

Rights and well-being of children and adolescents: how to monitor and assess local programmes and actions in Italy along the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan

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The paper aims to analyze how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been linked to the 2030 Agenda statistic framework as well as the national commitments aligned with Next Generation EU Program for definition, monitoring and assessment of national and local strategic priorities proper to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Italy.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, entered into force in Italy in 1991, rests on key principles to ensure their promotion and protection at the highest level: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, well-being and development, and respect for the views of the child¹. These principles give particular relevance to a wide range of rights and freedoms, implying that they are not only universally read but contextualized at the national and local levels.

This means that targeted and effective responses in favour of children and adolescents count on environment in which they live and grow: the right to education takes on a peculiar dimension in terms of degree of satisfaction regarding school well-being or the conditions of healthfulness and functionality of school buildings; the right to health has a heterogeneous connotation with respect to physical and mental health conditions and the ways of accessing essential or specialized health services; social perspective, peer dialogue and confrontation, are favoured differently when related to relational opportunities in out-of-school settings or access to resources and materials in each local setting.

The dialogue among bodies promoted within the framework of the United Nations to address the issue of measuring progress for the highest level of protection of the rights of children and adolescents, enshrined in the Convention also along the development perspective, was launched in 2017 in Geneva: by resolution 31/7, the Human Rights Council incorporated the report produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the protection of these rights for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in September 2015 by the General Assembly².

Building upon one of the key principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda³, no one should be left behind, it implicitly devotes specific attention precisely to children and adolescents so that their rights-based approach informs sustainable development, in line with

¹ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3.

² Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council. Rights of the child: information and communications technologies and child sexual exploitation, A/HRC/RES/31/7, 23 March 2016.

³ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1, 15 September 2015.

achievements and crucial challenges for the Decade of Action towards 2030. Analysing its operative provisions in detail, the 2030 Agenda first and foremost confirms the indivisible, inalienable and universal nature of the rights of children and adolescents so that their full enjoyment is instrumental to countering poverty and inequality in the under-age population globally and strongly reaffirming the core principles of the Convention: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, well-being and development, and the active participation of the younger generation in public life and in decision-making directly affecting them, through listening to them, involving them in the compilation, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of policies, programs and development projects for children and adolescents.

With this in mind, precisely in order to address the Convention challenges in the 21st century, a comprehensive mapping of all the rights and freedoms enshrined therein and interrelated with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda has been promoted, especially aligning the 169 targets and 232 indicators identified in a stepwise manner for each Goal linked with the level of protection of children and adolescents as right-holders.

As noted by the Lancet Commission, because data on under-age population are rather fragmented and diverse as for geographic location (low, middle and high-income countries), indicators introduced under the 2030 Agenda could be complex to be duly used. Due to minimum or partial data, any systematic collection and analysis to identify gaps and challenges in achieving SDGs presents criticalities related to quantitative and qualitative parameters, disaggregated reading of data, a possible human rights-based approach⁴.

A technical response to these critical issues was provided by two entities which have a longstanding international experience about children and adolescents' issues.

UNICEF has pledged its assistance to the United Nations mechanism, namely the IAEG Group, tasked with defining a proper survey methodology for progressively measuring the achievement of SDGs by the Organization's custodian agencies of one or more of the Goals, also in order to facilitate quantitative and qualitative surveys by relevant national agencies. In this view, as will be discussed shortly, the methodology has been adapted not only to the context-country but also to its internal system to capture the development dimension at the local level concerning both children's needs and governmental priorities for action.

As part of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey program, UNICEF had already provided technical assistance to national statistical agencies to collect data on children and adolescents, starting with census and administrative regulatory data. For the implementation monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, the Fund used the 'Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support' (MAPS) model⁵: this methodology moves from the baseline to examine national development trends, in order to adapt targets and indicators in use in the wake of main critical issues related to the condition of children and adolescents, and thus to outline an appropriate programmatic-strategic framework, equipped with appropriate indicators, sufficiently flexible to make any corrections for measuring the national and local achievement of SDGs. In line with MAPS, UNICEF has identified 44 key-indicators for reading the 2030 Agenda along the children's and adolescents' perspective: some of them are generic and thus were interpreted for targeted analysis, while others required further adaptation when referred to child population. UNICEF's further effort has been to introduce an appraisal of key-indicators linked with

⁴ A future for the world's children? A WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission. *The Lancet*, Vol. 395, No. 10224, pp. 605–658.

