



Ten years of the BES project: a dynamic and multidimensional indicator based on a collaborative approach between the scientific community, intermediate bodies, institutions and associations

by Andrea Zoppo

On March 10, 2021, ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) organized an event to present the [2020 Report on BES, the italian indicator of Fair and Sustainable Wellness](#). The meeting was moderated by Francesco Maria Chelli, Director of the Department for Statistical Production at ISTAT. Exponents from the economic, political and institutional world were present at the event.

ISTAT President, Gian Carlo Blangiardo, remarked that the tenth anniversary of the BES falls in a very special historical moment, more than a year after the beginning of the pandemic. According to the President, the emergency has made even **more evident the inadequacy of GDP as the only tool for measuring the well-being of a population**. The conference talked about the genesis of the debate on overcoming traditional indicators of economic well-being and quality of life that go “beyond GDP”. The debate has ancient origins and was initially supported by a large scientific literature (For further information see W. Nordhaus, J. Tobin, *Is growth obsolete, innThe Measurement of Economic and Social Performance*, NBER, 1973) and only subsequently extended to statistical centers, various institutions and society.

Since the 2007 Istanbul Declaration and the OECD launch of the "*Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies*", an increasing number of countries have decided **to launch experimental, methodological and political initiatives to try to go “beyond GDP”**. After the “[Beyond Gdp](#)” conference, organized in 2007 by the European Commission, France in 2008 decided to undertake initiatives in this direction by establishing the Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress directed by J. Stiglitz and A. Sen and by J.P. Fitoussi. The Commission's goal was to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of the well-being of a society and shifting the emphasis on measuring the well-being of the person in a qualitative and not just a quantitative perspective.

This emerging need to **overcome the economic approach through new synthetic indicators therefore inevitably implies a critique of the dominant paradigm, which identifies economic growth as growth in well-being (although a direct correlation is undeniable)**. From this derives the need to involve trade unions, employers' unions, intermediate bodies, non-profit organizations, associations, institutions, businesses and more generally “civil

society”. The president of ISTAT stressed that if this aspect is neglected, there would be a risk of not grasping the real significance of the change in perspective. This would turn the discussion into a simple debate between statistical experts.

In 2010, Italy is part of this international debate with the BES project for the measurement of fair and sustainable wellbeing. An interinstitutional working group is born between CNEL (The National Economy and Labor Committee) and ISTAT for the creation of **more dynamic indicators that flank other existing indicators characterized by statistical and methodological problems**. A "Steering Committee on the measurement of the progress of Italian society" was created with representatives of trade unions, third sector, associations of different entities. The choice was to have a **participatory approach**: statistics also need democratic legitimacy and only in this way is it possible to orient the decision-making process and governance of public policies.

The CNEL-ISTAT expert committee, trying to **overcome the problem of the one-dimensionality of the current indicators and starting from the identification of the dimensions of well-being** and progress, has come to the definition of 12 domains: Health; Education and training; Work and reconciliation of life times; Economic well-being; Social relations; Politics and institutions; Safety; Subjective well-being; Landscape and cultural heritage; Environment; Innovation, research and creativity; Quality of services.

The first BES Report was published in 2013 and methodological innovations, new analyzes and revisions of the indicators were made every year. **Starting from 2016, the indicators and analyzes of the BES are included in economic planning documents such as the DEF (Economics and Finance Document of Italian Government)** with the aim of monitoring and evaluating the effect of policies on dimensions such as well-being, quality of life, life expectancy and others that integrate with GDP. The BES are thus included in the public finance cycle.

ISTAT President, Blangiardo, stressed that the country in this period needs strategies and indicators such as the BES. The domains and indicators provided by ISTAT could find a development in the monitoring programs of Next Generation EU, an unprecedented opportunity for the amount of resources and for the generality of the actors involved.

During the presentation, the President of the CNEL Tiziano Treu highlighted how Italy is one of the most advanced countries in the provision of tools to monitor economic, social and environmental conditions. One of the first agreements between CNEL and ISTAT was to **“territorialize” the BES indicators by dividing them by geographical area** (on the basis of the [2015 UrBes Report](#) which declined the indicators in the major urban areas of the country). It emerged that the gaps in some indicators (labor market, employment, job security, income) are very marked and are dramatic even within the provinces of the same area.

