

Social Rights Monitor

2021

Country Monitor:
Italy



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The National Strategy Group reports that the most pressing social issues are increasing poverty, high social exclusion, and growing inequalities. Education and lifelong learning are in desperate need of more funds and are key to the social and economic recovery of the country. Labour rights and the protection of employment must be adapted to the twin transitions, digital and green.

	2018	2019	2020	EU-27 2020
GINI index¹	33.4	32.8	/	30.2 (2019)
Unemployment²	10.6%	10%	9.2%	7.1%
Gender Equality Index³	63.0	63.5(2020)	63.8 (2021)	67.9
In-work poverty⁴	12.3%	11.8%	/	9.2 % (2019)
Housing Overcrowding⁵	27.8%	28.3%	/	17.1% (2019)
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor⁶	OPEN (until November)	NARROWED	NARROWED	N/A

Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

Missing data for 2020 are not available at the time of publication of the Social Rights Monitor 2021.

Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

Equal opportunities and access to services and the labour market have been hindered by the pandemic, which strongly hit the Italian peninsula both on a social and an economic level. Existing inequalities were magnified by the pandemic, which is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups of society. **Women, young people, migrants, and LGBT people have been the most affected by job losses. They also suffer more from poor working and living conditions and often from financial insecurity or poverty.**⁷ To mitigate social hardship, the Italian government has introduced some legislative changes and other measures, such as the extension of the solidarity fund for mortgages for

the purchase of a first home, the suspension of evictions, and the introduction of funds to support people who are not self-sufficient.

Most importantly, **Decree Law No. 34 of 19 May 2020 introduced an unprecedented tool to allow the regularisation of irregular employment.** This measure was adopted mainly to ensure adequate levels of health and safety at work, but it will have greater effects on social cohesion and inclusion. The majority of people with irregular contracts are from a disadvantaged background or vulnerable group. The measure has been demanded most often to regularise domestic workers.⁸

1 Eurostat (2021). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc_di12

2 Eurostat (2021). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2021). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/IT>

4 Eurostat (2021). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

5 Eurostat (2021). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en

6 CIVICUS (2021). Civic space monitor - Italy: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/italy/>

7 Eurofund (2021) Living, working, and Covid-19 Dataset – Italy https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/quality-of-life?-var=C001_01&chart_type=Bar&country_filter=Italy

8 Gazzetta Ufficiale, Decreto Legge 19.05.2020, No.34: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/05/19/20G00052/sg>

EDUCATION

Despite improvements over the last decade, it is still not possible to offer all young people the same opportunities for an adequate education. **The level of education and skills that young people can achieve across the country still depends to a large extent on their social background, socio-economic environment, and the area in which they live.** Education lags behind the European average in all indicators, including lifelong learning and skills levels.⁹ The 2020 pandemic exacerbated those difficulties through the closure of schools and universities and the shift towards distance or integrated learning.

Italy continues to be critically below both the European and OECD averages in educational

attainment. Only 61% of adults have completed upper secondary education, around 17 percentage points below the OECD and European averages.¹⁰

Moreover, the share of 15-to-29-year-olds not in education or employment (NEETs) remains high. After several years of decrease, it is increasing again and reached 23.9% in the second quarter of 2020. The proportion of young people who leave education and training prematurely is also worryingly high. In 2020, the share of early school-leavers reached 13.5% of people aged between 18 and 24 years. It was found that parents' educational qualifications have a strong influence on pupils' success at school and on their ability to remain in education and training.

Fair working conditions and Labour rights

The pandemic significantly affected working conditions in Italy throughout 2020. The strict lockdowns imposed at the beginning of the pandemic and other restrictive measures that are still in place in 2021 had overall impacts on employment levels and incomes. Like other European countries, Italy introduced a short-time scheme to preserve employment, combined with a ban on dismissals that was in place until the end of March 2021.¹¹ The socioeconomic effects of the pandemic were mitigated by income support measures for the self-employed and domestic workers, as well as benefits for households with young children. Flexible working hours and extra provisions for leave and time off also helped people

tackle the unprecedented physical and mental consequences of the pandemic.

Social partners played a crucial role in ensuring occupational health and safety, despite the challenges posed to collective bargaining from the state of emergency and reduced consultations with the government. The National Strategy Group particularly welcomes the New Skills Fund¹² established through the Decree Law No. 34 (2020). This allows companies to reshape employees' working hours to allow and encourage them to take part in training activities on the basis of specific collective agreements with trade unions.

