

## 6. Bottom-up pressures, institutional hurdles and political concerns: the long path towards an ‘eco-welfare state’ in Italy

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns the notion of ‘sustainable welfare state’ in the Italian public and political debate in the 2010–20 decade. Since one can interpret ‘sustainability’ in several ways, and it is a highly contested concept (Gough, 2018; see Chapter 2 in this volume), our first aim is to clarify how Italian political and social actors conceptualize it and the related notion of ‘eco-welfare state’. Secondly, we analyse the main political parties and interest groups’ proposals aimed to build a social protection system that may protect the environment. Finally, we highlight the main obstacles along the path towards an integrated approach to economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Methodologically, the chapter employs a qualitative research approach, relying on the systematic analysis of relevant legislation, official documents by the government, social and political actors’ publications, as well as 12 interviews with key informants, members of the main Italian political parties, trade unions, employers’ associations and high-ranking bureaucrats (see Interviews section).

The findings reveal that, between 2010 and 2020, awareness of sustainability challenges – going beyond mere *economic* sustainability concerns – grew among social, political and institutional actors, although relevant institutional and political obstacles have prevented strong actions towards the construction of a more sustainable welfare state. The chapter shows that in the selected period sustainability has entered parties’, trade unions’ and business organizations’ programmes, platforms and manifestos. The main explanation for this outcome is the efforts of the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development

(ASviS), which represents the main actors behind the push for a ‘sustainable development’ policy agenda. ASviS’ activities have led to both significant changes in social and political actors’ ‘cognitive frameworks’ and relevant policy initiatives, among which is the definition of so-called Equitable and Sustainable Well-Being (BES) indicators. Nevertheless, there is (still) no comprehensive strategy on the issue, and institutional and political obstacles may hamper a paradigm shift aimed to pursue simultaneously social, ecological and economic goals.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. The second section outlines the different conceptualizations of sustainability among the main Italian social and political actors. The third section focuses on the main obstacles towards an eco-welfare state, as outlined by parties and interest organizations. The fourth section points out the main proposals advanced by political actors, and the recent initiatives taken by institutional actors to promote the construction of a sustainable welfare state. The fifth section concludes.

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE: WHAT ARE THE MEANINGS OF ‘PRODUCTIVIST’ AND ‘ECO-SOCIAL’ WELFARE STATES?

In the literature on political economy and comparative welfare policy, several authors have used the concepts of ‘productivism’ or ‘productivist’ for the opinion that one should maximize the potential economic productivity and growth potential of a country’s citizens (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 80). In some countries, productivism has meant that the welfare *state* must guarantee that people have the necessary resources and motivation to work (and that work is available) (Esping-Andersen, 1999). While productivist approaches differ, Goodin (2001: 15) claims that they have in common a concern ‘to ensure a smooth supply of labour to the productive sectors of the formal economy and they are all anxious that the welfare state not get too badly in the way of that’.

Critics of ‘pure’ productivism have mainly pointed to the ecological limits to growth in production and consumption on a finite planet. An increasing number of scholars advocate a nuanced ‘post-productivist’ approach to macroeconomic organization. According to these scholars, until now, productivism has neglected the environmental and ecological costs of solely giving priority to economic growth, higher employment rates and greater GDP (e.g. Birnbaum, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2009). Based on this criticism, we see calls for more explicit and consistent consideration of environmental sustainability and the eco-social dimensions of welfare.

Turning to the Italian case, we find that since the mid-2010s, a more nuanced concept of sustainability has entered the political arena and dis-

course. Indeed, most social and political actors are currently aware of the links between economic growth and *environmental* sustainability, although important differences are evident in the opinions of these actors on *how* one may achieve environmental sustainability. Moreover, few people connect such sustainability with *social* sustainability.

As for political parties, since the path-breaking national elections of 2013, the Italian party system has become three-polar: on the one side, the radical right party The League (L) has gradually become the leader of the centre-right coalition, though Forza Italia (FI) and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) retain a relevant share of the vote. On the left side, the centre-left Democratic Party is the pivotal actor, flanked by a number of centrist (so-called “+Europa”) and left-wing competitors (Liberi e Uguali, Potere al Popolo). The populist ‘catch-all’ party, the 5 Star Movement (M5S), completes the intricate Italian political puzzle.

These parties have promoted different concepts of sustainability: the Democratic Party (PD) has a long tradition of attention to environmental issues, as these concerns have traditionally found a place (at least on paper) in the agenda of left parties in Italy. In particular, in its 2018 electoral programme, the PD launched the concept of ‘*integral sustainability*’. This concept builds on the idea that all policy domains – from fiscal to industrial policy, from food to transportation and energy policy – should carefully take into account the environmental dimension, as Italy needs a regeneration of its cities and the requalification of its territories, with innovative modes promoting high ecologic value, quality, individual well-being and social inclusion (Democratic Party, 2018).

It is important to emphasize that PD’s positions on environmental issues – as well as on sustainability – are included in the section of the electoral programme titled ‘More jobs and more quality jobs’, not in a separate dedicated section. The lack of a separate environmental section and the inclusion of environmental issues in the ‘labour’ chapter suggest that PD considers the ecological revolution as an opportunity for economic growth, for firms and workers as well. For the same reason, the PD programme emphasizes the green economy paradigm, based on long-term investments. The party considers such investments as a win-win situation because it would create more jobs and make enterprises more ‘sustainable *and* more competitive’ (Democratic Party, 2018). Similarly, this party also explicitly associates de-carbonization and environmental sustainability with the improvement of the Italian industrial sector’s competitiveness, thus further reinforcing the conceptualization of sustainability as a growth opportunity.

