FOR A DEMOGRAPHIC SPRING



Edited by
Fondazione Magna Carta

sallux

ECPP FOUNDATION

FOR A DEMOGRAPHIC SPRING

Edited by
Fondazione Magna Carta

sallux
PUBLISHING

Colophon

For a demographic spring
Edited by Fondazione Magna Carta

© 2026 Fondazione Magna Carta. All rights reserved. This publication is published in cooperation with Sallux Publishing. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.)

Credit frontpage photo: Unsplash
Cover design and lay-out: Adviesbureau voor Bedrijfsidentiteit

Sallux | ECPP Foundation

Sallux is the political foundation for the European Christian Political Party (ECPP). Sallux means "Salt and Light" and we want to spark a salted debate where needed and shed light on the issues we face. We present solutions by organizing events and distributing relevant publications and will not stay on the safe side of the status quo.

info@sallux.eu, www.sallux.eu

La Fondazione Magna Carta

The Magna Carta Foundation is a think tank dedicated to scientific research, cultural reflection and the development of proposals for reform on major political and social issues. The Foundation has been active since 2003 with the aim of contributing to the modernisation of institutions, politics and the country.
The Foundation's cultural reference point is liberalism as expressed in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The evocative power of the name "Magna Carta" refers to a liberal approach, attentive to rules and procedures, without hostility to modernisation, but which at the same time considers tradition as a heritage to be preserved and revitalised. Magna Carta brings together intellectual figures who identify the Foundation as a place where freedom of thought is a prerequisite for a critical and non-conformist approach to the problems of the present day.

https://fondazionemagnacarta.it/

Disclaimer

Since 2011, the activities of Sallux have been financially supported by the European Parliament. The liability for any communication or publication by Sallux, in any form and any medium, rests with Sallux. The European Parliament is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.



Table of contents

Introduction.....6

1. Children. Values, hopes and fears of young people in Italy.....14

1.1 The research: objectives and sample.....14

1.2 Young people's responses.....19

1.3 Data analysis: income and regional differences.....20

1.4 Data analysis: fear of responsibility and personal beliefs.....22

1.5 Only children.....24

1.6 Fear of pregnancy.....26

1.7 Survey of privileged witnesses.....27

. 1.7.1 Teachers.....27

1.7.2 Healthcare professionals.....29

1.7.3 Psychologists and psychiatrist.....32

1.8 The condition of young people today and cultural models.....32

1.9 Role of companies.....35

2. Good practices in corporate welfare in Italy.....36

2.1 Corporate welfare in Italy:
a brief historical overview of its origins and evolution.....36

2.2 Magna Carta Foundation research on corporate practices.....38

2.3 Young people and birth rates: the time factor.....39

2.4 Analysis of corporate practices.....40

2.4.1 The pandemic and the advent of hybrid working.....41

2.4.2 Work-life balance policies.....42

2.4.3 Corporate welfare platforms.....43

2.4.4 Services and initiatives in favour of parenthood.....44

2.4.5 Leave.....46

2.4.6 Psychological and relationship support services.....46

2.4.7 Healthcare services.....47

2.4.8 Financial incentives and *gender pay gap*....48
2.4.9 Mobility support....49
2.4.10 Education and training support....49
2.4.11 Support for education and training....49
2.5 The experiences of partner companies....50
2.5.1 Jointly....50
2.5.2 WellMakers by BNP Paribas....52
2.5.3 Prysmian....53
2.5.4 Engineering....53
2.6 Policy proposals: guidelines for a policy to support birth rates....57
2.6.1 Introduction of measures to support education and work-life balance n the early years....58
2.6.2 Babysitting vouchers....59
2.6.3 Support for childcare during school closures....60
2.6.4 Enhancement of parental leave....60
2.6.4 Incentives for businesses....60
2.6.5 Policies to support birth rates....61
2.6 6 Smart working and flexibility....62
2.6 7 Additional economic support measures....62

3. Public welfare policies for birth rates and parenthood....64

4. Children, work, careers: an analysis of the main regulations and some experiences of corporate welfare in Germany, Sweden and France....72

Conclusions....92
Acknowledgements....94

Introduction
Introduction



Farmers arrived in Brussels on the morning of Monday 26 February 2024. Source: Belga / Benoit Doppagne (https://www.brusselstimes.com/1340111/the-future-is-not-europe-building-with-brussels-famous-mural-demolished-tbtb, accessed 24.4.25)

Demographic phenomena have always had a significant influence on the economy, social cohesion and the fate of states and human civilisations. So much so that some scholars have defined demography as a 'destiny' whose effects are difficult to change over a period of a few years. Others have defined it as 'inertia, the present that incorporates the manifestations of the past and creates the conditions for building the future'[1] .

In 2022, the Magna Carta Foundation published *Demographic Trends in Italy. Crisis Factors and Rebalancing Actions*, a volume in which authoritative scholars photographed the different aspects of the Italian situation and beyond: the decline in births, the ageing population, immigration, the decrease in women of childbearing age, the advance of chronic diseases with the consequent issue of the sustainability of healthcare systems, and the falling birth rate, which affects the labour market and the balance between supply and demand for employment. All this is seen in a context that considers the influence of demographic trends in the world, in Europe and in our country. The publication also includes an overview of family policies in Italy in relation to those in Europe and an analysis of possible actions to reverse demographic trends. These authoritative essays therefore provide us with an overall picture of today's reality.

Global demographic trends

The demographic history of humanity over the last hundred years presents us with at least two major turning points. The first is the astonishing growth of the population during the 20th century, a period in which the world's 'heartbeat' accelerated, pushing nations to expand and show unprecedented vitality. Until the 18th century, the global population had grown very slowly, at an average rate of

1 See Gian Carlo Blangiardo's essay in the volume edited by Antonio Pilati, *Demographic Trends in Italy. Crisis Factors and Rebalancing Actions*, Permanent Observatory on the System Crisis, Magna Carta Foundation, 2022.

0.04% per year. With improved health conditions and declining infant mortality, things changed rapidly. In fact, over the last century, the world's population has more than quadrupled: from two to eight billion people, reaching a peak growth rate of 2.1% in the late 1960s.

This surge was mainly due to a combination of factors. After centuries in which a large part of humanity had lived according to the timeless cycles of the agricultural economy, in a world of traditions and customs handed down from generation to generation, 20th-century demographics appear as an overwhelming march marked by technological innovation, industrial development and increased labour productivity. Industrialisation brought with it urbanisation, and these phenomena together drove social progress and global population growth. Innovations in agriculture, manufacturing and transport revolutionised the way people lived and worked, offering new opportunities and greater prosperity. The other major factor in demographic development was the advances made in medicine: progress in healthcare and public hygiene drastically reduced infant mortality rates, while scientific discoveries extended life expectancy, increasing the average age of the population. The development of vaccines, antibiotics and surgery are milestones in modern medicine, capable of banishing the spectre of many diseases and sufferings.

The second turning point came at the end of the last century. At the dawn of the new millennium, the unstoppable growth of the global population began to slow down, at least in some areas of the world such as Europe. While at the beginning of the 20th century the European population was a quarter of the global population, after the two world wars Europeans grew more slowly, surpassed in fertility rates by Africa and Asia. This surprising reversal was not caused by any catastrophic event but was once again the result of a series of intersecting factors: from socio-economic changes to cultural transformations, from enormous advances in healthcare to family planning policies, to name but a few examples.

Urbanisation driven by industrial development is reshaping society and people's lifestyles: millions of people are moving to metropolises and large cities, attracted by the prospect of a better life. Yet it is precisely in this phenomenon that we can find the key to understanding the demographic turmoil of recent decades. Experts call this the 'demographic transition', i.e. the historical shift from a type of society with high birth and death rates – in a technological, social and economic context that is still underdeveloped – to another type of society with low birth and death rates, in a much more advanced development scenario. The demographic winter, therefore, coincides with a radical transformation of human existence.

This is not happening everywhere. Even the results of improvements in healthcare,

nutrition and medical science are not uniform across the world. In Africa, for example, the demographic situation requires attention: many countries have high birth rates, with an average of more than four children per woman. This situation, due to both cultural factors and a lack of resources for sexual and reproductive health education, can put a strain on communities' limited resources, affecting food security, access to education and the health of mothers and newborns. One example is Ethiopia, which has seen its population grow from around 22 million in the 1960s to over 122 million today. The fertility rate in this African country is around 4.6 live births per woman, compared to 1.53 in the EU and 1.24 in Italy. Ethiopia has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world (412 women dying per 100,000 live births), almost double the global average. While in this part of the world, therefore, there is even an issue of women's and children's right to health, in the West we are witnessing a decline in birth rates thanks to medical and scientific advances, but also because many observers believe that we are moving towards an increasingly 'individualistic' society. The social change brought about by economic and technological development is expressed in a new way of living, of imagining human relationships, people's identities, and the reshaping of individual perspectives and aspirations.

As for predictions about the future of the world, according to a recent study published in The Lancet, the global fertility rate could continue to decline between now and 2050. By the end of the century, the decline could affect 198 out of 205 countries, and almost none of these would have fertility rates above the replacement level estimated at 2.1 births per woman[2] . Fertility rates would continue to rise in only a few countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. However, WHO experts urge caution, pointing out the limitations of predictive models and, in particular, the scarcity of data from many developing countries. The world could face a *baby boom* in some countries and a *baby bust* in most others at the same time, with staggering socio-economic effects, not to mention the consequences for the reconfiguration of the international geopolitical balance of power. The impact of the demographic winter on the labour supply and social security systems would be immense. Europe is the continent most at risk of 'shrinking' in terms of population: at the beginning of the last century, Europeans accounted for more than 25 per cent of the world's

2 See GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators, *Global fertility in 204 countries and territories, 1950–2021, with forecasts to 2100: a comprehensive demographic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021*, The Lancet, 20 March 2024.Only in six countries will the fertility rate exceed 2.1 (Samoa, Tonga, Somalia, Niger, Chad, Tajikistan).



population, today they account for less than 10 per cent. The workforce is shrinking, the number of pensioners is increasing, and the imbalance between those entering and leaving the labour market no longer allows for the social security of the past. The European population continues to grow but is ageing, the age of mothers is increasing and births are declining; the number of marriages is falling compared to the number of divorces. The demographic gap between urban and rural areas is widening, while the number of migrants in European countries is growing. According to Eurostat, in 2022 there were 190.5 million households in Europe, of which 73.3% were childless, 12.1% had one child and 9.3% had two; only 3% of households had three or more children.