9 ISTAT (2020) Rapporto Bes 2020: <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/254761>

10 OECD (2021) Better Life Index – Italy: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/italy/>

11 Pedersini, R., (2021) Italy: Working life in the Covid-19 pandemic 2020: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/wpef21020.pdf>

12 Gazzetta Ufficiale, Decree Law 19.05.2020: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/static/20200519_128_SO_021.pdf

INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

Strong inequalities still affect the economic situation of migrants in Italy. While the share of Italian citizens living in absolute poverty is 7.5%, the percentage jumps to more than 29% for foreigners,¹³ highlighting migrants' vulnerable conditions compared to Italian citizens. Despite the continuing negative effects of the Decreti Sicurezza Decrees approved in 2018,¹⁴ some positive steps for the inclusion of migrants have been undertaken since these decrees were modified in December 2020. The 2018 decrees dismantled the SPRAR reception system for asylum seekers and suspended humanitarian protection, resulting in 80% of asylum requests being rejected in 2019.¹⁵ **In December 2020, humanitarian protection for asylum seekers was reinstated, and some of the judicial charges and fines imposed on NGOs saving migrants in the Mediterranean were lifted.**

In addition, Law No.173 of 18 December 2020 introduced an important step forward for the inclusion of migrants, allowing residence permits to be converted into working permits. This adjustment will allow thousands of people who entered Italy for various reasons – such as study, medical treatment, or special cases – to obtain a work permit if they meet the requirements. The same law also reintroduced the public reception system, which can once again accept and start processing asylum seekers and people holding other permits related to conditions of fragility and vulnerability.

GOOD PRACTICE

The Juma Map

The health emergency dramatically affected vulnerable sections of the population, among them thousands of migrants and refugees. The Juma Map project tackles the problem of access to information that migrants encountered during the pandemic, mainly due to language barriers and complex terminology. Juma Map is an online platform created through the collaboration of a network of mediators and refugees, which conveys official information on the measures (restrictions and opportunities) in 15 languages. For two of the languages, podcasts were created. The service has been very useful, as it answered a real need for access to information by a very large part of the Italian population. Juma Map and its COVID-19 information pages had more than 133,000 visits during 2020.¹⁶

GENDER EQUALITY

The pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities in societies, and this was certainly the case for the gender gap in Italy, which is still higher than the European average. **First of all, working women have more short-term contracts than men. This makes them more prone to lose their jobs, a phenomenon**

13 ISTAT (2021) Absolute poverty report 2020: https://www.istat.it/files/2021/06/REPORT_POVERTA_2020.pdf

14 Gazzetta Ufficiale, Decreto Sicurezza e Immigrazione, 1.12.2018: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/showNewsDetail?id=1478&backTo=archivio&anno=2018&provenienza=archivio>

15 ISPI (2020) Migrazioni in Italia: tutti i numeri <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/migrazioni-italia-tutti-i-numeri-24893>

16 Juma Map – Services for Refugees: <https://www.jumamap.it/en/>

which peaked during the pandemic. The rate of full-time equivalent (FTE) employment in Italy is 31.1% of women compared to 51.4% of men, making men's career prospects much better than those of women in terms of continuity, job security, and career advancement.¹⁷

Most worrying for the National Strategy Group is the approach adopted and fostered by the Italian government on teleworking and care activities. **As working from home has become the norm for many workers, there is a need for policies promoting co-responsibility at home and in looking after children.** In Italy, 81% of housework continues to be carried out by women, well above the European average.¹⁸ The National Strategy Group therefore denounces the rhetoric promoted by the Italian government through the Family Act, in which work-life balance policies are considered to be only for women, or even just for mothers. Work-life reconciliation policies continue to be mainly calibrated to deeply rooted cultural assumptions.

The National Strategy Group also calls for more women to be included in political decision-making bodies and structures, in order to ensure a real change of vision. In 2020, Italian politics was still predominantly "male": government ministers are mostly men (75.6%), as are members of the assemblies governing the Italian regions (80.3%).¹⁹