The Five Star Movement (5SM) also elicits a comprehensive definition of sustainability, seeing it as an inter-sectoral and encompassing concept that needs to be taken into consideration in different policy domains, ‘from infrastructure to waste management, but it also considers foreign and international

relations, in addition to migration' (Interview no. 2). The idea of sustainability supported by 5SM builds on the reduction of consumption and limitation in resource usage. Indeed, the party affirms that it is necessary to live within the limits of one planet, that is, within the natural system's capacity while maintaining its 'vitality and resistance' (ASviS, 2018c). It also argues that 'for national and international institutions, the reduction of energy consumption should be a strategic priority to address environmental global emergencies' (Five Star Movement, 2018). To pursue such objectives, the 5SM proposes to take into consideration the 'ecological footprint', that is, an estimate of the level of nature, land and water resources needed to satisfy the community's needs and absorb waste.<sup>1</sup>

Although neither its representatives nor official documents explicitly articulated it, such conceptualization of sustainability seems to imply the possible clash with economic growth: setting limits on resource usage may in fact lead to a decrease of production levels and, thus, to a different paradigm of economic development which does not necessarily imply sustained growth.

Of particular relevance for this volume is that the 5SM also outlines the linkages between environmental and social sustainability, explicitly arguing that improving environmental conditions would positively affect the welfare state. For example, this party relates air pollution with health care and pensions. The main argument is, therefore, that pollution reduction would diminish negative externalities – especially in the field of health care – and one should invest the related savings in other sectors, making the welfare state and the labour market more sustainable. Moreover, besides attention to the environment, 5SM includes the idea of fair 'distribution' in its own definition of sustainability, to be intended in relations to 'economic resources, the guaranteed access to basic services and the elimination of creative finance' (Interview no. 2).

The right side of the political spectrum is less interested in sustainability when not linked to the adjective *economic* (Centre-right coalition, 2018). Its electoral programme gives limited attention to these issues and what it does state seems more a 'declaration of intent' rather than a realistic project, as it is quite vague and general. In addition, in the interview with the League, the spokesperson never mentioned the transition to a green economy. Sustainability is mostly linked with economic parameters (e.g. the financial sustainability of the pension system) or to denunciation of the social '*unsustainability*' of immigration. Migration has a central dimension in the League's conception of sustainability: 'If the yearly number of migrants arriving in Italy is too high, then the system is not sustainable ... because we need to provide them with housing, education, language courses, jobs ...' (Interview no. 11). The League claims that migrants drain financial resources, which one could use differently, eventually, also to achieve (environmental) sustainability. Furthermore, the League argues that without sustained economic growth, it is

impossible to maintain the social protection system, which, according to the League, relies on contributions levied on the employed population (according to a pure social insurance model). Significantly, on the other hand, taxation on work should be radically reduced (Interview no. 11).

Switching from political actors to *the social partners*, we see that recently also trade unions have elaborated specific conceptualizations of ‘sustainability’. Among the three main trade unions confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) both CGIL – by far the largest and traditionally more leftist Italian trade union confederation – and UIL – the smallest and more centre-left – have broad and encompassing notions of sustainability. Moreover, they have elaborated specific policy proposals centred on ‘work’. Indeed, the General Confederation of Italian Labour (CGIL) supports the idea that the future development model should combine attention to the environment *and* job quality. Behind this vision, we seem to find the belief that one should not see environmental or ecological aspects as incompatible with work and economic growth, and that a synthesis is not only feasible, but also necessary. In fact, ‘environmental development and actions for climate have a positive impact ... on growth’ (CGIL, 2018). Similarly, the Italian Labour Union (UIL) does not consider growth, work and environmental sustainability as alternatives, and that ‘there is no need to choose between employment and the protection of environment and climate’ (ITUC CSI IGB and TUAC, 2017).

Among the labour organizations, CGIL is particularly active, advancing ideas and proposals to achieve sustainability. In particular, it produced an ad hoc document on sustainable growth – the so-called ‘Integrated Platform for Sustainable Development’ – demanding ‘integrated action’ including economic development, full employment, respect for the planet and human rights’ (CGIL, 2018), thus highlighting an idea of sustainability which is well beyond mere environmental protection. The largest Italian employer association, Confindustria, conceptualizes sustainability differently. Indeed, while the unions conceive job quality, social protection and workers’ rights as important dimensions of sustainability, Confindustria sees this as a mere ‘economic opportunity’: if/when firms switch to the ecological paradigm, they will become more competitive and they will make the economy grow. In this view, sustainability is a ‘key factor of competition’ (Confindustria, 2018b), since – at least in the long term – promoting sustainability would increase the competitiveness of the Italian production system (Confindustria, 2018b). In other words, sustainability is strategic to solve the structural weaknesses of the Italian economy (Confindustria, 2018b). Confindustria, in particular, identifies some specific ‘economic’ benefits deriving from the adoption of a sustainable model, such as decreasing production costs (e.g. lowering energy costs through the adoption of low-impact production) and attracting consumers and investors due to increased reputation (Confindustria, 2018b). If sustainability is a key to

overcome the structural problems of the Italian economy, firms should stand at the centre of the process of change – they are the actors that should promote sustainability in the Italian system – a vision that meets strong criticism from CGIL (2018).

