

An indicator dedicated to libraries in Istat's BES Report: a great achievement for our discipline

The focus on the impact of libraries, that is the change, the improvement of an individual or of a community deriving from their contact with library services¹ – a central theme in our discipline in the last decade also in Italy – can be considered the reflection of an external transformation of a social, political, economic, and technological nature. This is a real paradigm shift – in the sense attributed to this term by Thomas Kuhn – in the definition of society's progress, which is no longer measurable only from an economic point of view, but also from a social and environmental perspective.

There are two reference points to frame this shift in paradigm. Internationally, in 2016, the United Nations (UN) identified through its 2030 Agenda a set of 17 Sustainable development goals (SDGs), divided into 169 targets measured through 240 indicators. The targets represent the values, priorities, and objectives for a fair and sustainable world². Prior to the UN Agenda, the Italian national institute of statistics (Istat) funded a project in this area called Fair and sustainable wellbeing (Benessere equo e sostenibile, BES)³, on which we will focus in this brief editorial.

Born in 2010 from a joint initiative of the National council for economics and labour (CNEL) and Istat, the BES Report is part of the international debate on the

1 See International Organization for Standardization, *International standard ISO 16439: information and documentation: methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries*. Geneva: ISO, 2014.

2 United Nations. General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development*. 25 September 2015, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf>; for the Italian translation see <<https://unric.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/11/Agenda-2030-Onu-italia.pdf>>. For an in-depth study on the path that led to creation of the UN 2030 Agenda see Enrico Giovannini, *L'utopia sostenibile*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2018.

3 See Istituto nazionale di statistica, *Gli indicatori del BES*, <[https://www.istat.it/it/benessere-e-sostenibilit%C3%A0/la-misurazione-del-benessere-\(bes\)/gli-indicatori-del-bes](https://www.istat.it/it/benessere-e-sostenibilit%C3%A0/la-misurazione-del-benessere-(bes)/gli-indicatori-del-bes)>. The models represented and the indicators employed for the measurement in both documents – Agenda 2030 and BES – are only partially overlapping, but they are complementary. See Istituto nazionale di statistica, *Rapporto SDGs 2020: informazioni statistiche per l'Agenda 2030 in Italia*. 2020, <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2020/05/SDGs_2020.pdf>.

necessity to overcome the use of the gross domestic product (GDP) as an indicator of well-being. This debate is fuelled by the awareness that the parameters on which to evaluate society's progress cannot be exclusively of an economic nature, but must also take into account the fundamental social and environmental dimensions of well-being. The multidimensionality of the notion of well-being and the complexity of its measurement are the central themes of the report. Another fundamental issue is related to the centrality of data: in the information society, data – and statistical data in particular – are fundamental to building a complete understanding of the world and, thus, improve decision making.

To undertake this path, in 2010 a steering committee was set up to measure the progress of Italian society. The committee consisted of representatives of entrepreneurs, trade unions and civil society, and was tasked with identifying the characteristics that can best describe well-being in a society. At the same time, a scientific commission, chaired by Enrico Giovannini – then president of Istat, now Minister of infrastructure and sustainable mobility in the Draghi government – was tasked with selecting a set of statistical indicators capable of capturing those characteristics. The commission identified the following 12 dimensions of fair and sustainable well-being in Italy: 1) Health; 2) Education and training; 3) Jobs and work/life balance; 4) Economic well-being; 5) Social relations; 6) Politics and institutions; 7) Security; 8) Subjective well-being; 9) Landscape and cultural heritage; 10) Environment; 11) Research and innovation (today Innovation, research, and creativity); 12) Quality of public services; in addition to these broad dimensions, the commission selected 130 key indicators of well-being.

In 2013, this line of research led to the publication of the first Report on Fair and sustainable wellbeing (BES). On March 10, ten years after the start of the project, the eighth edition was presented to the public⁴.