The Minister of Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility, Enrico Giovannini, former president of Asvis (Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development), one of the major proponents of the new BES approach, stressed that the European Union has decided to use some indicators other than GDP for the economics and finance documents (DEF) of the Member States. The year 2021 should be the starting year of this new approach to processing official documents. Giovannini said he wanted to propose the **introduction in the Italian Constitution of the**

principle of sustainability (which was one of the main proposals of Asvis, of which Giovannini was President). The PNRR, in the Minister's opinion, will have to reconcile sustainable development according to European guidelines. The set of indicators provided by the BES will be fundamental in the development, in the monitoring of expenditure, in the evaluations, in the reporting in terms of outcome and output in the absence of which the resources could not be assigned. Giovannini concluded the speech by hoping for an acceleration in the production of reliable statistics built with the involvement of institutions, trade associations, local authorities and civil society.


Linda Laura Sabbadini, Istat Central Director, presented the BES 2020 Report, published on 10 March 2021, **focusing on the analysis of worsening and weaknesses in health in Italy on the basis of well-being indicators**. The 2020 report shows how the gap with Europe also increases in education (low number of graduates and an increase in the number of NEETs to 23.9% in 2020 and a reduction in the employment rate for both sexes). The report highlights how the percentage of work from home in Italy increased during the pandemic. The incidence of poverty has also increased: over 5.8 million poor are estimated (significant increase in Northern Italy). The weight of knowledge workers is growing, but investment in research and development in relation to GDP remains low, below the European average and below the 1.5 threshold set by the European 2020 strategy. The report highlighted how **the main signs of deterioration** are in illegal construction in the North and in the South (where it was already higher) and in climatic conditions since extreme events are increasingly frequent. On the other hand, there are **signs of improvement**: on internet access indicators (even if gender, territorial and generational differences remain); on the safety of citizens both in perception and in reality; in satisfaction with life after having decreased a lot in the years of the crisis (which, however, does not return to the levels of 2010); in lifestyles through decreased sedentary lifestyle, alcohol consumption and smoking.

Riccardo Barbieri Hermitte, Chief Economist of the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, illustrated the introduction of the BES in the economic and budget planning cycle through documents drawn up by the Minister of Economy and Finance. **Hermitte underlined that the concept of well-being "beyond GDP" is a multidimensional concept that includes innovative and complex approaches in research activity**. One of the challenges for statisticians and stakeholders involved in the BES approach is to try to anticipate the trends of the indices (such as those on absolute poverty) and then provide policy making tools in order to intervene in time.

Matteo Mazziotta and Alessandra Tinto, both Istat researchers, illustrated at a technical, statistical and methodological level, **what are the bases of the BES indicators and the main set of data that have gradually been added**. This year 33 new indicators will be added (some very important such as avoidable mortality, extra-mortality, multi-chronicity, trust in doctors, children enrolled in the nursery, indicator on asymmetries of work from home etc ...) for a final total of 152 indicators which integrate those of the previous BES domains. The expansion of the territorial dimension has resulted in the creation of a map for the **"geography of well-being"** which can be a tool for implementing policies at the local level. Finally, the research group wondered if the domains, identified over 10 years ago, are still valid today and if there are other more representative indices of well-being in our country such as intolerance, the sense of democracy, trust and social cohesion.

Finally, Professor Filomena Maggino, of the control room Benessere Italia of the Italian Council of Ministers, highlighted how the added value of the BES lies in the process of formation, definition of domains and above all sharing with society. Maggino also confirmed **that collaboration with the CNEL, with local institutions, and with internal areas is essential so that the new indicators are "felt by the population and by the people"**. The **granular approach** followed ensures that the indicators are perceived more by the population or by the various subjects of society.

Coming to a conclusion, the approach of the **BES represents a real information revolution in the measurement of well-being which implies a change of methodological perspective** (passing from the one-dimensional approach of economic growth to the multidimensional and multidisciplinary one of the growth of well-being) and extraction data through the involvement of representatives, local administrations, trade associations, trade unions, associations, the educational world and society. The **statistical robustness of the models and the participatory process allow for updated and reliable data to accompany the complex decision-making processes of the economy and society.**

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