Against this background, Confindustria's view on sustainability (outlined in documents such as 'Social Responsibility for 4.0 Industry', the 'Manifesto of firms that change, for a more sustainable country', and 'The vision and the proposal', presented in Verona in February 2018) – is built on three main pillars. The first of these is the identification of the crucial strategic priorities (called 'missions') Italy should pursue: more work for young people, economic growth and gradual reduction of public debt. The second is the identification of the key actors to be involved in pursuing these 'missions' (firms, Europe, the State). The third is the proposition of six 'key axes': (1) more efficient and lighter bureaucracy; (2) better education, training and inclusion of young people in the labour market; (3) investment in infrastructures and the environment to achieve sustainability; (4) social and technological innovation; (5) pro 'investment and growth' tax system; and (6) stronger emphasis on market stability in the European Union.

Overall, the analysis of Italian social, political and economic actors' discourse also reveals interesting but contrasting understandings of what an ecological welfare state is (or should be). From document analysis and interviews, it is possible to identify two different conceptualizations: the first can be defined as *productivist*, the second *inclusive*, the two differing in relation to the role that the welfare state should play in the transition from the current production system to the green economy. Not surprisingly, these actors express divergent views on how one should manage how this transition emerges, especially between trade unions and business associations.

Confindustria promotes a productivist approach. According to the main Italian business organization, green growth is beneficial for the society as a whole, since by adopting an economic growth model based on sustainability, the entire country can be more competitive and better connected (Confindustria, 2018a). In this framework, social protection plays a limited role. Indeed, Confindustria does not conceptualize a clear link between the social protection system and environmental sustainability. It rather focuses on education and training, as well as on the need to facilitate young people's insertion into the labour market. In its economic policy document, Confindustria explicitly calls for both high-quality education and more training to facilitate insertion in the labour market, for example by 'projecting a school system which links professional skills' requirements and training courses' (Confindustria, 2018a). Other proposals concern specific apprenticeship programmes reserved for firms planning production according to environmental sustainability principles. Active labour market policies and a business-oriented education system

to support the establishment of a green economy are therefore the key elements of Confindustria's idea of a sustainable welfare state.

Trade unions promote an inclusive approach, suggesting a shift to an economic model based on respect for the environment, which would have positive long-term consequences also in terms of economic growth. However, according to trade unions, this growth will not automatically benefit all workers and citizens, unless mediated by the public welfare system. Therefore, the trade unions highlight explicitly the linkages between environmental sustainability and the social protection system, emphasizing the importance of a tightly managed transition towards the green economy. For example, UIL states that one should guarantee that 'workers and community will not pay the price for change' (ITUC CSI IGB and TUAC, 2017). The transition should include plans and investments to guarantee high-quality jobs, no pollution and poverty reduction. According to CGIL, in order to follow a sustainable growth model and assist the ecological transition, one has to pursue some key priorities: job creation, social protection, labour rights and social dialogue (CGIL, 2018). CGIL also emphasizes the connections between ecological and social sustainability, arguing that promoting environmental protection and supporting social policies and job creation are 'part of the same strategy': one should see welfare provision as a tool to switch towards the green economy. As an example of this kind of approach, one should manage pension funds according to a logic of sustainability, making it necessary to pursue sustainable investments, as well as disinvestment from fossil resources and extremely polluting production (CGIL, 2018; Interview no. 6).

Although both trade unions and business organizations support sustainable economic growth, the former argue that some policies should be implemented to prevent the potential negative side-effects of the economic transition (i.e. a just transition approach, cf. Sabato et al., Chapter 9 in this volume). By contrast, business organizations do not seem to worry because the benefits of a sustainable industrial system (i.e. according to a green growth model) would automatically translate into well-being increases for the entire society.

We find these divergent visions of sustainability reflected in how political and social actors use references to the Sustainable Development Goals, as stated in the Agenda 2030, or to the Italian Sustainability Strategy in their electoral claims (see the fourth section). Indeed, all political and social actors considered in this report have demonstrated knowledge of these goals as well as the ability to include them strategically when elaborating their programmes and strategies, with the exception of the League, which in the interview openly admitted to know neither the goals nor the National Strategy (Interview no. 11). As outlined in the next sections, such diffused knowledge relates at least partially to the creation of the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS). This has emerged as a key advocacy coalition (Sabatier

and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and has been able to open new discussion fora with governmental, social and institutional actors to both discuss the Italian national development strategy and demand its alignment with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The PD, in its electoral programme, makes a specific reference to the Italian National Strategy and to objectives established in the framework of Europe 2030, especially to Goals 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 which concern energy, economic growth, innovation, sustainable cities and responsible consumption, where the notion of circular economy is central. ‘Smart cities’ seem to emerge as an important issue with an entire paragraph on this in the electoral programme.

When it comes to 5SM, it makes no particular reference to the SDG nor to the National Strategy in its electoral programme. However, its proposals on mobility, tourism, energy, land use and so on seem to be clearly inspired by these goals. Moreover, in response to ASviS’ requests before the 2018 election, 5SM promised to implement the Italian National Strategy for Sustainable Development and pursue environmental sustainability with the purpose to achieve the 17 SDGs of Agenda 2030.