Before addressing the novelty introduced by this report, it is useful to take a small step back and remember that the importance of the debate on well-being indicators is based on the principle expressed with particular emphasis in a fundamental document published in 2009: the *Final report of the Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress*, – the so-called Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission – the most significant work that has influenced welfare studies⁵. The principle was: «what we measure affects what we do; and if our measurements are flawed, decisions may be distorted».

⁴ There are several innovations. For example, some indicators that were updated every few years are substituted for others that are updated yearly. This change improves timeliness (on safety, for example, the economic vulnerability of families and the asymmetry of family work). Furthermore, there are 33 new indicators that integrate eight of the twelve BES domains, for a total set of 152 indicators. This update of the system of indicators was necessary to measure the profound transformations taking place right now, including those caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. See Istituto nazionale di statistica, *Rapporto BES 2020: il benessere equo e sostenibile in Italia*. Roma: Istat, 2021, <<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/254761>>.

⁵ See Joseph E. Stiglitz; Amartya Sen; Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress*. 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160806043140/http://www.communityindicators.net/system/publication_pdfs/9/original/Stiglitz_Sen_Fitoussi_2009.pdf?1323961027>.

Libraries' workers and, even more so, their users firmly believe that libraries play a fundamental role in neighbourhoods and cities. Libraries foster 'cultural growth', strengthen 'positive social relations' and, in general, the 'well-being' of people (children, adults, the elderly, students, workers, scholars, etc.). Often perceived as 'near', 'welcoming' and 'safe' places, libraries represent a real 'growth opportunity'. What I reported here are not my personal beliefs, but the outcomes of a national survey, called "The library for you". This is the largest survey ever carried out in our country on the role of public libraries in people's lives; in particular, the goal of this survey, which is also the goal of this editorial, was to investigate how libraries influence well-being and quality of life⁶.

Yet, despite this evidence, we continue to experience great difficulty in measuring libraries' contribution, impact and value for communities. Excluding the aforementioned survey and a few other surveys that I do not address for the sake of synthesis, we can easily affirm that in our discipline we suffered and continue to suffer the terrible effects of the aforementioned principle outlined by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi: 'what is measured' influences 'what is done', and if the tools that we use are not correct or fail to grasp all the characteristics of the phenomenon of interest, they can lead to ineffective or bad decision making⁷. In light of this paradigm, if we think of the poor social recognition of libraries, their legitimacy crisis and the difficulty of measuring their impact, we understand that what is measured and what is done are strongly connected.

In the past, the BES Report itself could be considered a powerful example of the relationship that exists between data and measurements on the one hand and identity and expectations on the other: until last year, among the report's 130 indicators, only one referred to libraries within the "Landscape and cultural heritage" domain. That single indicator offered a measure of the expenditure destined for the enhancement of cultural heritage⁸. There was nothing in the report relative to the results produced (output) or the impact (outcome).

Regarding this matter, something very important has taken place within the latest BES Report. The great accomplishment to which I refer in the title of this editorial concerns the inclusion of a new output indicator entirely dedicated to libraries within the "Education and training" domain. This domain expresses the very strong relationship that exists between a person's degree of competency and his or her well-

6 The survey is promoted by Rete delle reti in collaboration with the Italian library association (AIB) and with the scientific direction of the Laboratory of social librarianship and applied research to libraries (BIBLAB) at Sapienza University of Rome. I presented a first report, based on partial data gathered until February 1, 2021, at the Stelling Conference in Turin "The library platform of knowledge" on February 26, 2021. The data collection ended on March 31, 2021 and about 67,000 people received the questionnaire.

7 This principle is even more consequential if we consider that with the Italian law 163/2016 which reformed the budget law, the BES enters for the first time in the process of defining economic policies, shifting the attention on their effect also on some fundamental dimensions for the quality of life. See Istituto nazionale di statistica, *Il BES nel Documento di economia e finanza*. <<https://www4.istat.it/it/benessere-e-sostenibilit%C3%A0/misure-del-benessere/il-bes-nel-def>>.