⁵ <https://sdgintegration.undp.org/maps-mainstreaming-acceleration-and-policy-support>.

rights and freedoms enshrined in the Convention: by way of example, as for Goal 6, concerning the universal and equal right of access to water for all, the relationship with the Convention is visible via the principle of non-discrimination and the right to health but also the labour dimension and possible exploitation of the under-age population (Art. 32, 34 and 36 of the Convention); as for Goal 9, concerning the promotion of infrastructure development, industrialization and innovation has been examined in close relation with Art. 29 of the Convention which defines the right to education as an indispensable tool for the development of the personality, talents and physical and mental abilities of the under-age population while ensuring respect for the environment. To deepen this two-way reading between the 2030 Agenda and the Convention, UNICEF has published interesting papers in recent years in which the above mentioned methodology has been further detailed and analysed for its proper use with respect for example: to child mortality rate in spite of lacking complete series, to child immunization rate measured by census and administrative data, to literacy rate, to the percentage of access to basic health services of the under-age population, to special conditions of the child population with a migratory status, to possible and integrative methodologies of survey and data analysis to measure the so-called multidimensional child poverty.

A different analytical approach has been proposed by the Danish Institute of Human Rights⁶: in the database on human rights recommendations and SDGs, the Institute has provided data on the rights of children and adolescents by correlating the 2030 Agenda with observations and recommendations adopted by the main United Nations monitoring bodies about the condition of human rights in member states. Since these observations and recommendations explicitly refer to one or more SDGs, they are particularly relevant when referring both to the Convention's Committee and Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council competent over children and adolescents, as well as to human rights assessments by the Council under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism. Recommendations examined concern, in particular, the inclusion and development of children's and adolescents' issues in the national strategies implementing the 2030 Agenda, the identification of vulnerable groups suffering from potential or factual violation of rights and freedoms enshrined in the Convention, and the adoption of targeted legislative measures and policies to combat the exclusion and discrimination of children and adolescents.

As already anticipated, if it is true that Goals and targets have a primarily global connotation, the national level, and even more so the local level, prove to be fundamental for the definition, planning and implementation of even more effective policies for children and adolescents, thus reinforcing the current international legal framework and the programmatic commitments also made at the European level.

First of all, the correlation between the 2030 Agenda and EU commitments to promote the rights of children and adolescents can be found in the EU Strategy on the rights of the child⁷. Here, just to make an example, children's and adolescents' participation in political and democratic life is included, directly related to SDG 4 and target 4.7, or also of the social and economic inclusion of young generations to counteract poverty and de facto inequalities, along SDG 1 (and target 1.3) and 11 (and target 11.7).

In this appraisal, it is important to highlight how the critical implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the European level accelerated during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic perspective: this has entailed an in-depth analysis of the conceptual and operational

⁶ <https://www.humanrights.dk/sdg-human-rights-data-explorer>.

⁷ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EU strategy on the rights of the child (COM/2021/142 final), 24 March 2021.

dimension of the Next Generation EU Programme for the definition of national and local strategic priorities of EU member states, with a specific focus on the Italian situation⁸.

In general terms, the NGEU defined the main areas of intervention, or pillars, that each member state had to include in its national planning: Green Transition, Digital Transformation, Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Health and Economic, Social and Institutional Resilience, and Policies for New Generations, Children and Youth. For the latter area, member states were asked to provide dedicated interventions to improve early childhood education and care systems, digital education, strengthening the European Pillar of Social Rights with respect to challenges depending upon generational gaps and related to the need to promote the entry of young people into the labour market.