Nonetheless, in the government ‘contract’, signed by 5SM and the League in May 2018, a few weeks before appointing Conte as their Prime Minister – there are few points referring to sustainability. Although some of the ideas presented by 5SM have been included in the contract, it seems to water down the proposals concerning environment with respect to the original electoral programme. This should not come as a surprise, since the League demonstrates poor knowledge of the SDGs and the Italian National Sustainability Strategy. This relevance of the ‘League’ as a ‘veto player’ is also confirmed by later events: with the government coalition 5SM-PD, in September 2019, the 17 SDGs and the 2030 Agenda were included among the 29 points that compose the alliance’s political programme.

The trade unions and Confindustria participate in the ‘fora’ organized by ASviS. These are working groups created to discuss specific issues, one for each of the SDGs (ASviS, 2018a). It is therefore easier to identify which of the SDGs they most take into consideration. CGIL has chosen to focus on some of the 17 fora and in particular those on ‘no poverty’ (forum number 1), gender equality (5), decent work and economic growth (8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (9), reduced inequalities (10), sustainable cities and communities (11) and responsible consumption and production (12). Moreover, in the interview with one of its main representatives, it emerged that ‘the Sustainable Development Goals are not enough *per se*, as they should be adapted to consider regional differences and the gap between the North and the South of the country’ (Interview no. 6). Similarly, UIL takes part in some of the fora, in particular those on poverty (1), sustainable cities and communities (11), decent work and economic growth (8), and climate action (13). It is quite clear that



trade unions participate in the fora that most clearly fit their interests in terms of representation, especially when it comes to work, economic growth and social issues such as (the fight against) poverty – an issue related to the SDGs of common interest among labour organizations.

As a member of ASviS, Confindustria is also to some extent taking the SDGs into consideration. More specifically, it participates in the working fora on decent work and economic growth (forum number 8), innovation and infrastructure (9) and sustainable cities and communities (11). These three goals represent three different areas in which the business organization can contribute, while looking at sustainability from the point of view of enterprises, therefore deepening the analysis of the relationship between the market and environmental sustainability.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE MAIN BARRIERS TO THE CREATION OF SUSTAINABLE WELFARE STATES IN ITALY

In our interviews, all social and political actors have highlighted the presence of many barriers to the construction of a sustainable economic and social system in Italy. We can cluster these barriers in four categories: (i) constraints of a political nature; (ii) coordination problems; (iii) lack of information and awareness; and, last but not least (iv) budgetary constraints.

The first type of constraint is political. In general, parties, interest groups and associations emphasize the lack of political will by the government. CGIL underlines that ‘institutions have not created yet a formal dialogue between government and civil society organizations; therefore, any attempt of civil society to promote sustainability is *de facto* blocked’ (Interview no. 7). UIL expresses similar worries using almost the same words, arguing that ‘policy-makers seem available with their words, but not with their facts. At the end, they decide according to fiscal considerations. However, sustainability needs a long-term perspective, not the short-term horizon that prevails in politics’ (Interview no. 12). Indeed, the perspective of the 2030 agenda may include short-term losses to achieve medium and long-term benefits, and it can potentially clash with the policymakers’ need to obtain short-term results and consensus (ASviS, 2016).

Another problem frequently raised by interviewees is that, even when social and political actors decide to support the shift towards an eco-welfare state, they see that coordination problems between different government levels are emerging. CGIL, for example, argues that in Italy there is a system ‘without guidance’ (Interview no. 7). This is because, formally, the Ministry of Environment and Territory has the competence to manage the (environmental) sustainability issue, but this is a general and transversal policy, rather than

a compounded one (Interview no. 7). In Italy, the Ministry of Environment has a department called ‘Directorate for Sustainable Development’, which is ultimately responsible for the elaboration of the Italian National Strategy for Sustainable Development. However, this department hinges on the traditional Italian administrative structure, hierarchically subordinated to the Ministry of Environment, and with no formal horizontal linkages with other ministries and/or department – including the area of social and welfare policies.

In addition, the Ministry of Environment has limited resources and weak political power with respect to other government institutions (Interview nos. 5 and 7). Solving coordination problems is thus crucial to increase attention to sustainability and to consider the issue as a key element for the development of the Italian economic system. Currently, a major debate in Italy is whether the Directorate for Sustainable Development ought to be under the lead of the Ministry of the Environment – as it has been so far – or under the responsibility of the Council of Ministers. Considering the limited resources and the weak political power of the former, the interviews indicate that a direct involvement of the Council of Ministers would be a crucial step to foster horizontal and vertical integration and promote sustainable development in Italy (Interview nos. 3 and 5). Such a shift would make the formal structures within which coordination takes place more similar to the German case (see Chapter 5).

In addition to government and executive agencies, whether at the national or local level, citizens might also play a role in the ‘road towards sustainability’. However, many of the interviewees stressed how difficult it is to carry out strategies promoting sustainability when people are neither informed nor aware of the implications of the switch towards a green economy. Interviewees from 5SM, the PD and the trade unions state that information should be spread through the population, either through technological platforms that make participation possible (Interview no. 2), through institutional channels such as television (Interview no. 9) or even through events such as festivals, such as those promoted by ASviS (Interview nos. 6 and 12). These arguments are particularly emphasized by 5SM: ‘Few people know that food habit determines more than one third of adults’ pathologies ... Everybody should know the origins of the water we drink or how smartphones are made’ (Interview no. 2). Moreover, the party highlights that ‘there exist data concerning the population state of health which are collected every year, but they are kept secret for five years before being published. This lack of transparency does not allow people to be informed and participate with awareness to the construction of a sustainable civil society through platforms like *Rousseau*’ (Interview no. 2.). ‘Rousseau’ is the web platform for political participation set up and run by 5SM (<https://rousseau.movimento5stelle.it/>).