The situation in Italy

If we adopt a historical periodisation from the end of the Second World War to the present day, our country seems to follow the same dynamics described above. Italy, like th , experienced post-war demographic recovery and its decline between the late 1940s and early 1950s, followed by a new demographic revival on the wings of the 'economic miracle' that led to the baby boom in the mid-1960s. From the middle of the following decade, however, this trend reversed, until the 'demographic winter' arrived, which is the subject of this research.

The decline in fertility between 1976 and 1995 led to a historic low of 1.19 children per woman in 1995. The natural balance in Italy – the difference between births and deaths that guarantees population growth – has been consistently negative since 1993 (with the sole exception of 2006), resulting in a decline of just under two million residents over a period of thirty years. In the year of the pandemic, an event that was also exceptional from a statistical point of view, the Italian population fell by 383,000, after already losing 176,000 in 2019. To give a concrete picture of the significance of these figures, it can be said that in that year, the population of a large city such as Florence disappeared from Italy.

The most recent data published at the end of March 2024 by ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) are even more worrying: the decline in births continued in 2023. There were approximately 379,000 births among residents in Italy, with a birth rate of 6.4 per thousand (6.7 in 2022). The decrease in births compared to the previous year was 14,000 (-3.6%). Since 2008, the last year in which Italy saw an increase in births, the decline has been 197,000 (-34.2%). The average number of children per woman fell from 1.24 in 2022 to 1.20 in 2023. The decline in births is largely due to the decline in the female population of reproductive age (15-49 years) and the continuing decline in fertility. Women account for 51.2% of the resident population, but the average age at childbirth is around 32.4 years. The Italian population is also declining. As of 1 January 2024, it stood at 58,990,000, down by 7,000 compared to

the same date in the previous year (-0.1 per thousand inhabitants). In 2022, the decline was 33,000. Between 2014 and 2021, therefore, the population decline averaged 2.8 per thousand per year.

The average age of the resident population in Italy is 46.6 years. At the beginning of 2024, there were 14,358,000 individuals aged 65 and over, accounting for 24.3% of the total, compared with 24% in the previous year. The number of people over the age of 80 is also increasing: 4,554,000 individuals, almost 50,000 more than 12 months earlier. The 'elderly' outnumber children under the age of 10 (4,441,000 individuals). The number of centenarians reached an all-time high, exceeding 22,500, over 2,000 more than the previous year. For every child under the age of six, there are over five elderly people (5.6): in the early 1970s, there was one elderly person for every child[3] . The decline in the population is being contained thanks to the positive trend in foreign nationals: there are 5,141,341 immigrants registered in Italy (+2.2% compared to 2021), accounting for 8.7% of the resident population[4] .

These figures highlight the need for timely intervention, otherwise the demographic imbalances caused by the combined effects of declining birth rates and an ageing population will have a destabilising impact on the labour market and the sustainability of the social security and welfare systems. According to ISTAT forecasts, the ratio of individuals of working age (15-64 years) to those not of working age (0-14 years and 65 years and over) will fall from around three to two in 2022 and could fall to one to one in 2050. The active workforce is declining in a country where productivity is also too low; the labour market is shrinking and the gap between advanced and backward areas is widening: not only the traditional gap between North and South, but also that between areas with the highest social innovation and fragile, less populated and isolated areas.

The 'internal areas' of our country are characterised by a progressive ageing and decline of the population. In small municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (70% of Italian municipalities), there is a real phenomenon of depopulation: between 2014 and 2021, 81.2% of small towns recorded a reduction in the number of residents, with peaks of up to 97% in towns in central and southern Italy with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. The average age in these areas of the country is 47, while the proportion of young people (11.8% aged 0-14) is half a percentage point lower

3 The old-age index measures the number of people aged 65 and over per 100 young people aged 0–14. The index rose from 187.6% in 2021 to 193.1% in 2022 (compared to 148.7% in 2011). Over the course of fifty years, the ratio of elderly people to children and young people has gone from 46 over-65s per 100 young people under 15 in 1971 to 193 in 2022. Source: ISTAT.

4 ISTAT, '2022 Census: population still declining', in *Resident population and demographic dynamics*, 18 December 2023

than in larger towns. People over the age of 65 account for 25.2% of the population, compared to 24.1% in large towns. The negative effects of this situation on public finances, businesses, welfare, the national health system, education and the environment are set to worsen if the negative birth rate trend cannot be reversed.

When the number of people entering the labour market is lower than the number leaving it, it becomes more difficult to find the skills and professionals needed to meet the demands of the productive sector. The reduction in the number of young people as a proportion of the total workforce is a phenomenon that will have consequences in terms of both vitality and innovation. This is all the more so given that this contraction in the labour market is compounded by the so-called 'brain drain', as people seek opportunities and a better quality of life elsewhere.

In the medium and long term, the ageing of the population will lead to the participation in the labour market of people in poorer health, workers who are nevertheless essential to sustaining the social system, and a shortage of new skilled workers. The negative balance between new entrants and leavers from the labour market will have an increasing impact on the social security and welfare system, due to the difficulty of continuing to finance services and the reduction in the number of taxpayers able to support the growing number of pensioners.

Following this trend, the increase in the pension burden could double in a short period of time. If we consider the interrelationship between demographics and the sustainability of healthcare systems and public finances, the scenario is one of growing demand for healthcare, characterised above all by care and assistance services in response to the increase in chronic diseases, against a reduction in the number of taxpayers and the tax revenue needed to cover welfare costs. Finally, fewer births also means fewer pupils and, therefore, fewer enrolments in schools and then in universities: a phenomenon that already characterises the fragile areas of the country, with the closure of schools and, in the future, university faculties in medium-sized urban centres.

In Italy, however, there is at least one positive case that deserves consideration: that of the autonomous province of Bolzano, where, unlike other Italian provinces, the average number of children per woman is 1.7, with an upward trend. High employment rates, especially in the public sector, higher female employment than the national average, flexible use of part-time work, and the availability of nurseries are all factors that make the province of Bolzano and/or cities such as Trento examples to look to in order to try to initiate the 'demographic spring' that gives our research its title and which is so greatly needed. This is a hope that can and must be realised, or else our country will slowly disappear. The ISTAT report also states that

the decline in births affects both Italian and foreign nationals. The latter, accounting for 13.3% of the total, number 50,000, 3,000 fewer than in 2022.

The downward trend in births is therefore overall, and even if immigration to Italy rejuvenates the age structure of the population with a positive impact on workforce replacement, its effect on fertility levels is increasingly weak.

For all these reasons, it can be said that the crux of the matter is rediscovering a sense of community, the beauty of transferring values, experiences and skills between generations, the pleasure of integration between different cultures, solidarity between territories, the contribution of the world of work to personal growth and, above all, the social value of motherhood and fatherhood in order to 'mobilise' all stakeholders - families, institutions, associations, companies and the communication system - with a view to reversing the trend of declining birth rates.

Research objectives

In this spirit, the Magna Carta Foundation, together with its project partners (Jointly, WellMakers by BNP Paribas, Engineering, Prysmian Group), undertook the research project *'Per una Primavera demografica' (For a Demographic Spring)*[5] . The research is essentially based on two main pillars. The first part investigated the reasons for the decline in the birth rate through interviews with 1,072 young people and adults and 530 'privileged witnesses', such as teachers, healthcare professionals, psychologists and psychiatrists.

The analysis focused primarily on changes in young people's behaviour, which is essential for understanding demographic trends. The aim was to explore the difficulties that stand in the way of choosing to have children: not only those of an 'objective' nature, such as lack of employment, work-life balance and low incomes, but also those of a 'subjective' nature, such as fear of having less time for oneself, fear of not achieving individual goals, and personal beliefs. Of course, the issues that emerge are always interrelated, but we believe that only by investigating the underlying reasons that are driving fewer and fewer women and men to bring new lives into the world will it be possible to identify useful solutions to reverse the current trend. For a long time, the issue has been underestimated in Italy. Unlike other countries such as France or Scandinavia, our country does not seem to have prioritised public policies and a public/private system capable of addressing the root causes of the demographic winter. However, more recently, something seems to be changing: the political class is paying greater attention to these issues.

5 The group of partner companies represents approximately 30,000 employees, with more than 840 operational sites located throughout the country. Six other national companies were involved for the sole purpose of collecting qualitative data.

The second aspect of the research concerned the corporate welfare initiatives that companies implement to promote motherhood, fatherhood, work-life balance and, in general, the well-being of workers. Through self-assessment grids and interviews with company management, a range of good practices were collected that demonstrate how corporate actions, appropriately supported by ad hoc public policies, can contribute to creating a virtuous system that makes the world of work, our communities and society welcoming to births and more. Companies' focus on the mental and physical wellbeing of their employees is the way to meet the needs and desires of workers and encourage the possibility of reconciling work with family and even with one's personal space.

Based on an examination of positive practices, guidelines have been drawn up, which the Foundation has already shared in part with policy makers during 2023. Finally, the volume contains an analysis of Italian policies on birth rates and an overview of the main regulations and experiences in three European countries: France, Sweden and Germany.





Chapter 1

Children. Values, hopes and fears of young people in Italy

1.1 The research: objectives and sample

The purpose of the first part of this research is to understand the underlying reasons for the decline in births in Italy. To this end, the Magna Carta Foundation conducted a quantitative and qualitative survey with the aim of understanding the social and cultural causes of the demographic decline.

The survey sample was divided into two macro-categories: the first consisted of 'young people' (456 respondents, aged 17-28) and 'adults' (616respondents aged 29 and over)[5.2] the second consisted of teachers, healthcare professionals, psychologists and psychiatrists[6] . The decision was made to interview the latter, who belong to different professional categories, considering them to be 'privileged witnesses' of the world of young people. The experts also offered extremely useful insights during the processing of the data emerging from the research. The composition of the sample between social groups divided by age – young people and adults who are 'protagonists' of reality – and groups composed of professionals who are 'witnesses' to that reality – reflects the dual methodological position on which the first part of the research was based. Each of the groups interviewed expressed an extremely personal point of view on the demographic issue, creating a multifaceted mosaic of experiences that represents a realistic cross-section of today's Italy.