Based on these indications, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) was adopted in 2021⁹, being articulated on three strategic axes: digitization and innovation, ecological transition, and social inclusion; it has been developed along six Missions – to be operational through sixteen components: Mission 1 - digitization, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism; Mission 2 - green revolution and ecological transition; Mission 3 - infrastructure for sustainable mobility; Mission 4 - education and research; Mission 5 - inclusion and cohesion; Mission 6 - health. Undoubtedly, these Missions from a conceptual point of view can be related as much to the Convention as to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs that specifically concern the rights of children and adolescents for interventions both of general scope - policies and programs adopted at the central level, and targeted actions framed and implemented at the local scale, put under monitoring for an evaluation of results achieved through methodologies in use that recall the survey and evaluation approach proposed at the global level by UNICEF.

For example, objectives introduced under the NRRP include measures to support parenthood, including through actions that can facilitate conciliation of family life with work engagements, particularly for women, as well as the fight against low birth rate. Mission 2 green transition investments and reforms contribute to the creation of youth employment in all sectors touched by the European Green Deal, including renewable energy, distribution networks, and the hydrogen supply chain. In particular, Missions 4 and 5 of the Plan cross-cuttingly aim at economic and social improvement in order to prevent family and child vulnerability by improving women's empowerment as well as how to access and use multiple family care services for a better parenting care for children. These interventions, in particular, aim to strengthen the conditions for the development of a knowledge-intensive economy, competitiveness and resilience, starting from the recognition of criticalities of education, training and research, to enhance the 'social' dimension of health, urban planning, housing policies, services for children, the elderly, and the most vulnerable, as well as training, employment, family support, security, multiculturalism, and gender equality, and finally to promote systemic socio-educational interventions to combat educational poverty in the South in support of the Third Sector. The allocation of financial resources of the NRRP stipulates that 5% - more than 11 billion euros - are earmarked for the implementation of interventions for families in charge of central and local authorities.

Along these considerations, it is clear that analysis and monitoring tools proposed both at the international level and at the European level, cannot fail to take into account the need for a close conceptual and operational correlation between the Convention and the 2030

⁸ https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en.

⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en#further-information.

Agenda for the real achievement of the goals set and in favour of the highest standard of promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents.

In the last decade the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) strongly invested in enhancing and strengthening information available for statistical purposes, releasing data for central administrations but also several local administrations, and it is continuing effectively and comprehensively in this important activity also strengthening the local dimension of sample surveys in specific projects.

Among the objectives introduced in the NRRP there are targeted measures to support parenthood, including through actions that can facilitate family-work balance, especially for women, and the fight against birthrate decrease.

In particular, Missions 4 and 5 of the Plan are aimed to deal with economic and social issues according to a cross-cutting vision, in order to prevent the vulnerability of families and children, to improve women's empowerment and access to and use of various family support services related to parenthood and childcare. The allocation of financial resources for the whole Plan foresees that 5% - more than 11 billion euros - will be earmarked for the implementation of family interventions under the competence of both central and local authorities.

In order to monitor the implementation of the Plan's commitments, a new tool has been developed in 2022 via the collaboration between ISTAT and the General State Accounting Office¹⁰.

This is a dashboard for navigating between the Plan's missions and indicators of well-being and development (BES), which, moreover, are directly linked to SDGs (more specifically, the two sets of indicators produced by the United Nations and at the national level only partially overlap, but are certainly complementary). In fact, ISTAT information system, which already includes the alignment of indicators to measure BES with the SDGs, is now also integrated with the six Missions envisaged in the NRRP.

The use of indicators to monitor public policies and assess progress towards sustainable development is now included in national public finance documents. So far the dashboard allows for a close monitoring of the Plan's measures through sustainable development indicators, including at the local level. In particular, the definitions of expenditure allocated to each of the components, measures and sub-measures of the NRRP provides, through these indicators, a precise interpretation of the performance of measures, also in terms of sustainability. In detail, the six Missions of the NRRP are divided into 285 sub-measures corresponding to 64 statistical indicators of the BES/SDGs.

