

## A deficit in international leadership

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In spite of an increased employment rate and improvements in social expenditure and policies, it must be noted the existence of negative social indicators such as incidence of poverty, work-related problems for women and marginalised social classes, along with new forms of discrimination and poverty. In the international level, NGOs observed with concern the total incapacity of the State to assume a leadership role on crucial development issues in the poorest countries.

### Inequalities in the past decade. *Che dire?*

Analyses of data on social spending and welfare policies in Italy in the last four to five years show an overall improvement; this is an important reversal of past trends, even if such spending increases were not sufficient to deal with problems of social exclusion and poverty. The increases are even more impressive if we consider that during this same period Italy has had to effect deep cuts in spending, adhering to a rigorous and severe fiscal plan that is among the most challenging in Europe.

In 1996, expenses on social services were about USD 272 million; with the new budget expected for 2001, such expenses should increase to USD 1,500 million. This piece of data best represents the Italian government's chosen path of increased spending (in overall terms). The emphasis is on provision of services rather than transfer payments as was typical in the old welfare system.

Other pieces of legislation augmented and transformed the framework of welfare policies in Italy in this period. For example, the government approved laws on immigration, the protection of children, the rights of the disabled, family issues, the civil service, and the fight against drugs. Also approved were a fundamental law reforming the welfare system as a whole and other laws and decrees regulating the 'third sector' (non-governmental organisations, volunteer work, social work) in terms of legal recognition and fiscal benefits.

Social policies are a more important part of the political agenda than in the past and are no longer assigned secondary place in development policies. A reinterpretation and revival of the EU tradition throughout Italian society, and a blossoming of the "Mezzogiorno" (the southern part of Italy) as a result of efforts to liberate the region from historical burdens and the grip of the Mafia, have also contributed to the new focus on social policies.

With the government reorganising along federal lines, the new laws have already set in motion strong decentralisation toward the regions and, even more so, the municipalities for management of social politics. Such decentralisation should lead to decisions being taken closer to where citizens' needs are expressed. This will likely involve a need for greater coordination in each area to find common solutions and maximize local capabilities and potential.

The qualitative leap represented by the above changes does not solve social problems. It is a good start, however, in that it reflects a reversal in past trends of government inattention and inefficiency in this area.

From the point of view of social analysis, it must be noted the existence—despite the above-mentioned improvements and increased employment—of negative social indicators (number of poor, work-related problems for women, marginalised social classes, *etc.*) along with new forms of discrimination and poverty. For example:

- The increased number of immigrants in Italy (a trend that will continue) has created significant pressure not yet resolved in terms of adequate social policies. The right to work and citizenship rights of immigrants are still not priorities for the government. Illegal immigration and work mobility of immigrants are the most dramatic and dangerous aspects of urban reality.
- According to the most recent statistics, the number of employees with salaries too low to maintain a minimal standard of living for their families is rising. This creates a series of problems of marginalisation and social exclusion, which are not always measurable with the traditional instruments and indicators. Marginalisation leads in turn to under-the-table work for senior citizens, women and minors, a high rate of school drop-outs, and the risk of recruitment into criminal organisations. With each of these, there is an increased violation of rights.
- There is a worrying trend of discrimination against those who cannot use the new information technologies. Such discrimination occurs on a social, generational and geographical basis, and may also be related to work, training, the crisis of education, and the lack of sufficient infrastructure in certain areas. These divisions in the country, if not dealt with immediately at the core, could lead to negative consequences. Clear signals of some of these consequences are already noticeable.

The situation is one in flux, in which severe social exclusion exists, but a process of renewed focus on social politics and reform has been launched. The nation and the local territorial units throughout Italy face the challenge of improving the quality of development and social policies. Success requires rediscovery of the culture of rights through a reinterpretation of the European conception of welfare for everyone. The outcome of this challenge is uncertain – and failure could mean a step backward for social politics in Italy.

### Italian civil society and international cooperation in the 1990s

Civil society has always actively sustained international solidarity in support of people fighting dictatorships and seeking independence or self-determination and of victims of civil wars and ethnic conflicts. In the 1990s, because of close proximity of the crisis in the Balkans, such solidarity, manifested by associations, local authorities and citizens' committees, ripened and developed into a more conscious and complex operational model.

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Italians have helped the population “across the Adriatic sea” rebuild their social and economic tissue: for the first time, Italian civil society reacted in an organised manner to a crisis in international politics. This led to the creation of important, decentralised programs of cooperation and the establishment of relations with the communities of the Balkan nations.

On 17 and 18 May 2000 in Ancona, Italy, in conjunction with the Conference of the Countries involved in the Stability Pact in the Balkans, a coalition of NGOs, various voluntary associations, local authorities and the Italian regions promoted the “Civil Society Forum for Cooperation and Support of Peace and Local Production in Defence of Human Rights in Albania, Macedonia, and the former Yugoslavia”. Programs and proposals that came out of that conference have been partially adopted by national institutions. Support for projects and local productive activities have been taken into the political programs of certain Italian political parties.

Unfortunately, this imbalance reflects the lack of an adequate and updated legislative framework that recognises and supports the role of NGOs and local authorities, which play a key role in international cooperation in decentralised Italy.

#### Official development cooperation faces institutional failure

In 1987, NGOs actively contributed to the approval of Law No. 49, which provided the first legal framework for Italian cooperation with developing countries.

NGOs subsequently observed with concern the bad use of this good legislative instrument, in a succession of episodes of severe corruption and waste that led to near paralysis of Italian development cooperation.

NGOs reported on the scandalous aspects of the “bad cooperation”. They also reported on the total incapacity of this G7 member country to improve the lives of the most vulnerable social groups in the poorest countries, although this was the goal set forth in Law No. 49. NGOs noted that Italian governments in the last ten years have not accorded sufficient importance to international cooperation, and funding for the principal international organisations and developing countries has been haphazard.

In light of the above, NGOs supported creation of a new law in keeping with the international agreements signed in the 1990’s at UN World Conferences on crucial development issues such as: continuity between humanitarian aid and development programs; reassessing international intervention and support for structural development; maintaining a strong Italian presence inside the OECD to reinforce positions such as elimination of tied aid; guaranteeing the quality of aid (since so little of the already small amounts allocated to aid goes to crucial development sectors such as education, health, and drinking water); coherence among development cooperation, foreign policy and positions taken by Italy within international organisations; and the increase of the aid level to at least 0.7%.

On 18 November 2000, the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Commission introduced legislation that included many of these objectives, and NGOs put pressure on the Italian parliament to approve the legislation before the term ended. Unfortunately, this approval was not forthcoming. By failing to make the rights of people in developing countries a priority, Italy once again lost an excellent opportunity to become a trustworthy leader on the world political scene.

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