5.2 The survey sample, representative of different areas of the country, was divided by age, gender and area of residence, as well as on the basis of a series of socio-economic criteria. The survey was conducted online, by telephone and video call, using a questionnaire in which respondents could choose whether or not to make their testimony anonymous. Each member of each group in the sample was given a list of questions (open-ended, multiple-choice, with a satisfaction index); each individual member of the sample groups was analysed in terms of behaviour (looking in depth, for example, at whether young people had children, lived alone, with their family or with a partner), and also on the basis of their studies or work. The sample was created in order to understand regional differences and to maintain proportionality

in the responses between the different areas of the country (for the smaller groups in the sample, the islands were grouped together with the southern geographical area). The incomes (individual or family) of the people interviewed were also analysed. The 'Young People' group can be further divided into 'Very Young People' and 'Young People'. Very Young People: 178 Italian citizens aged between 17 and 22 (103 women and 75 men). At the time of the survey, 52 people in the group lived in the north, 59 in the central regions, 56 in the south and 11 on the islands. 145 people lived with their families, 9 alone and 24 with their partners. 123 were students, 32 were student-workers and 4 were unemployed. Twenty-one respondents lived in a municipality with up to 10,000 inhabitants, 25 in one with between 10,001 and 49,999 inhabitants, 24 in one with between 50,001 and 99,999 inhabitants, 25 in a municipality with between 100,000 and 499,999 inhabitants, 37 in a municipality with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants, and 46 in a municipality with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants. Respondents living with their families reported the following household incomes: 1 between €1,001 and €5,000, 22 between €5,001 and €10,000, 19 between €10,001 and €15,000, 27 between €15,001 and €20,000, 28 between €20,001 and €30,000, 19 between €30,001 and €50,000, and 7 people declared an income greater than €50,000. Young people: 278 people aged between 23 and 28 (165 women and 113 men). At the time of the survey, 85 people lived in the north, 87 in the central regions, 93 in the south and 13 on the islands. 119 people lived with their families, 88 alone and 71 with their partners. 101 people were students, 64 were student-workers and 15 were unemployed. The remainder (98 people) were workers, of whom 10% worked in the public sector, 60% in the private sector and 30% as freelancers. 255 wanted to remain anonymous. In terms of nationality: 258 were Italian, 6 Romanian, 4 Albanian, 2 Spanish, 2 Chinese, 2 Canadian, 2 French, 1 Greek and 1 Iranian. In addition, 28 lived in a municipality with up to 10,000 inhabitants, 37 respondents in a municipality with between 10,001 and 49,999 inhabitants, 35 in a municipality with between 50,001 and 99,999 inhabitants, 43 in a municipality with between 100,000 and 499,999 inhabitants, 60 in a municipality with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants and 75 in a municipality with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants. Respondents who lived with their families reported the following household incomes: 10 reported incomes between €1,001 and €5,000, 12 between €5,001 and €10,000, 20 between €10,001 and €15,000, 21 between €15,001 and €20,000, 19 between €20,001 and €30,000, 12 between €30,001 and €50,000, and 4 people with an income greater than €50,000. Working respondents reported an income: 18 up to €1,000, 12 between €1,001 and €5,000, 23 between €5,001 and €10,000, 57 between €10,001 and €15,000, 39 between €15,001 and €20,000, 19 between €20,001 and €30,000, 8 between €30,001 and €50,000, and 1 declared an income of more than €50,000. The Adult group can be further divided into 'Young Adults' and 'Adults'. The 'young adults': 237 people aged between 29 and 34 (134 women and 103 men), of whom 117 were aged between 29 and 31 and 120 were aged between 32 and 34. Sixty-nine people in the group lived in the north, 83 in the central regions, 76 in the south and 9 on the islands. One hundred and sixty-one were unmarried, 74 were married and 2 were divorced. Thirty-one respondents worked in the public sector, 98 in the private sector, 55 were self-employed, 39 were students and 14 were unemployed. 201 people wished to remain anonymous. In terms of nationality: 228 were Italian, 8 Romanian, and 1 Albanian. At the time of the interview, 26 people lived in a municipality with up to 10,000 inhabitants, 38 in a municipality with between 10,001 and 49,999 inhabitants, 30 in a municipality with between 50,001 and 99,999 inhabitants, 41 in a municipality with between 100,000 and 499,999 inhabitants, 40 in a municipality with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants, and 58 in a municipality with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants. 46 respondents reported an income of up to €1,000, 14 reported an income between €1,001 and €5,000, 28 between €5,001 and €10,000, 68 between €10,001 and €15,000, 47 between €15,001 and €20,000, 14 between €20,001 and €30,000, 18 between €30,001 and €50,000, and 2 people declared an income of more than €50,000. The 'adults': 379 people over the age of 34 (203 females and 176 males), specifically 118 individuals aged between 35 and 37, 128 aged between 38 and 40, 89 between

41 and 45, and 46 aged 46 or over. 116 people lived in the north, 125 in central regions, 112 in the south, and 26 on the islands. 123 were single, 208 married, 44 divorced, and 4 widowed. 31 respondents worked in the public sector, 98 in the private sector, 55 were self-employed, 39 were students and 14 were unemployed. 297 people wished to remain anonymous. Nationality: 354 Italian, 5 Romanian, 4 Albanian, 4 Chinese, 2 German, 2 French, 2 American, 2 Spanish, 1 Argentina, 1 Madagascar. At the time of the survey, 55 respondents lived in a municipality with up to 10,000 inhabitants, 71 respondents in a municipality with between 10,001 and 49,999 inhabitants, 52 in a municipality with between 50,001 and 99,999 inhabitants, 61 in a municipality with between 100,000 and 499,999 inhabitants, 54 in a municipality with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants, and 86 respondents lived in a municipality with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants. 29 respondents reported an income of up to €1,000, 7 reported an income between €1,001 and €5,000, 25 between €5,001 and €10,000, 91 between €10,001 and €15,000, 124 between €15,001 and €20,000, 54 between €20,001 and €30,000, 32 between €30,001 and €50,000, and 17 people declared an income of more than €50,000.

6. The second macro-category, 'privileged witnesses', can be divided into three sub-groups: teachers (100 nursery school teachers; 100 primary school teachers, of whom 58 are women and 32 are men; 100 secondary school teachers, of whom 59 are women and 41 are men; 100 secondary school teachers, including 53 women and 47 men); the group of healthcare professionals, consisting of 60 people (gynaecologists/endocrinologists, obstetricians, assisted reproduction centre professionals); the group of psychologists and psychiatrists, consisting of 70 people (44 women and 26 men).

The sample
(Young people and adults)

	YOUNG PEOPLE (17-28 YEARS OLD)	ADULTS (29 YEARS AND OLDER)
Total respondents	456	616
Women	268 (58,77%)	337 (54,71%)
Men	188 (41,23%)	269 (45,29%)
Italian citizens	436 (95,61%)	584 (94,81%)
Foreign citizens	20 (4,39%)	32 (5,21%)
Live alone/with others	192 (42,11%)	567 (92,05%)
Workers	117 (25,66%)	534 (86,69%)
Unemployed	19 (4,17%)	35 (5,68%)
Students	320 (70,18%)	47 (7,63%)
Graduates	90 (19,74%)	356 (57,79%)
High school diploma holders	362 (79,39%)	(36,53%)
Have children	64 (14,04%)	329 (53,41%)

Table 1 provides demographic data for the two age groups (young people and adults), a sample consisting mainly of Italian citizens with some foreign nationals; in both age groups, a higher percentage of women were interviewed. More than half of adults say they have children (53.41%), compared to a small proportion of young people (14.04%). The vast majority of adults (92.05%) live alone or with a partner, compared to less than half of young people. The number of employed people is also higher among adults.

Children

	YOUNG PEOPLE (17-28 YEARS OLD)	ADULTS (29 YEARS AND OLDER)
HAVE ONLY ONE CHILD	51 (11,18%)	210 (34,09%)
WANT ONLY ONE CHILD	20 (31,25%) 14,04%	130 (61,90%) 53,41%
PLAN TO HAVE MORE CHILDREN	44 (68,75%)	80 (38,10%)
HAVE TWO OR MORE CHILDREN	13 (2,86%)	119 (19,32%)
NO CHILDREN	392 (85,96%)	287 (46,59%)
PLANNING TO HAVE A CHILD	122 (26,75%)	126 (20,45%)
TWO OR MORE PLANNED	64 (14,04%)	(1,62%)
DO NOT WANT CHILDREN NOW	106 (23,25%)	
WILL NEVER WANT CHILDREN	57 (12,50%)	151 (24,51%)

The data in Table 2 show significant differences in family planning between the two age groups: the vast majority of young people do not have children (85.96%), although some say they want one (26.75%) or two (14.04%). About half of adults do not have children (46.59%), and a significant proportion of this group say they never want any (24.51%). Adults who have only one child and do not plan to have more outnumber young people (61.90% versus 31.25%). The desire to have more children after the first is higher among young people who already have one (68.75%) than among adults (38.10%); the latter figure would seem positive but nevertheless indicates a tendency among younger people to delay having a second child. The percentage of adults who have two or more children (19.32%) contrasts sharply with the very low percentage among young people (2.86%); therefore, the family unit

expands with advancing age[7] .

1.2 Young people's responses

The most frequent responses given by the youngest participants in the survey ('I don't want a child now', 'there's time', 'we'll do it when the time is right') express a logic of postponement that shifts the realisation of parenthood to a more advanced age. This is an extremely challenging solution: convinced that they will have a child when they are ready, young people tend to underestimate the fact that the experience of parenthood is very different when you are 25, 35 or 40 years old, with the risk that the long-awaited child may never arrive.

One wonders whether there is full awareness of the fact that fertility, the reproductive potential, declines rapidly after a certain age. A second factor that young people seem to underestimate is that in today's society, people are living longer, a demographic shift that is evident in the longevity of women (around 80% now reach the age of 90). This change should prompt individuals to reconsider their long-term life plans beyond their immediate circumstances: the ageing of the population and longer life expectancy, at least in theory, should prompt young people who are at a crucial turning point in their lives (caught between study and career goals, seeking financial stability) to redefine the importance of personal fulfilment in their lives, restoring the right value to family ties and contributing to the demographic stability of the society to which they belong. However, this exercise in introspection is difficult for the respondents in the survey; the importance of family ties and social networks only becomes more evident with advancing age. Yet, beyond factors such as the security provided by income or the functionality of health and welfare systems, the presence of children should continue to be a fundamental pillar in addressing population ageing and ensuring people's long-term well-being.

