



As NEETs Decline, the Good News is that Young People Seek for Guidance

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When it comes to youth employment, it is frequently the case that familiar refrains are employed: young people do not work or do not want to, they are caught between long-standing precariousness and exploitation, and – one might add – they are not what they used to be. Against this backdrop, even the most encouraging aspects are overshadowed by this dominant narrative, which is difficult to challenge. One example of this is confirmed by the fact that ISTAT issued the latest quarterly labour market data concerning NEETs, which means young people who are not in employment, education or training. In public debates, it is said that 3 million young people in Italy either stopped studying or face challenges in finding a job.

Yet ISTAT also tells us that – even considering the largest age group, i.e., those between 15 and 34 years – the number of NEETs at the end of 2023 was 2.1 million, down by almost a million from the peaks reported in 2018 and 2020, following the pandemic. This statistic should be welcomed in its own right, also in consideration of the fact that the decline is not so much the result of a demographic drop of people in this age group (the incidence of NEETs between 15 and 34 year-olds declined from 24.6 percent to 18 percent between 2018 and 2023). This decrease also concerned the subcategories therein: a decline was reported by almost 400 thousand among the unemployed and by more than 400 thousand among the inactive, especially what is known as the ‘potential workforce’. This is an important and – in some ways – surprising factor, particularly when taking into account the lack of policies intended to deal with this aspect, although Italy still ranks third place in Europe for the number of NEETs, behind Greece and Romania. A group of as many as 2 million young people who do not work or study is significant, especially because only 700,000 of them are unemployed, that is, people who actively seek work but cannot find it, while 1.4 million have just stopped looking for it.

These figures point to some challenges, which cannot be solved only by the economic incentives or the rules concerning flexibility targeting companies. What needs to be stressed is that the large drop in NEETs – especially from 2021 to date – does not depend on the government’s employment policies but, more simply, on economic recovery, which encouraged the demand for labour and for the related benefits to hire young people.

The other question that needs to be solved relates to the most vulnerable categories; while the recovery of the last few years is a positive one, it is also likely that those who have benefitted from it are those with a more desirable professional profile and educational background; those not suffering from the growing mental and mental disorders that affect younger people; and those who live in an area that offers significant employment opportunities. The rest – especially young women and young people in Southern Italy – risk being increasingly affected by these external factors, and we cannot think that the market will deal with these problems.

Therefore, these numbers should not lead us to believe that inactivity and youth unemployment have been solved; effective local ecosystems are needed, where all the actors engaged in the training of young people and production cooperate, focusing on them in order to tap into their potential. In this respect, it is problematic that many companies have stopped using the apprenticeship contract and that unions do not defend it as the main access-to-work tool, even for those who have yet to build skills. It is equally problematic that the debate about this working scheme takes place at the European level and not in Italy. Consequently, while hailing the results obtained so far, we should not forget that there is still a long way to go and it must be undertaken together. Youth unemployment is not only a political issue, but also an educational one and should be dealt with also by families, schools and the community, more generally. The main responsibility lies with adults because, if young people are always alone and without guidance, it is not them who are to be blamed.

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