The SDGs provide a framework for coordinating interventions from national and local governments and other stakeholders¹¹. A robust follow-up and review mechanism for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires a strong set of indicators and statistical data to monitor progress, implement actions, and ensure accountability of all stakeholders. This results-based vision entails an approach that seeks to ensure that all actors contribute, directly or indirectly, to a set of predefined outcomes. The international community agrees that monitoring and evaluation play a strategic role in providing a solid foundation for informed decision-making processes for the public interest. The aim is to improve the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of policy interventions¹². A concrete example of this approach to be translated in practice is the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative¹³ which supports local governments in implementing the 2030

¹⁰ <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/275128>.

¹¹ UNICEF Italia (2023), "Gli Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile e i Diritti dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza: come monitorarli a livello locale?".

¹² UNICEF (2010), "Bridging the gap. The role of Monitoring & Evaluation in Evidence-based policy making", New York UNICEF Evaluation Office.

¹³ <https://www.childfriendlycities.org/>.

Agenda by addressing children and adolescents' rights issues at the local level. The relationship between the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and the 2030 Agenda, therefore, is not only to pursue SDGs but also to foster local development¹⁴.

The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative is currently active in 42 countries worldwide: the reference framework is the same and is based on UNICEF international guidelines that are declined at the national level according to the administrative architecture of local governments. In Italy, it has been operational since 1998 and was renewed in 2018, in line with recent international guidance from UNICEF¹⁵.

The Initiative identifies the systematization of local governance processes related to policies for children and adolescents, as a key-precondition to face the 2030 Agenda challenges and proposes, as core elements of this systematization, the adoption of a child rights-based approach and the development of a programme to respond to the real needs of people aged under 18 based upon analytical evidence resulting (so called evidence-based decision making).

This approach, recalling the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments, suggests behaviours, actions, policies and programs to promote the participation of children and young people as rights-holders and increases the capacity of institutions and civil society to fulfil their obligations towards minors. The child rights-based approach encompasses a programming component to translate the principles set forth in the UN Convention into actions and solutions according to analytical evidence concerning the condition of minors in a given area¹⁶.

The analysis provides all information for the development of a strategy/action plan on childhood and adolescence and allows for the identification of indicators to monitor and assess the progress and impact on minors of policy programming. Moreover the analysis considers well-being of minors and all forms of deprivation they face, as well as allows for the identification of progress, challenges and opportunities to fully ensure the rights of children and adolescents.

The results of the analysis contribute to the identification of objectives, actions and goals to be included in an action plan on childhood and adolescence, whose actions need to be implemented – also along a sustainable vision – in the framework of existing planning tools provided for local governments.

To move from the analysis into a concrete action plan, the development of a set of indicators is key, to monitor the progress and impact on childhood and adolescence in terms of actions, roles and responsibilities of actors, proper timeframe and necessary resources.

Monitoring and evaluation of the impact that policy decisions have on children and adolescents is essential to assess their grade of implementation and to adopt improvements in policies, programs, investments to increase well-being of persons aged under 18; moreover, evidence and data are essential for effective protection and promotion of children's and adolescents' rights and to encourage local governments to advance and strengthen the implementation of children's rights. Adequate monitoring and evaluation enable local institutions and other actors who may be involved (civil society, private institutions, academies, individual citizens, and children and youth) to oversee and assess policies' impact, whether positive or negative, and thus enable them to reinforce their capacity to understand which measures work and why. From this also follows the

¹⁴ - UNICEF (2018), "Child Friendly Cities and Communities - Handbook", Geneva UNICEF Private Fundraising & Partnerships Division (PFP).

¹⁵ www.unicef.it/cittamiche.

¹⁶ UNICEF (2014) "Guiding questions to help implement a child rights approach", Source: UNICEF Child Rights Education Toolkit.

need to focus on data availability, i.e. those indicators that can be directly transformed into variables, designed to describe in details interventions under assessment. All these features are proposed in the Child Friendly City Initiative to those municipalities in Italy which join it under the management of the Italian Committee for UNICEF as a proper good conceptual and practical good practices along the lines of both international and national commitments, as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan according to a local perspective.