7 Only 9% of "very young people" (aged 17-22) say they have a child. Among these, 17% say they made a conscious choice to have a child and 95% say they are happy with this choice. Thirty per cent say they do not want a second child. Among the "very young" without children, 64% admit that they would like one in the future, in 80% of cases between the ages of 30 and 35. Thirteen per cent say they never want to have children. In the 'young' subcategory, 25% already have a child; of these, 40% say they made a conscious choice to have a child, 90% say they are happy with the experience of parenthood, and 38% would like to stop at one child. 75% do not have children; of these, 60% want to have one in the future, with 40% specifying that they want one between the ages of 30 and 35 and 45% between the ages of 35 and 38. Approximately 38% of 'young adults' stated that they have one or more children; of these, 75% have only one child and more than half do not want a second. Finally, among 'adults' over 35, approximately 63% of respondents stated that they have one or more children; of these, approximately 60% have only one child and two-thirds do not want a second.

1.3 Data analysis: income and regional differences

Analysing the data collected, it can therefore be said that the survey results confirm both the current national trend, which sees the average number of children per couple falling below the replacement rate essential to sustain generational turnover; and the trend towards delaying the birth of the first and second child, which reflects significant changes in Italian society with regard to concepts such as parenthood or changing individual attitudes and beliefs towards family roles and responsibilities, which are in turn influenced by factors such as the evolution of socio-economic conditions and dominant cultural dynamics.

Table 3 provides a series of reasons why the two age groups do not want children. Each reason was rated on a scale of 1 to 10. Economic concerns are a significant factor in not having children, with adults giving a higher rating (9 out of 10) to this reason than young people (6 out of 10).

I don't want children!

	YOUNG PEOPLE (17-28 YEARS OLD)	ADULTS (29 YEARS AND OLDER)
Financial problems in supporting them	6	9
Lack of work	6	8,5
Lack of personal time	9	7
Career and objective limitations	9	9
Poor work/life balance	8	7,5
Negative experience in life	4	5,5
Too many responsibilities	6,5	6,5
Fear of pregnancy, postnatal period, childbirth	6	7,5
Health problems	1,5	3,5
Personal beliefs	8	8
Difficulty socialising/relating to others	7	

The search for economic stability becomes a growing concern with advancing age: people do not have children because they 'cost money', both in the sense that in order to have, raise and care for them, one must have a sufficient income, and because children require a complete reorganisation of one's life, which affects the amount of personal time available. Time, in turn, is extremely valuable to respondents. Children require constant care and attention from their parents, while at a social level they require the existence of care/educational facilities that guarantee adequate services, especially when grandparents or extended family networks are unable to make up for the shortcomings of the public sector.

Young people who are going through the delicate transition from education to work often face challenges that can discourage them, especially when there is no family safety net to cushion the difficulties of the transition, leaving them with the task of securing financial independence and finding stable housing, perhaps in a city other than the one where they were born and raised.

Housing and work therefore remain two crucial elements for the realisation of a long-term life plan, and when they are lacking, fears about starting a family tend to grow. The issue of income marks a profound divide between young people and adults in terms of birth rates: the trend among the former is that low incomes (personal or family) correspond to a low percentage of children. However, as income rises above €30,000 per year, the percentage of adults surveyed with children increases. Eighty per cent of those over 35 with incomes around €50,000 say they have children.

These figures are significant but not surprising: people tend to accept the challenge of parenthood when they have greater economic security.

However, there is one countertrend: despite the greater sense of instability generated by economic insecurity in the southern regions, there is a greater desire to have children here than in other areas of the country. This is a view of family structures characteristic of a more traditional and deeply rooted cultural model, as if the combination of factors linked to family and social safety nets in the south mitigated the burdens associated with parenthood, favouring an attitude more inclined towards the idea of starting a family or expanding an existing one.

Almost half of those interviewed in the South, both those who already have a child and those who want to become parents, express a desire to have more than one child, in stark contrast to the prevailing trends observed elsewhere, where the majority of respondents say they want to limit themselves to one child.

Once again, the deep-rootedness and cultural influence of family networks on the

attitudes of young southerners emerges; the traditional family appears, on the one hand, to be a source of psychological and emotional support and, on the other, a practical resource that helps young people cope with the uncertainties of their economic situation. Thanks to extended family networks, there is greater solidarity within the community and a reduced sense of isolation and vulnerability experienced by those who go to live far from their family of origin.

Regional differences go beyond the issue of family planning and affect personal beliefs: over 50% of respondents in southern regions define the family as an entity characterised by the presence of parents and children, in contrast to the prevailing attitudes in central and northern Italy, where there is a shift towards more modern interpretations of family dynamics. In northern regions, the emphasis is not so much on the role of traditional structures as a bulwark against economic uncertainty, but rather on the emotional bond that can develop between two individuals regardless of their marital status, whether or not they choose to have children, and the more conventional notion of family.

1.4 Data analysis: fear of responsibility and personal beliefs

Central-north vs south - the country in comparison
What are the main factors that lead to a rejection of parenthood? (On a scale of 1 to 10)

	NORTH	CENTRAL	SOUTH
Economic problems	8	8	9
Lack of work	7	7	8
Reduction in personal time	8	8	7
Limitations related to career and personal goals	9	8	7
Lack of work-life balance	9	8	7
Negative experiences in family and social life	6	5	5
Fear of responsibility	8	8	6
Fear of pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum	8	8	8
Health problems	7	8	8

In any case, economic considerations are not sufficient to provide a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon of declining birth rates in our country. The limitations on career and personal time imposed by the birth of a child are also a strong motivation for not having children, which is found in both groups; this data seems to indicate an inner conflict between the desire for personal fulfilment and the choice of parenthood. Furthermore, adults evaluate the fear of pregnancy and any related health problems to a greater extent than young people. Looking more closely at the sample's responses, therefore, the set of motivations that shape individuals' decisions about parenthood appears much richer and more nuanced than it might seem; in the under-35 age group, the decision to become a parent is not dictated solely by financial considerations, but is the result of a complex interaction between personal aspirations, career paths and social expectations. For many respondents, the prospect of starting a family represents not only a potential obstacle to educational and professional paths, but also a profound re-evaluation of personal goals and freedoms. This *sentiment* is expressed by a significant majority of the sample. The potential sacrifice of personal time is even more important in the 17-22 age group, which at the same time harbours a strong anxiety about the responsibilities that come with becoming a parent. Therefore, beyond pragmatic and economic motivations, there are deeper fears in the younger generations' rejection of parenthood[8] .

Finally, it is worth highlighting the data relating to 'personal beliefs', i.e. the conscious decision not to have children, which received the same rating in both groups (8 out of 10). This is one of the most emblematic results of the survey: if we compare the current situation with the post-war period and the economic boom of the last century[9] , it is clear that attitudes towards parenthood have changed among part of the younger population. What was once viewed through the lens of hope and

8 If we try to further segment the reasons among the 'very young' (17-22 years old) and 'young' (23-28), the main reasons why the former exclude or postpone the choice of having a child are the limitations that this would entail in their studies, career and achievement of personal goals, the fear of responsibility and not feeling ready yet (a score of 9 out of 10 for all these reasons). Younger women tend to fear pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period (score of 8 out of 10) and admit to having difficulty relating to or socialising with the opposite sex (score of 7 out of 10). As for those who do not have children and claim they do not want them, the most common reasons include a reduction in personal time (score of 9 out of 10) and personal beliefs (score of 8 out of 10). In the 'Young People' subcategory, those who do not have children and claim they do not want them (25% of the sample) justify this choice because of limitations related to their studies, career and personal goals, and because they believe that becoming parents would restrict their personal time (score of 9 out of 10). One of the reasons that needs to be considered once again is the 'personal conviction' not to have children (score of 8 out of 10).

9 In the first quarter of 1943, 240,000 children were born in Italy: despite the drama of war, a huge tragedy and a social situation that was out of control, Italians still thought about having children, i.e. about the future. That historical context contrasts sharply with today's reality.

optimism for the future (the decision to become parents) is now subordinated to the question of 'what comes next' after having a child. Around 30% of the sample of younger people show palpable hesitation when faced with the choice of becoming a father or mother without the guarantee of a collective safety net capable of reducing concerns related to family life, calling into question both the social function of parenthood and the desire for it. One could try to explain these new sensibilities with the change in the social paths of a part of the younger generation, particularly those who put all their efforts into completing their education, facing insidious challenges to obtain a degree, or those who face the transition to the world of work without the financial support of their families.

The desire for independence, the desire to obtain paid work that allows them to be autonomous, together with the aspiration to achieve their personal goals, the need to find a home to live in and to create authentic and meaningful relationships with their partner, risk pushing the choice to have a child to the margins. It should therefore be acknowledged that there are young women and men who reject parenthood, clashing with traditional social expectations that tended to equate the experience of motherhood with the female condition, as if it were an obligation for women to become mothers. In a part of the youth world, the innate urge to procreate no longer seems so obvious: it is a radical change in our social fabric that requires, on the one hand, a rethinking of the trajectory of our society and, on the other, an in- tensive dialogue with younger people about the meaning they give to autonomy, their relationships, a vision of life based on performance and results, and so on. What is certain is that we are facing a rapidly evolving youth culture whose behaviour, lifestyles and mentality are difficult to understand. These trends did not arise today; previous generations also expressed a desire to be able to choose whether to have children, as well as to postpone that choice. However, considering the survey data, it must be added that, unlike in the past, what has changed among the younger generations is the very notion of family, the traditional family structure, so that the perspectives of younger people now diverge significantly from those of their parents. Finally, it should be noted that difficulty in socialising is a recurring factor in the decision not to have children, especially for adults.

1.5 Only child

Table 4 focuses on the reasons that lead 'adults' to have only one child. In this case, the sample is divided into 'young adults' (aged 29-34) and 'adults' (aged over 35). Economic problems and career limitations are the two main reasons why both groups choose to have only one child; the perception of the financial and professional sacrifices that parenthood would entail pushes them towards a society of only children.

Why only one child?

	YOUNG PEOPLE (17-28 YEARS OLD)	ADULTS (29 YEARS AND OLDER)
Financial problems	9	9
Lack of work	6	5
Lack of personal time	9	8
Career and objective limitations	9	7
Poor work/life balance	8	9
Negative experience with first child	4	5
Too many responsibilities	8	7
Fear of not being able to manage the second child	9	8
Health problems	2	6
I can't have any more	2	2
Advanced age	1	3
Desire to have only one child	6	8

Limitations on personal time and, especially for the over-35s, the concern about not being able to find a balance between work and family life also appear to be dominant reasons: with advancing age, the value of personal time and that given to 'work-life balance' increases. There is a substantial regional difference: the demand for more services to help balance motherhood, fatherhood, work and private life comes from respondents living in the northern regions (both those who already have a child and those who would like to have one or more). In the regions of the country where career aspirations and the achievement of personal goals are most strongly felt, there is also a greater fear of not being able to achieve work-life balance, i.e. the ability to be parents and workers at the same time.