Also the PD supports the idea that information is crucial in the process of transition: it is important to spread knowledge about the relevance of sustain-

ability and the existence of sustainable practices – for example through public service broadcasting – such that citizens can change lifestyles and get used to a new paradigm in their daily life.

In addition, the social partners acknowledge that the diffusion of information among citizens is a crucial challenge. CGIL and UIL, in particular, promote events with this goal, especially in cooperation with ASviS. Confindustria instead highlights the need to focus on training and education for employers and firms. It claims that information on sustainability should begin in schools – in particular in technical and professional institutes – an idea that is shared by the PD, 5SM and the trade unions, and stresses the relevance of education about environmental issues in primary school already.

Education and the importance of being ‘prepared’ – in terms of skills useful for the transition towards a sustainable economy – is particularly emphasized by trade unions and the PD. CGIL argues that the shift to a ‘green economy’ can lead to the creation of high-quality jobs. However, these jobs cannot be created unless the education system is also ready. This declaration is particularly telling of the CGIL point of view:

If we say that competences are a strategic factor, they must be created and teachers must be trained to be able to contribute to the promotion of the culture of sustainability. How can schools invest [i]n the necessary competences for innovation if the personnel do not know what we are talking about? (Interview no. 6)

The education system should thus address this problem and favour a real connection between schools/universities and the new labour market (Interview no. 6).

Another obstacle highlighted by interviewees is the lack of economic resources. ASviS in particular argues that a major drawback limiting the possibility to promote effectively a sustainable development strategy is the absence of a fund specifically targeted to its implementation. Interestingly, however, political actors address the question of budgetary constraints from different angles. The PD addresses the scarcity of resources especially for what concerns the maintenance of the welfare system, with particular reference to the health care system, stating that ‘universal health care service is crucial, and its support must be continuous’ (Interview no. 9).

The League addresses the problem of the lack of economic resource by blaming the European Union, the central State and the (illegal) migrants: these represent costs that should be avoided. In the interview it emerged that according to the League, the European Union is a cost because Italy – and especially Northern regions – pay more than they receive back while the central State is inefficient and imposes a high tax burden (Interview no. 11). In addition, there is a tendency to perceive migrants as ‘guilty’ since they absorb

economic resources, which could be devoted to other purposes. CGIL points at the difficulties to invest in sustainability due to the budgetary constraints given by the current European governance framework (Interview no. 6). Similarly, Confindustria and UIL highlight fiscal constraints, while also pointing to the large Italian debt as the main cause for the limited possibility to invest in a green strategy (Interview nos. 8 and 12). Despite having different opinions regarding who is to blame, these actors consider limited scope for investment as a key factor impeding a shift towards an ‘eco-welfare state’ in Italy. Yet, this was a vision not completely supported by 5SM, which in the interview outlined that Italy should allocate its public spending differently so that it could invest more in this policy area (Interview no. 2).

## POLICY PROPOSALS AND PRACTICES: POTENTIAL WAYS OF NUDGING WELFARE STATES IN THE DIRECTION OF SUSTAINABLE WELFARE STATES

If we move from conception to policy proposals, we find that there are some concrete signs that Italy moved (albeit slowly) in the direction of sustainable development. The Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea developed the Italian National Sustainable Development Strategy – calling it the Environmental Action Strategy for Sustainable Development in Italy (NSDS) – and the government adopted it for the first time in 2002. The Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea wrote within the frameworks of the sixth Environmental Action Plan, the guidelines of the Gothenburg (2001) European Council, and especially the Barcelona (2002) European Council. Designed by the Ministry of Environment, the Action Strategy later gained the approval of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE) – an inter-ministerial body responsible for coordination and horizontal integration of national economic policies – in August 2002, with the aim of favouring horizontal coordination and a more effective implementation of the strategy. As for the linkages between environmental and welfare issues, the strategy did not contain any specific reference to social policy, beyond some broad references to the importance of tackling threats to public health, especially in terms of exposure to air pollution (Ministry of Environment and Land Protection, 2002).

Years later, Italy’s involvement in the preparations for the United Nations ‘Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ from 15 September 2015 led to a new political process (Interview nos. 3, 4 and 5). The next step was the final approval of the Agenda 2030 in December 2015 after two years pending in Parliament. The so-called ‘Collegato Ambientale’ (Law 221/2015, renamed ‘Provisions to promote measures on Green economy and to limit the extensive use of natural resources’), committed the Italian

Ministry of Environment to take proper actions and measures in different fields related to green economy and sustainable development. In December 2016, the PD government led by Gentiloni (December 2016–May 2018) decided that from 2017, the Italian Budget Law could not be approved before it had been evaluated against its effect on four out of 12 indicators of Equitable and Sustainable Well-Being (BES). Accordingly, the procedure is to calculate the median available per capita income, the inactivity rate (with composition differentiated according to gender), an inequality index based on ‘available income’, and the per capita CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gas emissions and include these indicators in programme documents in order to complement GDP as the main indicator of the country’s well-being. Other indicators will be added as statistical models advance with a view to providing new insights into the economic and financial programming cycle. The main idea behind these indicators is that economic parameters alone are inadequate to evaluate the societal progress. Instead, they should be complemented with both social and environmental information, covering measures of both social inequality and sustainability. For these reasons, the indicators include 12 different dimensions: health, education and training, work and life balance, economic well-being, social relationships, politics and institutions, security, subjective well-being, landscape and cultural heritage, environment, research and innovation, and quality of services (for greater information, see ISTAT, 2014, 2015, 2016). Since ISTAT began to work on the construction of the BES indicators before the introduction of the SDGs (ISTAT, 2013), these two concepts do not completely overlap, but they are inspired by a very similar logic.