LIVING CONDITIONS AND HOUSING

Living conditions deteriorated for many people in Italy in 2020. **Housing prices rose sharply, by 3.4%, and they continue to rise, putting extraordinary pressure on already impoverished households. In the first trimester of 2021, prices rose 1.7%.²⁰** Moreover, overcrowded housing continues to have negative effects on both physical and mental health: the average household has just 1.4 rooms per person, which is less than the OECD average.²¹ According to a statement recently published by the Italian social housing organisation, Federcasa, the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic mean that one in four people find it difficult to pay the rent, **while more than 40% expect not to be able to pay their rent in 2021.**²² The same applies to households with mortgages, which in 2020 have made use of loans to an unprecedented extent (a total of €15.6 billion).²³ Therefore, an important and significant housing policy promoted by the Italian government was the introduction in 2020 of a temporary ban on evictions. This allowed tenants to cope with the pandemic's impact on their household income. First introduced as a temporary measure until August 2020, it was extended several times, lastly with the Sostegni Decree Law adopted in March 2021.²⁴ This extended the ban to the last quarter of 2021. The National Strategy Group identifies this measure as fundamental during a crucial period, when living in satisfactory housing conditions is fundamental for mental health and personal development.

In addition, there are clear differences between the north and south of the country. **A housing shortage affects 8.6% of southern households and 5.2% in central and**

17 EIGE (2020) Gender Equality Index 2020 – Italy: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/domain/work/IT>

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 ISTAT (2021) Prezzi delle abitazioni / Housing prices <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio>

21 OECD (2021) Better Life Index – Italy: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/italy/>

22 Federcasa (2020) Dimensions of housing deprivation pre- and post-Covid-19: <http://cms.federcasa.it/download.aspx?id=9fe957dd-f413-476f-ba81-4c05cf30149e>

23 Ibid.

24 Gazzetta Ufficiale (2021) Decree Law 22 March 2021 "Decreto Sostegni": <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2021/03/22/21G00049/sg>

northern Italy.²⁵ SOLIDAR's Italian National Strategy Group calls for a significant increase in the number of social housing units in order to cope with the severe housing shortage.

However, the National Strategy Group welcomes the Italian government's "Superbonus 110%" initiative, which provides for a 110% deduction on expenses incurred when carrying out specific interventions. These can be for energy efficiency, anti-seismic renovations, installation of photovoltaic systems, or infrastructure for charging electric vehicles. This measure is expected to produce significant results in numerous other ways. It aims to decrease energy poverty, remove architectural barriers, and increase seismic safety. In other words, it contributes to environmental objectives, while ensuring a positive social impact.

GOOD PRACTICE **Abitare Solidale**

The organisation Auser Abitare Solidale provides a service to tackle housing issues through an innovative approach. It creates positive connections between the needs of elderly people – often living alone and at greater risk of social exclusion – and young people, who are looking for decent housing at reduced costs. Usually, guests are people at risk of poverty, young workers and students looking for independent and decent living conditions, or women recovering from gender or other kinds of violence. To match these needs, Abitare Solidale promotes different forms of cohabitation based on the principles of mutual solidarity and mutual help.²⁶

POLICIES TO TACKLE POVERTY

In 2020, the poverty rate in Italy reached its highest level since 2005. According to data released in March 2021 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat), the incidence of households in absolute poverty jumped from 6.4% in 2019 to 7.7% in 2020, representing over 2 million households and more than 5.6 million people.²⁷ This increase can mainly be explained by the pandemic, but it is worrying as it reversed a pattern of decreasing poverty rates up to 2019. That year, the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion fell 2 percentage points from 2018.²⁸

The National Strategy Group reports that the Reddito di Cittadinanza Citizenship Income, introduced in 2019, played a crucial role in supporting millions of people. This structural measure was accompanied in 2020 by the Reddito d'Emergenza Emergency Income introduced by Decree Law No. 34 (2020), which contained economic measures to support the population. Emergency income was initially envisaged as an intervention limited to a few months, but it was repeatedly extended, most recently in May 2021.²⁹ This demonstrated the limitations of the Citizenship Income – above all the access criteria for foreigners – as well as the difficulties incurred by a wide part of the population for a prolonged period of time.

Particularly worrying is the poverty gap between Italians and foreign citizens. More than 1.5 million foreigners live in absolute poverty, a rate of 29.3%, compared with 7.5% of Italians.³⁰ The measures slightly reduced the poverty rate from 20.2% to 18.6%,³¹ which led them to be considered sufficient, so that no structural intervention in the welfare system was thought to be necessary. But a

25 Federcasa (2020) Dimensions of housing deprivation pre- and post-Covid-19: <http://cms.federcasa.it/download.aspx?id=9fe957dd-f413-476f-ba81-4c05cf30149e>

26 Auser Italia, Abitare Solidale: <https://www.auser.it/cosa-facciamo/abitare-dalla-parte-degli-anziani/abitare-solidale/>

27 ISTAT (2021) Poverty in Italy: <https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/259103>

28 ISTAT (2020) Income, living conditions, and fiscal burden: <https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/255479>

29 INPS (2021) Reddito di Emergenza: indicazioni per la domanda / Emergency Income: application guide <https://www.inps.it/news/reddito-di-emergenza-indicazioni-per-presentare-la-domanda>

30 ISTAT (2021) Absolute poverty report 2020: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/06/REPORT_POVERTA_2020.pdf

31 Ibid.

structural intervention might strengthen public services at local level, enabling them to provide necessary services, respond to the population's multidimensional needs, and accompany people along paths to social inclusion.