1.6 Fear of pregnancy

The data once again reveals a tendency towards smaller families or choosing not to have children, dictated by economic, personal and health concerns, as well as a rather pessimistic view of the birth rate. The picture that emerges from these interviews is that of a society that is increasingly cautious about expanding family size, due to a complex interaction of factors. The women interviewed during the survey, particularly those under the age of 25, for example, feel the weight of parental responsibilities heavily, assigning an overwhelming importance rating of 9 out of 10 to these reasons. Equally noteworthy are fears related to the physical and emotional impact of pregnancy, childbirth and the overall experience of motherhood, a fact that is really worth reflecting on considering that we live in an era marked by unprecedented advances in medical science and greater attention to healthcare by society. On reflection, however, this is only an apparent paradox, serving to remind us of the complexity of human emotions and social expectations in the reality in which we live. Although the relentless advance of technological progress has presumably mitigated the fear of suffering, and despite the fact that women dealing with pregnancy today have access to practices that have reshaped the perception surrounding the experience of childbirth, concern for their physical safety remains one of the reasons given by younger women when asked if and how many children they would like to have. a sort of persistent 'ancestral' fear that casts further shadows on the contemporary discourse on parenthood. Once again, the feeling is that we need to explore the deep origins of these 'fears', whether they stem from primordial instincts or reflect the existential anxieties of a generation that adults cannot fully understand. Hence the urgent need for meaningful dialogue with younger people to understand their perception of life and the responsibilities inherent in parenthood.

Interviews with experts reveal that, unlike previous generations, who were also politically committed to gaining greater awareness of themselves and their bodies, in today's reality there is a section of young women who seem to have a more distant relationship with their own bodies. Medical and scientific progress alone is not enough to resolve the search for meaning in human life and personal existence, a labyrinth of desires, expectations and uncertainties, from which one can only escape by establishing more empathetic intergenerational relationships, which are essential for grasping the dark and profound dimensions of the person that escape the control of technology and cannot be easily rationalised.

1.7 Survey of privileged witnesses

1.7.1 Teachers

Moving on to analyse the assessments of 'privileged witnesses', Table 5 shows teachers' perceptions of parents' attitudes and trends on issues such as parenting, family planning and the decision to have a second child; some recurring behaviours among students are also analysed.

Privileged witnesses Teachers

	Nursery/ kindergarten	Primary	Middle school	High school
Total respondents	100	100	100	100
What parents think about a second pregnancy	"26,3% yes to a second child 31,3% have doubts"	"25% yes to a second child 34,6% have doubts"		
Do more couples stop at one child, or continue and have additional children?		"54,6% stop 45,4% continue"	"56% stop 44% continue"	"57% stop 43% continue"
How do parents interact in their relationship after the first pregnancy	"23,6% no change 43,6% decline 8,6% separation	"24% no change 44% decline 7,6% separation"		
How do they interact with each other? Men and women			"46% inclusion 39,3% respect 7,7% hostility 7% indifference"	"43,3% inclusion 34% respect 17,3% hostility 5,4% indifference"
How much does emotional and sex education influence the development of the desire for parenthood?			"85,6% very 14,4% quite"	"86,6% very 13,4% quite"
Will there be a demographic increase?	"Yes 21,6% Don't know 50%"	"Si 23,3% Non so 43,3%"	"Si 15,6% Non so 47,3%"	"Si 15% Non so 47,3%"

Teachers indicate that there is general uncertainty about the decision to have a second child. The greatest uncertainty (34.6%) is found among parents of children attending primary school, showing once again that there is a significant segment of the population concerned about expanding their family for a variety of financial, personal or social reasons, compared to parents of children in nursery schools (nurseries and kindergartens), who show slightly less uncertainty (31.3%).

personal or social reasons, compared to parents of children in nursery schools (nurseries and kindergartens), who show slightly less uncertainty (31.3%).

It can be said that there is a trend among parents, also perceived by teachers, to create smaller families. The decision to have only one child increases slightly as the child s, reaching a peak of 57% among parents of secondary school children. In this case, it is likely that the choice is influenced by the greater responsibilities and financial burdens perceived by parents as their children get older.

An important finding is that early childhood teachers (nurseries and kindergartens) say that for 43.6% of couples, the bond seems to crack after the birth of their first child, while 8.6% tend to separate. For about 24%, the relationship remains unchanged. The stress and joy of parenthood therefore end up exposing the underlying fractures in the relationship or strengthening it. The slightly lower separation rate perceived among parents of primary school children (7.6%) could indicate greater stability among couples when they are able to adapt more to family roles and responsibilities. More generally, the relationship between parents is perceived as less problematic or becomes more stable with the arrival of a second child and in large families.

Teachers offer a somewhat worrying assessment of gender dynamics among students: 46% of the category speak of inclusive relationships among students in nursery and middle school, but the figure drops to 43.3% in secondary school.

Hostility between the genders is perceived significantly among secondary school teachers, reaching 17.3%. While emphasising the fact that younger boys and girls still know and value the word 'respect', the data on the growth of feelings of hostility between the genders, particularly in secondary schools, is a warning sign, especially when we consider the occasional episodes of violence that characterise youth environments. Among educators, the issue of male-female relationships and broader issues related to interpersonal relationships appear to be recurring concerns. Can we say that there is some correlation between the feelings of hostility between the genders recorded in schools and the phenomenon of declining birth rates? Furthermore, the vast majority of all categories of teachers, approximately 86%, believe that sex education and emotional education can significantly influence the desire to become parents. In this sense, the educational context can be considered fundamental in influencing personal decisions about parenthood. There is also strong pessimism among teachers about the possibility of population growth in our country, particularly among secondary school teachers (47.3%). Approximately 50% of those interviewed who teach in schools express pessimism or cannot imagine what the demographic future of the country will be.

1.7.2 Healthcare professionals

Table 6, on the other hand, provides evidence from healthcare professionals on family dynamics, health and motherhood, all issues that can influence the decision to have a child. When talking about the people they usually deal with, 51.7% of healthcare professionals indicate a shift in family models towards non-traditional forms, which also include the idea of a childless couple. On the other hand, 35% still consider the traditional model of a couple with children to be the main family structure in Italian society. 13.3% believe that there are broader symbolic ties that define the family and that their patients are moving away from traditional biological or marital ties.

The focus group with healthcare professionals highlights a paradigm shift in family structures, which should be borne in mind given the professional experience of the respondents and their knowledge of the physical and psychological demands of parenthood. More than half of healthcare professionals, 53.3%, say that health issues and risks related to pregnancy have a significant influence on the decision to have children, while 23.3% of respondents believe that this influence is even more significant.

According to healthcare professionals, economic and personal concerns, time constraints and a lack of work-life balance are the main reasons for postponing or ruling out parenthood (8.5 out of 10 on the rating scale), followed closely by previous negative experiences and fear of responsibility (rating of 7.5 out of 10). Economic conditions and career limitations are the main reasons for stopping at the first child (rating 8 out of 10), followed by a lack of work-life balance (rating 7.5 out of 10). 43.4% of healthcare professionals do not expect any increase in demographic trends in Italy, while only 16.6% of respondents expect population growth.



Privileged witnesses
Healthcare professionals

Total respondents	**60**

the concept of family today?	
35%	Spouses + children
51,7%	Spouses
13,3%	Symbolic bonds

how much does health affect birth rates?	
23,3%	Very
53,3%	Enough
21,8%	Not much
1,6%	Not at all

what are the main factors that lead to a refusal to become a parent	
8,5	Economic problems
7,5	Lack of work
7,5	Lack of personal time
8	Lack of work-life balance / negative experiences with family
5,5	Negative experiences within family and friends
7,5	Fear of responsibilities
8	Fear of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period

what are the main factors that limit parents to one pregnancy?	
8	Economic problems
8	Career and goal limitations
7,5	Less personal time
6,5	Lack of work-life balance
4,5	Negative experiences with the first child
8,5	Fear of not being able to handle a second child
8,5	Desire to have only one child

will there be a demographic increase?
YES 16,6%
DON'T KNOW 43,4%

Privileged witnesses
Psychologists and psychiatrists

Total respondents	**70**	
The concept of family today?	21,6%	Spouses + children
	56,6%	Spouses
	21,8%	Symbolic bonds
How much does health affect birth rates?	20%	Very
	60%	Enough
	20%	Not much
	0%	Not at all
What are the main factors that lead to a refusal to become a parent	8,5	Economic problems
	7,5	Lack of work
	7,5	Lack of personal time
	8	Lack of work-life balance / negative experiences with family
	5,5	Negative experiences within family and friends
	8,5	Fear of responsibilities
	8	Fear of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period
What are the discomforts associated with motherhood?	9	Fear of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period
	7,5	Fear of responsibilities
	7	Career and personal goal limitations
	8	Lack of work-life balance
	5,5	Fear of changes in the couple's relationship
What are the discomforts related to fatherhood?	8	Fear of changes in the couple's relationship
	8,5	Career and personal goal limitations
	5,5	Lack of work-life balance
	6,5	Fear of responsibilities

Finally, Table 7 concerns the testimonies of psychologists and psychiatrists on the relationship between mental health and birth rates, with respect to issues such as motherhood and a series of factors that influence parenthood. Based on their professional experience, 56.6% of the sample perceive today's family as a non-traditional model that also includes childless couples. 21.6% refer to traditional family structures with spouses and children, while 21.8% see the family more as a symbolic than a traditional model.

Twenty per cent of the sample report that mental health considerations significantly influence decisions about motherhood, a recognition that underscores the importance of psychological well-being in the choice to have children.

Economic concerns prevail among the reasons for postponing or ruling out the decision to have a child (rating 8.5 out of 10), followed by lack of work-life balance (8 out of 10), lack of work and personal time constraints (7.5 out of 10). A significant finding is that fear of pregnancy and postpartum challenges appears to be the greatest concern related to motherhood (9 out of 10), followed by lack of work-life balance (8 out of 10), fear of responsibility (7.5 out of 10) and career limitations (7 out of 10). Fathers' concerns highlight other professional challenges: among fathers, there is a fear that a child will lead to career limitations (8.5 out of 10), fear of changes in couple dynamics (rating 8 out of 10), followed by a lack of work-life balance and fear of responsibility (6.5 out of 10). The focus group with psychologists and psychiatrists clearly illustrates the concerns of mental health professionals regarding the substantial role that economic stability, mental well-being and appropriate lifestyles play in family planning. The high percentage of respondents who consider the family to be only a couple (56.6%) may reflect broader social trends that increasingly prioritise personal fulfilment and career over traditional family roles.