The introduction of BES indicators constitutes a clear sign of interest and an encouragement to advance on the path towards sustainability, although CGIL partially criticized this choice by stating that the chosen indicators are not sufficient, and they are among the ‘easiest’ to achieve (Interview no. 7). Nonetheless, Italy was the first European country to adopt such indicators in official economic documents, thus formally stating the relevance of SDGs elaborated within the Europe 2030 context, and as highlighted in the PD’s 2018 electoral programme. Law 163/16 which also established the Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing Committee headed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance and composed of the President of ISTAT (Italian National Statistical Institute), the Governor of the Bank of Italy and two other experts on the issue of sustainability (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2018). The Committee has the task of selecting the BES indicators to be included in the legislative process.

Domestic political dynamics facilitated these developments – and more generally, the relevance of the 2030 Agenda in Italy. ASViS was established – on the initiative of Enrico Giovannini, Minister of Labour and Social Policies during the 2013–14 grand coalition government – by the University of Tor

Vergata in Roma and the ‘Unipolis’ Foundation on 3 February 2016. ASviS brings together over 150 of the most important interest groups, civil society organizations and networks, including organizations representing the main social partners (business, trade unions and third sector associations), public and private universities, research centres and associations of local public administrations. ASviS has published annual reports outlining the main challenges for SDGs in Italy, making seven concrete proposals to strengthen the strategy, promoting coordination among different stakeholders and raising awareness about the need for horizontal coordination among different organizations and associations.

Among others, ASviS called, firstly, for the introduction of the principle of sustainable development in the Italian Constitution. Indeed, ASviS deposited at the Italian Court of Appeal a draft law of citizens’ initiative concerning changes to Articles 2 and 9 of the Constitution, to include environmental protection as a fundamental human right. Secondly, it demanded that the Italian government take full responsibility for the implementation of the NSDS, preparing every year a Report on Sustainable Development (not every three years as requested by the current legislation). Thirdly, it proposes that the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE) is renamed ‘the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Sustainable Development (CISS)’ to increase the visibility of the strategy. Finally, it proposed the creation of a ‘Committee on the 2030 Agenda’, including all relevant stakeholders and experts in the concerned fields.

The National Sustainable Development Strategy (Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea Protection, 2017), approved by the Italian government in 2017, met some of these demands. For instance, it made the Prime Minister’s Office (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri) responsible for the overall coordination and management of the NSDS in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Environment holds the day-to-day responsibility for coordinating the review of the NSDS every three years but the process is overseen by the Prime Minister’s Office. These steps represent concrete efforts to enhance the level of coordination of public policies to deliver on the ambitions of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

Furthermore, among its specific policy proposals, ASviS wanted to reinforce the Plan Against Poverty, which was approved in 2019 by the Council of Ministers. The Alliance has gained recognition as a key partner of the Italian government in the preparation of the ‘Italian Strategy for Sustainable Development’.

ASviS met the political parties in 2018 to ask them to commit to a sustainable agenda (ASviS, 2018b). The PD and 5SM supported increased inter-ministerial coordination through the switch from CIPE to the Inter-Ministerial Committee

for Sustainable Development (the latter called Committee for Sustainable Development and Environmental Sustainability, Circular Economy and Common Goods protection; ASviS, 2018d). Indeed, after the government change, in November 2019 the Senate voted for the transformation of CIPE to ‘Inter-Ministerial Committee for Economic Planning and Sustainable Development’ (CIPESS). The new name took effect from January 2021 and should ensure that Italian economic policies will be coordinated with the 17 SDGs.

Already before this, the PD – which was the leading partner in the three broad coalition governments in power between 2013 and 2018 – had proposed the introduction of three laws that had important consequences in terms of ‘sustainability’. Firstly, Law 208/2015 introduced a new type of enterprise in the Italian legal system, defined as a ‘benefit corporation’. This new type of company, rather than focusing on profit only, is required to have a positive impact ‘on both society and the environment’. Secondly, with the adoption of Law 166/16 on food surpluses, the Renzi government intended to promote the so-called ‘circular economy’, which entails the reuse of food, drugs and pharmaceutical products, involving creative solutions within the entire supply chain (Interview no. 9). This law favoured the donation of overproduced food by restaurants and cafes and was followed by the emergence of smartphone apps that could assist in the collection and redistribution of surpluses. Thirdly, Law 141/15 on ‘Social Agriculture’ introduced explicit links between agriculture and social needs, including specific incentives to hire disadvantaged people in agriculture. It defined rehabilitation paths for those who are at risk of social exclusion – such as disabled people, formal detainees and drug addicts – through agriculture and animal farming. Furthermore, this law promotes initiatives in the fields of food and environmental education. Thus, even if the law does not directly incentivize sustainable practices in agriculture, according to its supporters, it indirectly promotes their adoption through investments in education and training associated with biodiversity protection. From these government acts emerge some connection between policies aimed to include disadvantaged people and the diffusion of sustainability practices in agriculture.

