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Measuring wellbeing – an Italian lens into BES framework

The *CircleU Workshop: Confronting Poverty* has aimed to bring different interdisciplinary perspectives into the concept of poverty. The three intense days included discussions on different dimensions of poverty - from how we define the term itself, who speaks on poverty, where we, as scholars, put the blame and agency over poverty, to how different type of marginalisation influences the experience of poverty. In media and most popular discourse, poverty is often measured through GDP only. As GDP only offers statistical averages and insight into one singular economic dimension of poverty, it is a flawed framework that fails to capture the realities of people experiencing it. If GDP is not enough, how else can one measure poverty across all its dimensions?

During the workshop activities with Professor Carla Scaglioni from the University of Pisa, we were introduced to a new framework used by the Italian government to measure poverty levels based on the assessment of an individual's well-being. The BES (Benessere Equo e Sostenibile) framework stems from the approach that poverty should be understood through a broader lens of subjective well-being declared by the individual rather than exclusively through a set of traditional socioeconomic factors. BES refers to a set of indicators or categories that measure one's well-being equitably and sustainably. The framework was launched in 2010 by ISTAT and CNEL and uses mostly surveys, online questionnaires and regional meetings to gather data. BES includes 12 dimensions of well-being: health, education and training, work-life balance, economic well-being, social relationships, politics and institutions, safety, subjective well-being, landscape and cultural heritage, environment, research and innovation, and quality of services. After the first glance at the set of indicators, a question was raised: How exactly does BES differ from the UN's Sustainable Development Goals? The SDG framework has been criticised as an inaccurate 'one fits all' initiative by most of the workshop participants the day before. Indeed, the main difference between the two is that BES does not set goals or requirements to meet; it is simply a set of differently categorised indicators used for measuring purposes.

Undeniably, some SDG categories overlap with BES, while others are completely omitted, and with Professor Scaglioni, all 12 dimensions have been analysed in terms of how accurate they are in representing all factors that might contribute to one's well-being. As a group, the conclusions varied from acknowledging that certain categories are too broad to unnecessary splits of the same dimension into different categories. For example, 'health' includes all disabilities, but an individual in need of mobility assistance will face different well-being challenges than a neurodivergent person, while both are considered disabled. On the other hand, the "politics and institutions" category would include the existence of certain government bodies as well as their efficiency in assisting citizens, which is already expressed in the "quality of services" category.

The BES framework has already been adapted by the Italian government to be included in budgeting and policy development, but has that been a positive contribution? According to ISTAT – yes, especially when discussing the measurement accuracy aspect of BES. The use of the framework revealed a series of regional inequalities in comparison to EU27, showcasing Italy's specific challenges relating to poverty and well-being. The BES framework exemplifies that the socioeconomic lens is no longer sufficient in measuring well-

being or poverty. True equitable and sustainable progress is possible – and it starts by measuring what matters.

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