These insights, together with those of teachers and health professionals, also appear to be fundamental for the definition of policies and support systems capable of addressing the complex reality that future parents face today; in particular, to enhance mental health support, improve the economic conditions of young families and create flexible work environments that are better suited to parenthood.

1.8 The condition of young people today and cultural models

In any case, a broader analysis is needed to contextualise the phenomena we have described within the historical landscape in which they developed, so as not to run the risk of falling into generalisations about the condition of young people. The younger girls and boys interviewed during the focus groups have grown up through dramatic experiences such as the pandemic, have lived through the nightmare of

lockdown and are grappling with a reality of bloody international conflicts, not to mention the climate crisis and the importance that the battle for a more sustainable world has acquired in the youth world. There is no doubt that all these factors can fuel a series of anxieties about the future, potentially influencing the willingness to embrace parenthood. In order not to let these fears go unheard, we need to understand them and, if possible, mitigate them, considering the risk that in the years to come the social context may worsen compared to the situation we are facing today. Only by empathising with young people and involving them in decisions about our future will we be able to cultivate an environment more conducive to healthy interpersonal relationships, offering a more positive vision of parenthood.

Italy has changed, but it seems that what has changed most is people's life plans, with the growing idea that having a child can negatively affect individual aspirations; a mindset that downplays the ideal of the traditional family, the value of being a parent and the deep commitment required to raise and educate a child.

The survey results show a growing gap between young people's desire for personal fulfilment, their reproductive capacity and family planning, with significant implications for the demographic trajectory of our country: the impression is that in some social groups, we are moving in a direction where having children will no longer be considered a priority. This 'anthropological mutation' calls into question the very projection of human existence as well as our nation' , making it essential to ask how to address the underlying causes of the decline in births, removing the obstacles that prevent people from starting a family and rediscovering the meaning of parenthood, so as to build a sustainable social model for future generations.

Once again, the question is whether it is possible to encourage young people, from a cultural point of view and through combined action starting in schools and families, to recognise and appreciate more the joys of parenthood and the beauty of having a child, without the 'agencies' called upon to achieve this result necessarily falling into a paternalistic mindset. The risk, in fact, is that the adult world, convinced that the values and culture of the past are immutable, fails to grasp the attitudes and ambitions that young people have within themselves, for example, the way they relate to each other and to others. In the age of the Internet and the Web, just to give another example, it is possible to meet, get to know and love each other 'at a distance', in ways that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. It is therefore worth asking ourselves what the profound impact of technological transformation has been on the mentality and psyche of young people, analysing how new models of communication and relationships determine behaviours that are different from those of the past.
One way to instil courage in the majority of young people who still believe they can

become parents could be to share the idea that parenthood is also possible outside the confines of traditional marriage norms, considering the fact that today many young people and adults have relationships with different partners over the years. By initiating a broad discussion on the evolution of the contemporary family, it may be possible to safeguard the understanding of parenthood among a significant portion of future generations. Discussions on the results of research carried out by experts from the Foundation have shown that in order to achieve objectives such as those described above, a major cultural awareness campaign would be necessary, leveraging traditional mass media such as television and cinema, as well as new media such as social media, which are the preferred means of communication for young people. This is where the debate on the meaning of parenthood, issues related to birth rates and the responsibility of the younger generations for the country's demographic stability should take place. Instead, mass culture currently limits itself to promoting alternative, often minority values, which are quickly absorbed by young people, leaving no room for models that promote family unity or the fact that most families still consist of a mother, father and children. Similarly, the prevailing narratives of the last twenty or thirty years, based on the glorification of success rather than personal fulfilment, should be accompanied by other stories that show the sense of happiness and satisfaction that comes from nurturing family relationships, including those with children. It must be acknowledged that the media tend to exaggerate certain social phenomena which, although present in the reality we live in, do not necessarily represent the attitudes and behaviours of the 'silent majority' of the population, including young people.

The relationship models overrepresented by the media only partially reflect contemporary social reality, and it would be necessary to diversify them, showing more how children can contribute to the general well-being of society. This does not mean returning to models of the past that no longer fully correspond to modern sensibilities, nor does it mean legitimising the total dismantling of the traditional world. Instead, it means promoting a more balanced, renewed vision of family ties and their importance in human existence. The challenge is to effectively engage with the new communication channels preferred by young people, which escape the understanding of adults. Adults should make a greater effort to analyse the messages conveyed through these channels in order to rebalance the more 'ideological' views and give the family a perspective as the fundamental unit of human society.

However, it will certainly not be possible to achieve a constructive result if the media and cultural trend continues to be predominantly one of dismantling, deconstructing or overturning the social canon, without there being an alternative value system on the horizon to the menacingly nihilistic traits of deconstruction (this has happened,

for example, to the catalogue of 'old narratives' that some people want to archive). In other words, while we must acknowledge that we are no longer in the Italy of the 1950s, we cannot confuse critical thinking with some variant of 'political correctness'.

1.9 Role of companies

Finally, in this game that involves institutions, primarily the education system, the world of information, politics and public opinion, large companies can play a very important role. As we shall see, the business world already offers various guidance programmes for families and employees' children. These programmes can be used as a starting point for proactive measures to overcome some of the fears we have described, for example by providing accurate information on maternity, pregnancy and childbirth, encouraging employees' children and young workers to reflect on these issues.

After all, it is families themselves who are calling for a different kind of corporate welfare, one that is not solely focused on monetary benefits but addresses the broader issue of the psychological and physical well-being of employees, a field that includes the issue of birth rates and services to promote motherhood and fatherhood, such as neighbourhood nurseries and 'widespread' nurseries, just to give one example that we will discuss in the following pages.

Companies can play a key role in supporting public policies, so much so that large companies are increasingly structuring welfare plans and therefore have good practices in their portfolios that should be shared and replicated.

The situation described in the last few pages is the one our country is facing in this early part of the 21st century. In order to fully understand it and find solutions, all social actors, the government, local administrations, the business world, the private sector and the third sector must work together: we must not forget that today's young people are the Italians who tomorrow will create the 'country system', including the economy, employment and GDP. It is necessary to act on several fronts in order to try to create the conditions that will make Italy a nation that is friendly to couples and families with children. There are many aspects related to demographic winter, and they must be addressed simultaneously on several fronts if the ruling class intends to try to stabilise the downward demographic trend. A combination of innovative and common-sense solutions is needed: recreating a welcoming and favourable environment for births and doing so by breaking through the mindset of the younger generations, through public policies that offer freedom of choice to young people and families.



Chapter 2.

Good practices and policy proposals for corporate welfare in Italy

2.1. Corporate welfare in Italy: a brief historical overview of its origins and evolution

Much time has passed since Adriano Olivetti's pioneering intuition to create a company where life and work could coexist harmoniously, in a system such as the *company town* of Ivrea. Integrating work, technology and humanistic values to create a more inclusive and sustainable society: entrepreneurs and workers together, under the direction of the poet Paolo Volponi as head of personnel. Olivetti's virtuous intention to determine the civilisation of a people based on the level of 'adequacy' of its social structures remains a model to be inspired by; however, since the 1980s, Ivrea has lost a quarter of its residents and the average age is approaching fifty[10] . According to ISTAT projections, this could be the demographic reality of our country in 2040, the first among European states to have an average population of fifty-year-olds[11] . The combination of demographic decline, an ageing population, extreme events such as the pandemic, and the technological acceleration of recent years with its consequent impact on the production system has led to a change in work paradigms and, consequently, has affected traditional corporate welfare policies.

Historically, corporate welfare as an integral part of the modern industrial relations system in Italy originated in the 1950s. In the following two decades, based on available data for certain individual years, public and private companies contributed approximately 1.5% of overall welfare expenditure[12] . Corporate welfare services (supplementary pensions, health insurance, company nurseries, summer camps, canteens, sports facilities, educational support for workers and their families, housing)

10 Nikil Saval, *Utopia, Abandoned*, The New York Times, 28 August 2019.

11 Precisely, an average age of 49.7 years. See *Forecasts of the resident population of households / Base 1/1/2020. Future of the population: fewer residents, more elderly people, smaller families*, ISTAT, 26 November 2021.

12 Patrizia Battilani, *From assistance to citizen empowerment, Italy and its Regions*, Treccani 2015.

were highly appreciated by employees, especially in times of low wages. In the latter part of the 20th century, these benefits declined as a result of deindustrialisation and the reduction in the average size of Italian companies. This trend continued into the early 2000s. Research has identified three key aspects of Italian corporate welfare: its long-term correlation with the performance of the industrial sector and large companies; a geographically uneven distribution of these services linked to industrial concentration in specific regions and areas of our country; and the reduction of services since the 1970s, when municipal administrations became competitors of companies in the territories.

Corporate welfare as we know it today was introduced in 1986 with the approval of the TUIR (Consolidated Income Tax Law); in particular, Articles 51 and 100 of the TUIR constitute the pillars of 'Second Welfare' through tax leverage and define which corporate welfare services do not constitute income from employment.

Corporate welfare refers to a set of sums, benefits, works and services of social utility that companies can make available to all employees or categories of employees and their families to promote the economic, physical, psychological and social well-being of workers[13] .

The 2016 budget law, supplemented by those of 2017 and 2018, introduced a series of changes to further 'encourage' corporate welfare. The new rules, in fact, have firstly provided for the removal of the voluntary aspect for the purposes of tax exemption for employee benefits (Art. 51 of the TUIR, paragraph 2, letter f); whereas previously, IRPEF exemption for all services offered to employees, such as nurseries and meal vouchers, was only provided on the basis of a voluntary act by the employer, from 2016 onwards, the same exemption applies to services provided for in company contracts and regulations. In addition, the regulations have extended the benefits enjoyed by both employees and their families (as indicated in Art. 12 of the TUIR, letter f-bis) to educational and training services, including preschool services (including canteen services), summer or winter camps and play centres (for educational purposes); in addition to the introduction of IRPEF exemption for care services and benefits for elderly or non-self-sufficient family members.

Furthermore, as part of a possible trade union agreement, workers have the right to decide whether to receive all or part of their productivity bonus in cash or in welfare services that are totally tax-exempt. Finally, it has been established that it is not necessary for the company to provide direct services, but that it may use vouchers to be spent with accredited service providers (e.g. nurseries or elderly care services).

