present in the territories and absent in the enterprises, mainly small size.

*Fig. 1 – EMPLOYED, January 2019 - October 2024, absolute values in millions.*



Fonte: Istat occupati e disoccupati statistiche flash dicembre 2024.

*Fig. 2 – INACTIVE 15-64 YEARS, January 2019 - October 2024, absolute values in millions.*



Fonte: Istat occupati e disoccupati statistiche flash dicembre 2024.

## Conclusions

The theme of sustainability is both the pivot and the objective of economic policies. It is the pivot because we are called to create the conditions for an economy that is sustainable, but also a goal, because bringing the whole economic system, the world of businesses and work, on the guarantee of sustainability involves a “put in quality” the economic and social actors, which must be pursued as a global and systemic objective.

In fact, if we consider the economic analysis, these are precisely the years when the western economies are called to a real phase transition that has as its key and as an exit to sustainability. It is the transition from the so-called fourth capitalism, based on the relationship between globalization, finance and computer networks, to a new phase of capitalism based on social and environmental sustainability of economic activities, also through the promotion of digital networks and artificial intelligence. This transition can only be completed through appropriate choices, targeted policies and system actions. If the term sustainability is the synthesis between productivity and well-being, then the aspects that distinguish it are obvious: work is the meeting ground between a sustainable economy and society, while the actions and choices to be promoted are necessarily different and articulated, but they converge as system policies, in order to achieve the effect of sustainability of overall development.

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