HEALTHCARE

Healthcare in Italy remains accessible and of good quality. It ranks above the OECD average and has achieved an annual increase in average quality since 2005.³² **Access to healthcare is a universal right in Italy:³³ it is provided free of charge based on the condition of someone's health and their care needs, regardless of income. But equality is far from being achieved.** Over the last decade, different Italian governments have opted for cuts in public spending on healthcare,³⁴ which not only failed to help the system recover from the 2008 financial crisis, but also fostered even stronger inequalities between regions, enlarging Italy's historical north-south divide. **Per capita spending on healthcare is much higher in northern regions than in southern, resulting in huge gaps in service capacity and care delivered.**³⁵

The governance of healthcare has changed considerably over the past few years. A new management structure made the regions the main actors in healthcare policy and, as the National Strategy Group confirms, resulted in differences among regions, with a clear

north-south gradient. **In addition, cuts in public spending are resulting in individuals having to pay greater amounts of money, which will likely lead larger shares of the population to avoid medical treatment and assistance.**

Furthermore, the challenges posed by the pandemic highlighted many weak points in the Italian health system, which was at risk of collapsing due to a lack of hospital beds, doctors, and nurses.³⁶ Increased public spending therefore remains essential to hire more staff, widen services and infrastructure, and create a more accessible, egalitarian healthcare system.

Despite the significant increase in mental illness during the pandemic, particularly during the 2020 lockdown, almost no measure was adopted to guarantee equal access to psychological services. According to recently published research,³⁷ 27.1% of the Italian population suffers from a mental illness, and the percentage is 40.2% among young people. The same research revealed that 34.1% of young people show depressive symptoms and that the suicide rate among young people increased 20% during the pandemic. In addition, according to the Italian Psychiatric Society, **4.5 million people need mental health services but are unable to meet the incredibly high cost of treatment and support. Most services are not public, making mental health more a luxury than a right.**

32 OECD (2021) Better Life Index – Index: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/italy/>

33 See the DPCM dated 17.01.2017, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/03/18/17A02015/sg>

34 Pavolini, E, (2020) The Italian healthcare system facing the Coronavirus crisis: https://osservatoriocoesionesociale.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Nota1_Pavolini_2020.pdf

35 Italian Senate (2018), Documento conclusivo dell'indagine conoscitiva sulla sostenibilità del servizio sanitario nazionale / Final Report on the Sustainability of the Italian NHS: <http://www.senato.it/leg17/3381?comunicato=54392>

36 Pavolini, E, (2020) The Italian Healthcare system on the eve of the pandemic

37 Fondazione Italia In Salute (2021) Gli italiani e il Covid 19 / Italians and Covid-19 https://www.sociometrica.it/sites/default/files/Gli_italiani_e_il_Covid_19.pdf

Civic space

The latest monitoring activities carried out by CIVICUS find that **civic space in Italy has narrowed**.³⁸ The National Strategy Group reports that the measures to counter the pandemic had a negative impact on civic space and certainly limited the activities of civil society organisations. The National Strategy Group mentions in particular the circoli clubs (community-based organisations) that are part of larger national networks, which were forced to close and cease their cultural and social activities. The closures contrasted with continued activity at commercial and religious organisations, which continued with their activities. The unequal treatment led to cultural and social damage for communities, as well as economic damage for the clubs, many of which closed for good. In October 2020, ARCI released a statement³⁹ denouncing the lack of consideration in the government's measures for the crucial role that cultural and recreational organisations have in social cohesion and their contribution to alleviating loneliness and depression.

The health crisis put exceptional pressure on the freedom of peaceful assembly, as it often became difficult to maintain both the constitutional right to health and that to publicly demonstrate. Articles 17 and 21 of the Italian constitution protect the right of assembly and provide that the right to meet in a public place may be only limited “for proven reasons of public safety or security”.⁴⁰ Such limitations must be ad hoc and temporary, and they must meet the requirements of proportionality and reasonableness. Finding the balance was not always easy in 2020, and social tension intensified.