13 See Flavio Brenna, Corporate welfare, Treccani 2017.

These rules highlight the use of taxation for social purposes and have accompanied the evolution and activities already in place within companies: a virtuous example of policies supporting private welfare that integrates and complements the public service system. As we know, the regulations and legislation governing *fringe benefits* are different, as they fall within the macro-category of compensation in kind, i.e. that part of ordinary remuneration that is not paid by the employer in cash in the pay packet but through the provision of goods and services.

2.2 The Magna Carta Foundation's research on corporate practices

The second phase of the research was based on the regulatory framework described in the previous paragraph and on a consolidated overview of good practices to verify, together with partner companies[14] , the contribution that companies make to specifically encourage the birth rate in our country within the more general context of corporate welfare. Of course, corporate initiatives in the areas of work organisation, flexible working hours, smart working, leave and part-time work were also analysed. The aim is to highlight how this set of measures, which are flexible and able to adapt to new needs, can also bring benefits in terms of motivation, increasing innovation and productivity at work. The Foundation initially submitted a self-assessment grid to companies: using six criteria that take into account the duration and effectiveness of the measures, the commitment of the human resources involved, policies, compliance with the various regulations available, the provision of services and the financial management of processes, an attempt was made to measure the success of corporate welfare initiatives[15] . After completing the analysis of the data emerging from the grid, the Foundation's researchers conducted a series of qualitative interviews with the companies. This tool served to contextualise the

14 The survey directly involved partner companies (Jointly - Il Welfare condiviso, Engineering, WellMakers by BNP-Paribas, Prysmian Group) and 'non-partner' companies (six national companies operating in the food distribution, cosmetics and clothing sectors, interviewed for the sole purpose of collecting qualitative data).

15 The self-assessment grid was also used to classify the types of employees involved in welfare measures according to their respective stages of parenthood. The analysis included an assessment of the overall success of company policies, divided into organisational, economic, training, cultural and psycho-affective policies. By analysing the alignment of welfare initiatives with the strategic objectives of organisations, the economic profitability of the measures, the effects on improving employee skills, cultural inclusiveness and psycho-affective well-being, it was possible to explore the multi-perspective impact of welfare initiatives. The grid also provided an overview of the regulations used to implement the measures at national and regional level (collective labour agreements, company bargaining, unilateral actions by companies, etc.). Companies were asked to assess the accessibility, quality and inclusiveness of the services offered to employees, regardless of internal hierarchies. Finally, the grid took into account the financial resources allocated to welfare initiatives. The assessment framework was also supplemented by the 'Code for Companies in Favour of Motherhood' promulgated by the Ministry of Family, Birth and Equal Opportunities in March 2023, which is essential for assessing companies' adherence to best practices in maternity support initiatives.

quantitative data collected, offering a rich overview of the practices implemented.

The question today is how, by better protecting the economic security and well-being of workers, we can influence their decision to have children. Olivetti's lesson on doing business while involving communities remains relevant today, as companies choose to adopt measures to stem the decline in birth rates and contribute to stabilising demographic trends: new forms of subsidiary welfare meet the needs of working parents and young people who decide to have children; the structure of corporate welfare is therefore also changing. It is very important, in fact, that the Foundation's research reveals a new model of corporate welfare that is not conceived solely as an economic advantage , nor limited to interventions for social purposes, but that socio-economic aspects are integrated into a 'holistic' vision, according to which it is necessary to take care of the integral well-being of the person, both physically and psychologically. When companies embark on a similar transformation, shifting their perspective from economic benefits to a broader recognition of the value of human capital, the idea matures that embarking on the journey of parenthood does not necessarily mean sacrificing other aspects of one's career and personal life.

2.3 Young people and birth rates: the time factor

The focus on work-life balance also emerged in the first part of this research, where the analysis conducted through focus groups revealed that young Italians under the age of 35, especially those living in the more advanced areas of the country[16] , attribute their decision to postpone or forego having children more to the lack of work-life balance than to income, as they are unable to find a harmonious balance between their professional aspirations and their relationships. After all, individual happiness can be influenced by both income and the quality of our relationships. Up to a certain point, happiness increases as income rises (especially if starting from a low income level); however, beyond a certain threshold, the pursuit of greater personal wealth can have disadvantages. The efforts we make to increase it can damage our relationships, taking time and energy away from them and reducing our overall well-being. This is the well-known Easterlin paradox[17] .

The time factor is therefore crucial for those who work: how much time do we have available to devote to our families, to looking after our children, to achieving personal and career goals? How much time do we have to work and to live, and what balance should be struck between these aspects of life? Time is also crucial

16 In particular, young people working in the North, coming from the Southern regions, who cannot rely on traditional family support structures.

17 Easterlin's paradox can be represented by the formula: F = f (I,R), where F is individual happiness, I is income and R is 'relational goods'. See Richard A. Easterlin, *Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence*, 1974, MPRA Paper 111773, University Library of Munich, Germany.

for another reason: if workers have to spend it searching for the services they need to manage their daily family life, it becomes more difficult to raise a child and the decision to have more children is also likely to be postponed[18] . The goal then becomes to recalibrate corporate welfare approaches to respond to the changing needs of the younger generations, offering them the widest possible range of services to improve their quality of life.

2.4 Analysis of corporate practices

2.4.1 The pandemic and the advent of hybrid working

Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data provided by the partner companies in this research clearly shows that companies are paying increasing attention to initiatives aimed at supporting motherhood and fatherhood, while welfare packages are becoming increasingly sophisticated, customisable and designed to meet the diverse needs of employees. The management of the companies interviewed does not consider initiatives aimed at supporting the lives of workers with children to be an obstacle to productivity, but rather as tools for creating more congenial and welcoming work environments. Companies recognise the urgency of the demographic issue and the need to take innovative measures to mitigate the decline in births. This modernisation should be accompanied by public policies that reduce the bureaucratic difficulties and complexity of labour relations that slow down the transition to a model where personal satisfaction and productivity interact profitably.

A change in public policy is desirable, especially as businesses face a negative economic climate, high labour costs, low wages, low productivity, inflation eroding household purchasing power and restrictive labour regulations. Not to mention the traumatic experience of the pandemic and the major changes it has brought about in Italian society. *Active listening* to employees during and after Covid, for example through forms of relational and psychological counselling aimed at employees with children, has taken on a central role in company dynamics, in the face of a radical change in work requirements (think of the 'lockdown' period).

By promoting *a* genuine *culture of care*, companies have managed to strengthen the sense of belonging to the organisation, empowering structures in such a way that each individual feels valued and respected. These dynamics have particularly affected parents who have had to deal with the delicate balance between work and private life during the pandemic: widespread fear, remote working, children at home and

18 The results of the focus groups organised by Magna Carta show, however, that families with lower and more precarious incomes tend to forego parenthood in view of their difficult material living conditions.

closed schools, sudden changes in crisis management policies, perhaps in a small city flat where social distancing was a challenge. The subsequent phase of returning to work, which was particularly difficult for new parents, prompted companies to strengthen their family support measures, tailoring them to the individual needs of their employees. From remote working to childcare programmes, from various forms of prenatal and postnatal care, welfare initiatives today aim to mitigate the psychological pressure on working parents, allowing them to better balance their personal and professional lives.

Technological transformation has accompanied the processes we describe, becoming an indispensable tool for the functioning of corporate welfare packages. Thanks to new and more advanced platforms and innovative digital applications, companies are able to provide families with essential and diversified forms of support, administrative processes become more streamlined, the burden of bureaucratic obstacles is lightened, and the overall experience of those who work is improved. The widespread adoption of 'hybrid working' after the pandemic has undoubtedly represented a systemic change in the way companies operate. Working parents are no longer confined solely to the traditional office space, but enjoy the flexibility of different forms of remote working, increasing their resilience to external shocks and redefining the concept of working time, which can be adapted to a constantly evolving reality.

The majority of companies surveyed during the research stated that they had fully implemented the smart working model in recent years, understanding it as a shift from traditional space and time constraints towards performance-based objectives in the organisation of work. Two-thirds of the companies surveyed rated the effectiveness of smart working with a score of 8.5 on a scale of 1 to 10. Remote working opportunities were extended to new parents and employees with school-age children, while a third of the companies in the sample went a step further by extending remote working to parents with adult children. In addition, some of the sample said they had used teleworking in the last five years. The implementation of these measures was facilitated by second-level company bargaining supplemented by unilateral actions by companies.



Although corporate welfare is now widespread within the Italian economic fabric, its impact is still limited[19] : although 1 in 2 companies has introduced measures to promote well-being, only 1 in 5 employees say they are satisfied with the initiatives, suggesting that companies have little awareness of what their employees need. This may be due to a lack of structured listening to employees' needs: 75% of companies do not have structured organisational listening tools that allow them to promptly identify workers' needs and introduce support initiatives, and even fewer companies have structured a *corporate wellbeing* strategy consistent with their *people strategy* (12% say they have integrated the two strategies). Rather than thinking about individual corporate welfare initiatives, companies should consider structuring a genuine corporate wellbeing strategy, moving from a logic oriented towards offering a set of goods and services that aim to satisfy basic needs and integrate the purely monetary component of remuneration (corporate welfare) to a more holistic logic, oriented towards creating an organisational culture focused on wellbeing in all its aspects for both individuals and the organisation.

2.4.2 Work-life balance policies

Analysis of the data shows that the majority of the companies surveyed have implemented work-life balance programmes, particularly those related to the organisation of working time, rating them with an average effectiveness score of 9 out of 10. This high rating underlines the commitment of the business world to promoting a more harmonious balance between the different aspects of an individual's life. The mechanisms for implementing work-life balance measures once again include second-level company bargaining, on the one hand, and direct intervention by companies, with decisions taken independently, on the other. In addition, over the last three years, companies have provided continuous information support to employees on developments in company life, for example during periods of leave taken by parents experiencing motherhood. One third of the sample rated this measure as 8 out of 10 in terms of effectiveness, activating it unilaterally. T h e analysis reveals that the use of vertical and horizontal part-time work had already become common practice for companies for a considerably longer period (one third of the sample rated the effectiveness of part-time work as 9 out of 10). Part-time agreements were guaranteed through unilateral actions by companies, and flexible working arrangements were granted at the request of employees with the approval of managers. In general, all measures relating to flexible working hours are viewed positively by companies, even in the period prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. One third of the sample rated measures relating to flexible working hours as 7.5 out of 10 in terms of effectiveness. Second-level company bargaining and/or unilateral actions were used to ensure the sustainability of these agreements.