8 On this issue see Chiara Faggiolani, *Il rapporto BES – Benessere equo e sostenibile in Italia: il posto delle biblioteche e il compito della biblioteconomia sociale*, «Biblioteche oggi», 34 (2016), n. 1/2, p. 19-26, DOI: 10.3302/0392-8586-201601-019-1 and Ead., *Il potere delle parole per misurare l' impatto*. In: Ead., *Conoscere gli utenti per comunicare la biblioteca: il potere delle parole per misurare l' impatto*, con contributi di Maddalena Battaglia [et al.]. Milano: Editrice bibliografica, 2019, p. 293-358.

being. In fact, a higher degree of competence can open up otherwise precluded paths and opportunities. The focus on strengthening and updating people's competence is one of the main points for the implementation of the European policies of the Green deal. Furthermore, the Next generation EU fund also has among its contents education and competence agendas.

The new BES indicator is called "Library use" and is defined as «the percentage of people aged 3 and over who visited a library at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview»⁹. The adoption of this indicator is an extraordinary opportunity for Italian libraries, marking the achievement of a great milestone for the whole sector at a time in which the message that this result conveys is particularly important. I am obviously thinking of the ongoing work on the National recovery and resilience plan: the document that outlines the objectives, the reforms and the investments that Italy wants to implement through the European funds of Next generation EU.

In light of these new events, libraries position themselves not only as a very important part of our cultural heritage, but also as an infrastructure, a means for the growth of people, a tool for quality education and training, as recalled also by Goal number 4 of the 2030 Agenda.

The investment in the new generations that we must make at this time of planning and reconstruction of the future passes precisely through quality education – considered the absolute priority – which sees its fundamental assets in schools, in continuous training, in cultural participation and also in libraries¹⁰. In this regard, it is useful to add that the indicator "Reading books and newspapers" was also included in the "Education and training" domain¹¹.

The achievement that we have just described should not be considered as an arrival point – especially if we look at the trend of the indicator, which shows a decline relative to the current year¹² – but rather as a starting point for the construction of

9 The integration of this indicator was possible thanks to the inclusion of a set of questions dedicated to the use and attendance of libraries in the Istat annual survey "Aspects of daily life". At the same time, it is very important to consider the Istat library census which provides a snapshot of the supply of library services in our country. See Istituto nazionale di statistica, *Le biblioteche in Italia*. 23rd April 2021, <<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/256963>>. For an in-depth analysis of the path that led to this result, see Chiara Faggiolani, *Misurare, valutare, raccontare le biblioteche italiane oggi, guardando ai 17 obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile (SDGs)*, «Biblioteche oggi trends», 5 (2019), n. 1, p. 68-80, DOI: 10.3302/2421-3810-201901-068-1.

10 The indicators pertaining to the "Education and training" domain are: 1) Participation of 4-5 year olds in the school system; 2) People with at least a diploma (25-64 years); 3) Graduates and other tertiary qualifications (30-34 years); 4) Transition to university; 5) Early exit from the education and training system; 6) Young people who do not work and do not study (neet); 7) Participation in continuing education; 8) Inadequate literacy skills; 9) Inadequate numerical competence; 10) High digital skills; 11) Children aged 0-2 enrolled in the nursery; 12) Graduates in technical-scientific disciplines (STEM); 13) Cultural participation outside home; 14) Reading of books and newspapers; 15) Use of libraries.

11 The indicator is the percentage of people aged 6 and over who have read at least four books a year (printed books, e-books, online books, audio books) for reasons that are not strictly academic or professional and/or have read newspapers (printed and/or online) at least three times a week on the total number of people aged 6 and over (Source: Istat, "Aspects of daily life survey").

12 We read in the report: «In 2020, 12.8% of the population aged 3 and over declared having been in the library at least once in the last year; the situation caused by the pandemic has certainly affected the number of library users, which decreased by 2.5 percentage points between 2019 and 2020». See Istat, *Rapporto BES 2020* cit., p. 73.

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an information and evaluation system for Italian libraries. A system inspired by the paradigm of sustainable development which has as its objective the social recognition of the impact that libraries generate in terms of well-being and quality of life. This is a path that each one of us is called upon to shape.

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