The Italian National Strategy Group identifies an important difference between the first and second periods of the pandemic. During the first lockdowns, uncertainty over the nature of the pandemic led to obedience to the imposed measures. In the following period, protest demonstrations took place in many Italian cities.⁴¹ The NSG reports that these demonstrations were highly heterogeneous in terms of the political affiliation of their participants. **For the National Strategy Group, the most important message of these demonstrations is that the Italian government has to involve people in decision-making in order to function well. That means listening to them and understanding the difficulties they are experiencing. As the pandemic increases pressure on social cohesion and public spaces, democracy is in real danger if the institutions of political decision-making become closed.**

However, freedom of speech and of the press have been maintained and supported. Nonetheless, as reported by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ),⁴² three NGOs operating in Italy were charged in March 2021 with helping illegal immigration. The EFJ joined its Italian affiliate FNSI in demanding an explanation of the investigation procedures. It emerged that the investigators seeking to establish links between migrant rescue operations at sea and traffickers apparently engaged in a violation of the secrecy of journalistic sources by monitoring the communications of journalists working on the case.⁴³

38 CIVICUS (2021) Italian country report: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/italy/>

39 ARCI (2020) Statement to the Italian government: <https://www.arci.it/nuovo-dpcm-il-governo-non-ignori-lassociazione-culturale-e-di-promozione-sociale/>

40 Constitution of the Italian Republic: https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/Costituzione_della_Repubblica_italiana.pdf

41 As an example, see La Repubblica https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/27/news/proteste_contro_le_misure_anti_covid_milano_chi_sono_i_manifestanti-272010811/. Many other protests took place throughout 2020 from Milan to Naples, against the measures adopted by the government.

42 EFJ (2021) Italy: Massive violation of the confidentiality of journalists' sources: <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2021/04/02/italy-massive-violation-of-the-confidentiality-of-journalists-sources/>

43 Articolo 21 (2021) Decline di giornalisti e un avvocato intercettati illecitamente. Il lato oscuro dell'inchiesta sulle Ong: <https://www.articolo21.org/2021/04/decline-di-giornalisti-e-un-avvocato-intercettati-illecitamente-il-lato-oscuro-dellinchiesta-sulle-ong/>

SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Italy has a long tradition of social dialogue, and its 1946 constitution set up an auxiliary body of government. But many people point to its fundamental lack of mandate and consequent difficulty in producing policy proposals and inputs.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the NSG reports that social dialogue in Italy continues to be rich in good

practices and articulated at national, regional, and local level. Despite the pandemic and the general trend of diminishing social dialogue across Europe and beyond, the National Strategy Group reports that relations between social partners and the government have become more frequent and meaningful because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, social dialogue slowed with Mario Draghi's technocratic government.

The national recovery and resilience plan

Despite the long tradition of social dialogue and civil society organisations' greater involvement in the government's decision-making procedures, **both CSOs and the main Italian trade unions denounced a lack of participation in the preparation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plan.** The National Strategy Group also says that their lack of involvement in the process was a "sore point". **It reported that neither of the Italian governments that helped to draft the National Recovery and Resilience Plan opened any consultation with civil society.** (In February 2021, a new government had to be formed following the fall of the previous one.) Beyond the national plan, decreased social and civil dialogue is partly due to the state of emergency declared because of the pandemic. All the measures adopted were approved by direct decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM).

Many people – even members of the Italian parliament – said that this form of action made discussion scarce.⁴⁵

The intermediate social bodies rightly called for thorough coordination with the social, productive, and political forces of the country over the European Recovery Plan and the national plan. But this did not happen. The Italian National Strategy Group reports that only some political parties tried to influence the decisions taken by small groups of super-specialized experts directly in contact with the prime minister. But their role was severely reduced because of the lack of discussion during the pandemic. Therefore, the space for participation has been limited, despite the great efforts that third-sector organizations have put into collaboration with public institutions to maintain decent welfare during the pandemic.

44 Guardiancich, I., Molina, O. (2020) The Effectiveness of National Social Dialogue Institutions: From Theory to Evidence, ILO Working Paper 16: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---dialogue/documents/publication/wcms_762099.pdf
45 La Repubblica (2020) "Basta DPCM, torniamo in parlamento." https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/29/news/basta_dpcm_torniamo_in_parlamento_il_pressing_del_pd_trova_alleanza-255166680/

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