Besides supporting the introduction of the BES, the PD stresses that in order to address sustainability at the national level it is crucial to involve trade unions, environmental associations and the third sector (Interview no. 9). Therefore, ideally, the path towards sustainability should imply a consultation process – if not proper concertation – with all the groups potentially affected by the introduction of sustainability practices. In addition, the PD points at the European Union as an important political actor that has to play a role in the road towards the eco-welfare state. More specifically, it considers the European Union’s rules and general guidelines as crucial, potentially representing a starting point

for many initiatives, with particular reference to the circular economy and social agriculture. In fact, in 2018, the European Union launched the ‘Circular Economy Package’ addressing the management of plastic but also raw materials during the entire supply chain, establishing an action programme from production to consumption, from waste management to placing on the market for reuse. Social agriculture has not been the object of an entire package at the European level, but one has been regulated and promoted within the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, based on Goal 9, that is, the promotion of social inclusion and the fight against poverty and discrimination. This law constitutes the framework for national action, and according to the PD, Europe has to go further in this direction (Interview no. 9).

The 5SM, while in opposition, has also launched proposals to move towards a sustainable welfare state, which are inter-sectoral and therefore include different policy fields. Like the PD, it promotes the circular economy, waste reduction and reuses (Interview no. 2). Furthermore, 5SM considers that the finance sector should be completely reoriented, and that it is fundamental to shift from ‘speculative finance’ – irrespective of environmental concerns – to a regulated financial sector that can contribute to hydrogeological stability (Interview no. 2). Another proposal is the reuse of public real estate to guarantee the right to housing. Indeed, housing – through the recovery of already existing buildings – is a policy field that in the 5SM electoral pledges should be developed to achieve an eco-welfare state. It is important to emphasize how, according to 5SM, this overall ‘renovation’ of the economy will also lead to the creation of new jobs.

Unlike the PD and 5SM, the League has few proposals to promote sustainability, due to their weak attention to the theme and lack of conceptualization of the linkage between environment and welfare. In its programme there is only a rather vague reference to the introduction of ‘rewarding and facilitated mechanisms’ (The League, 2018) that can help citizens to move in the direction of a circular economy. Furthermore, the League refused the creation of any waste-to-energy plants in Lombardy to avoid receiving waste from other regions; it formally supported the importance of the transition towards a green economy and energy, besides emphasizing the promotion of Italian agriculture and the need to modernize infrastructure and transport (The League, 2018). Thus, the League addresses the theme of environmental sustainability in its electoral programme, but it does not consider its linkages with social sustainability. In fact, it gives no attention to the potential social consequences of the shift towards a circular economy and/or green economy, which the electoral programmes mentioned while the interviews did not (Interview no. 11). Yet, this party has a clear idea concerning the institutional structure, supporting decentralization and a federalist state based on regions. A greater autonomy to regions would allow them to be more efficient in the implementation of



environmental policies as ‘the recognition of further competences to regions should be coupled with necessary resources’ (The League, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the Italian trade unions consider social dialogue between government, workers and employers (CGIL, 2018; ITUC CSI IGB and TUAC, 2017; UIL, 2017) as the crucial instrument to foster sustainability (Interview no. 6). In particular, CGIL supports a strategy based on multilevel bargaining through ‘reinforcing cooperation with CISL and UIL and alliances with civil society organizations and promoting democratic participation ... Collective bargaining aimed at (integrated) development should occur at national, regional and local level’ (CGIL, 2018). CGIL thus promotes the concept of ‘territoriality’: collective bargaining performed at the various government levels in order to achieve a comprehensive implementation of a ‘sustainability’ strategy. Nevertheless, collective bargaining might have an important role also in making public procurement adopt criteria of energetic and environmental sustainability, because territorial bargaining can help public administrations with both training of personnel and with the promotion of minimum environmental criteria in the agreement of public contracts (Interview no. 6). Moreover, CGIL supports the idea of introducing an ‘environmental tax’ (CGIL, 2018). This proposal is directly linked to Law 23/2014 which aimed to establish ‘a more equal, transparent and growth-oriented fiscal system’, therefore also including environmental sustainability. The revenue from the tax should then be invested into research and the development of new technologies, renewable energies and emergencies prevention.

As mentioned above, Confindustria also elaborated plans to achieve sustainability. This organization considers that enterprises – especially small and medium firms, the core of the Italian industrial system – should be at the very centre of its strategy. Furthermore, Confindustria itself should play an important role, promoting awareness regarding social and environmental problems – and the possibility for growth – among its associated firms, encouraging business models based on the SDGs and developing training programmes on sustainability based on the Agenda 2030. In addition, Confindustria asks the government to support firms that adopt good practices in the concerned field through: (i) facilitations when participating in public procurement; (ii) easing access to credit; and (iii) fostering public investments in research associated with the study of sustainable practices and technologies. Concerning the latter dimension, Confindustria promotes the creation of partnerships with institutions, such as universities and non-governmental organizations, to support innovation practices and encourage business schools and universities to develop a culture of sustainability.

It is fair to say that Confindustria is one of the social actors that has devoted more attention and proposals to promote sustainability by instituting ad hoc bodies. Beyond proposals, it has also created a ‘specialized group’ defined

as ‘technical group for firms’ social responsibility’. The group has elaborated a manifesto on firms’ social responsibility, providing specific tools to foster the diffusion of good practices. Furthermore, during the ‘Sustainable Development Festival’ organized by ASviS in 2019, the ten most representative enterprises’ associations at national level presented a document called ‘Speed up the transition to sustainability. Firms for the 2030 Agenda’, where Confindustria’s priorities were further emphasized.

This brief reconstruction allows an emphasis on the presence of specific proposals regarding how to move towards an ‘eco-welfare state’ in parties’ and interest groups’ programmes and manifestos, in addition to the existence of many differences and some similarities among them. The centre-left PD has concrete proposals that should ease the gradual shift towards a more sustainable economy through better governance instruments, the introduction of new indicators and the adoption of the ‘circular economy’ paradigm. Furthermore, it considers the European Union an important actor that has to play a role in this shift. The 5SM also emphasizes the importance of the shift towards an ‘eco-welfare state’. While supporting the circular economy and new governance instruments, this party assigns a great role to citizenship involvement, and the potential role of ordinary citizens in shaping the economy. Conversely, the League does not consider ‘sustainability’ a priority – and its proposals to solve Italian problems – through decentralization, the fight against migration and the European Union – are only indirectly associated with potential ways of nudging welfare states in the direction of eco-social states.

In addition, trade unions and employer associations have their specific policy proposals. CGIL in particular emphasizes the role of collective bargaining at different government levels. It considers the inclusion of social partners and civil society organizations in the policymaking process as a key to promote the shift towards sustainability. Confindustria’s proposals give less emphasis to bargaining, which it deems crucial for the diffusion of information and training related to the opportunity for growth associated with the shift towards a ‘greener’ economy among small and medium enterprises.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is aimed at understanding how the main Italian social and political actors conceive sustainability, and eventually how they plan to move from the status quo to an ‘eco-welfare state’. The results are interesting, since awareness has grown between 2010 and 2020, although relevant political, economic and institutional obstacles have prevented sound actions towards the construction of a more sustainable welfare state.

The findings are particularly telling if we look at the ‘conceptualization’ of sustainability, as the issue has entered in parties’, labour and business

organizations' programme documents. Most of these actors have a rather comprehensive idea of sustainability, which includes different policy sectors, going beyond environmental policies only. Moreover, all social and political forces have identified linkages between environment and social policies, the exception being the League.

In this regard, the creation of ASviS has played a key role, giving a boost to the diffusion of awareness concerning the 17 SDGs, Agenda 2030 and the National Italian Strategy of Sustainability among political and social actors. ASviS was able to build upon what before had only been a latent and dispersed socio-political demand for the transition towards an 'eco-welfare state' in Italy by adopting a different mechanism. Firstly, it created specific fora related to the various SDGs, spreading relevant information and favouring the discussion on these topics among social and political actors. Secondly, building on these, it has contributed to steer the Italian political debate by promoting a 'sustainable' agenda specifically built on an analysis of the main economic, social and institutional weaknesses of the country. The emergence of such an active – and resourceful – advocacy coalition (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) has also played a role in pushing the interest and later the agenda of political parties towards a 'sustainable development' policy agenda, as our analysis of party platforms revealed. The mobilization of ASviS may thus constitute an important innovation in Italy, both promoting new ideas and 'cognitive' resources that political and institutional entrepreneurs interested in pursuing a sustainable development agenda in Italy may find useful. Furthermore, it introduces incentives for consensus-seeking political actors to shift their political agenda in the direction of an eco-welfare state.

ASviS' attempt to spread awareness – mainly among the Italian political class – of the need for a sustainable growth model has been successful and it has already contributed to the introduction of new indicators in official budgetary documents, the so-called Equitable and Sustainable Well-Being Indicators. In this regard, Italy is the first European country to officially measure growth using indicators clearly inspired by the SDGs. The introduction of BES indicators potentially represents a turning point as they depict the limit of growth measured in economic terms stating that one must complement this by strengthening the social and environmental dimensions.

Clearly, there is still a long road ahead to move towards an 'eco-welfare state' in Italy. A transition towards a different socio-economic model might have high social and economic cost – especially in the short run. There is still no political consensus among the elites regarding how to manage the transition from the current status quo to a model of economic growth, which also takes into account potential social and environmental consequences. In particular, these differences concern the role that the welfare state should assume in the transition towards a 'greener' economy. Confindustria demands more invest-

ments and incentives for firms to make the industrial system more competitive, not supporting a relevant role for the social protection system and imagining only an investment in vocational training and active labour market policies. Conversely, trade unions demand to protect workers and the weakest groups in society in this transition. The welfare state should thus act as a buffer and prevent the weakest groups from being adversely affected by changes in the production model.

To conclude, important developments are occurring in Italy, both in social and political actors' 'cognitive framework' and in terms of policy initiatives. Yet an overall strategy has not emerged, and relevant institutional and political obstacles exist that may prevent the shift towards an eco-social welfare state.

## INTERVIEWS

1. Civil Servant, Ministry of Environment, 10 March 2017, Rome
2. Representative of Five Star Movement, 10 April 2018, Rome
3. Senior representative of ASviS, 10 March 2017, Skype
4. Civil Servant, Ministry of Economic Development, 17 September 2016, Rome
5. Civil Servant, Ministry of Environment, 9 March 2017, Rome
6. Member of the Italian General Confederation of Labour, 11 April 2018, Rome
7. Member of the Italian General Confederation of Labour, 11 April 2018, Rome
8. Member of Confindustria, 5 April 2018, Skype
9. Representative of the Democratic Party, 12 April 2018, Rome
10. Civil Servant, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 19 March 2017, Rome
11. Representative of The League, 13 April 2018, Milan
12. Member of Italian Labour Union, 9 April 2018, Rome

## NOTE

1. See the Global Footprint Network website: <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint> (accessed 1 December 2020).

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