19 Anna Zavaritt, *The new organisational paradigm of wellbeing*, Jointly, 28 March 2024.

2.4.3 Corporate welfare platforms

JOINTLY is the first B Corp® in Italy specialising in welfare and *corporate wellbeing*, capable of guaranteeing a positive impact on the wellbeing of people, companies and the local communities in which it operates. The company works with businesses to design useful and effective responses to the new challenges of the labour market, increasing the sense of belonging and satisfaction of their employees. In this way, corporate welfare has a significant impact on the well-being of families and organisations, protecting female employment. The aspects described above are crucial for the modernisation of welfare systems and for making companies more competitive in the market. "During the pandemic, the question 'How are you?› took on a whole new meaning," explains Anna Zattoni, President and *Co-founder* of Jointly. 'Taking care of people's well-being and productivity was more important than checking on employees' productivity at work.' Covid-19 has revolutionised corporate welfare strategies, creating a new paradigm that is gaining ground in Italian companies. 'When planning a well-being strategy, you start with a question,' adds Zattoni. 'What does it mean to feel good, both inside and outside the organisation?'. It is clear that investing in active listening tools for staff has also enabled companies to increase the effectiveness and satisfaction of specific employee needs, making welfare credits truly spendable, as well as promoting a broad understanding of a company's internal needs and allowing for greater flexibility in what is offered.

Active listening, personalisation and digitisation of services are three key aspects of the change underway. Innovative companies such as Jointly are able to identify and meet the needs of new parents, enriching the range of services offered within the portal and facilitating access to a set of measures to support birth rates.

"Over the last three years, there has been a rapid surge in attention to the issue of parenthood within companies," points out Francesca Rizzi, CEO & co-founder of Jointly. «This has also happened because the demographic issue closely affects businesses." Corporate welfare is strategic both from a tax exemption point of view, when companies are able to take advantage of the tax incentives made available by public decision-makers, and from the point of view of enhancing services as a tool to increase the attractiveness of the remuneration package. "When a parent knows that there is no nursery in their area and the company offers them one, that area suddenly takes on great importance. Introducing vouchers, contributions or other forms of economic and financial support for parents is undoubtedly important, but the problem is the lack of services; the public sector in Italy is disinvesting and a replacement private market has not yet established itself," says Rizzi, who is convinced that companies need to network to accelerate the infrastructure of welfare services. "What we need," she concludes, "is a structured ecosystem to turn to. We need to design models and adapt them to different areas, intervening with

customised solutions."

2.4.4 Services and initiatives in favour of parenthood

Returning to the analysis of the welfare measures implemented by the companies participating in the research, it is clear that the approach to initiatives supporting working parents has changed in recent years. This is evident in the widespread adoption of company policies aimed at providing long-term support to workers during the different stages of parenthood, from pregnancy to maternity and then on to the subsequent upbringing of children. This approach increasingly brings into play the role and commitment of fathers in balancing time within the family unit.

Support measures for families include a wide range of services, such as access to prenatal and childbirth care, affordable and high-quality paediatric services for children, and financial contributions to support the costs associated with nurseries. Companies have taken proactive measures to safeguard the career continuity of working mothers, recognising the importance of providing opportunities for ongoing engagement and professional development even during periods of leave.
Initiatives taken by the companies surveyed include summer camps and winter breaks for employees' children, offering a safe environment that enriches children's education and social skills while their parents are at work; courses and counselling services tailored to meet the specific needs of parents, providing valuable support and guidance on various aspects of parenting; programmes dedicated to school-to-work guidance, helping families navigate their children's education and future study aspirations.

With regard to non-residential campuses and experiential summer or winter camps for employees' children, in particular, it should be noted that these measures, which in some cases have been in place for a long time and are considered central to work-life balance, received an average effectiveness score of 7.5 out of 10, confirming the role that such services can play in promoting a work culture geared towards child-rearing. In this case, it should be emphasised that the perception of an increase in demand for services such as summer camps, even in southern regions (where grandparents traditionally took their grandchildren to the seaside during the summer holidays), indicates the difficulty of extended family structures, which no longer seem fully capable of supporting the educational mission of parents. A significant proportion of the companies surveyed offered camps and stays not only to parents with school-age children but also to those with adult children, seeking to provide a diversified response to employees' priorities. These initiatives were mainly implemented through a combination of unilateral actions by companies and through company bargaining.

To meet the specific needs of families, such as those with children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN), one-third of the companies in the sample said they offered additional assistance and support, rated as effective at 7.5 out of 10; this is a very important action in the field of educational and social inclusion. Over the last eight years, the majority of companies have provided educational guidance services to employees, rated on average as effective at 8 out of 10, demonstrating once again their focus on providing useful tools and resources to support their children's education. A third of the sample extended these services to employees with adult children, recognising the importance of school and university guidance for young people transitioning from education to the world of work. Over the last seven years, a third of the companies in the sample have also organised specific courses for new parents, workshops and educational programmes to support parenting; the effectiveness of these initiatives was rated 7.5 out of 10, a figure that attests to the tangible impact of the measures in the transition to parenthood and their consistency with the company's overall organisational objectives. Second-level company bargaining was used for implementation, in addition, once again, to unilateral actions by the company. For three years, some of the companies in the sample have been unilaterally providing babysitting services to employees, rating the effectiveness of this measure at 7 out of 10. Such services indicate that company management is committed to finding practical solutions to help parents juggle professional responsibilities and childcare obligations.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate the ongoing commitment of business organisations to responding to the ever-changing needs of social groups. This is also demonstrated by the fact that national labour contract and company bargaining regulations are increasingly being accompanied by unilateral measures taken by companies to support new parents and families. Recognising the central role that the younger generations play in determining the demographic future of our country is essential to creating work environments where the choice to have children is encouraged. This means, on the one hand, not hindering the possible career advancement of employees who take leave from work and, on the other, ensuring that productivity gains within companies are achieved by improving quality and not just workload.

Parenting-oriented corporate welfare therefore improves worker satisfaction and loyalty, helping to spread a sense of optimism and enthusiasm within the company when employees become parents and families grow. In this sense, corporate welfare can truly play a role among the factors capable of reversing negative trends in birth rates and promoting a more inclusive and supportive society.



2.4.5 Leave

The data collected indicates that over the last 14 years, there has been a significant increase in the uptake of various forms of leave, including maternity leave, which provides essential support to new parents during an extremely important phase of their family life. One-third of the companies surveyed rated maternity leave that goes beyond the statutory periods as effective on a scale of 8 out of 10. In addition, in recent years there has been a notable shift towards offering new parents extended parental leave options that exceed the minimum requirements of national employment contracts. This trend once again reflects employers' growing recognition of the importance of promoting a healthy work-life balance for employees. New parents have the opportunity to take longer periods of leave, often accompanied by income support measures that cover a large part of their usual salary. The positive reception of extended leave policies is confirmed by the effectiveness rating given by the companies surveyed, which was 8 out of 10. This result shows not only the tangible benefits gained by employees, but also the strategic alignment of leave policies with the objectives and values of organisations.

In addition to company policies aimed at strengthening state maternity leave legislation (by increasing the number of paid weeks), minimum leave standards for fathers and secondary *caregivers* have been introduced. The importance of paternity leave in promoting gender equality, the involvement of both parents in childcare and, more generally, a more inclusive and supportive work culture is recognised. Paternity leave is a measure that is rapidly gaining ground in the corporate world, with an average effectiveness rating of 8 out of 10, which amply confirms its success. From a regulatory point of view, the activation of the various forms of leave is traditionally governed by collective labour agreements (CCNL) and second-level company bargaining.

2.4.6 Psychological and relational support services

Over the last decade, two-thirds of the companies surveyed have introduced parenting support measures in the form of counselling and specialist psycho-pedagogical support for families, including in-house training sessions designed to respond to the various needs that fathers and mothers face in their daily lives.

The effectiveness of these measures has an average rating of 7.5 out of 10 by companies, underlining the value that such initiatives bring to both employees and the organisation as a whole. From a regulatory point of view, one-third of the companies surveyed say they have used second-level company bargaining to activate these support measures, together with unilateral actions carried out with the help of company funds. Most companies have also implemented programmes to promote the physical and mental well-being of parents during the pre- and post-natal period, focusing in particular on the mental health of employees. These initiatives have been widely welcomed, achieving an average effectiveness rating of 8 out of 10.

Initiatives aimed at promoting meaningful interaction between parents and children in the office, such as themed company parties, are along the same lines: this type of activity has been extended to all employees with children, receiving widespread approval and achieving a score of 9 out of 10 in terms of effectiveness. Recognition and support for employees when they become parents is also appreciated, as a way of celebrating the role of fathers and mothers within the company. In addition, unilateral measures have been put in place to support education, such as tutoring and extracurricular activities for employees' children.

2.4.7 Healthcare services

Over the last 14 years, two-thirds of the companies surveyed have introduced measures to improve access to affordable, quality prenatal care, childbirth services and paediatric care. This trend seems to have consolidated, considering the average effectiveness rating of 7.5 out of 10, and in the last three years, part of the sample reports having permanently adopted these initiatives to support new parents in their welfare plans. To ensure more equitable access to these measures, second-level company bargaining, internal funds and unilateral actions have been used. More generally, with regard to healthcare initiatives, recent years have seen an evolution in insurance and healthcare services specifically for newborns. One-third of the companies in the sample recognised the effectiveness of these measures, giving them an effectiveness score of 7 out of 10. Prevention and healthcare treatments, usually aimed at new parents, have also been extended to families with school-age children. In this case, the average effectiveness rating rose to 8 out of 10. This shift in focus towards parents with adult children once again demonstrates the attention organisations pay to responding to the diverse needs of their employees, especially since one-third of the sample stated that they had adopted these measures unilaterally. Even higher is the effectiveness rating for prevention and vaccination campaigns, at 9 out of 10, highlighting the importance companies attach to safeguarding public health. A mix of regulations has been used to activate and support all these measures: second-level company bargaining, private funds and

unilateral actions by companies. These welfare packages are particularly important because they help to create a family-friendly environment, starting with the health and well-being of individual employees.

2.4.8 Financial incentives and the gender pay gap

Another trend that has become established over the last decade is to encourage childbirth through solid economic incentives that encourage employees to start a family, for example through the provision of advance payments on severance pay to facilitate the purchase of a home or to take out a mortgage. Over the last six years, for example, reimbursements for childcare have been guaranteed, rated as effective by one-third of the sample (7 out of 10) and targeted at new parents. Some companies have also introduced microcredit schemes to mitigate the financial burdens associated with growing families. To implement these kinds of progressive measures, companies have used company bargaining agreements, drawn on internal company funds and taken unilateral action, for example by entering into strategic partnerships or with leading banks. Efforts have also been made to diversify financial strategies by drawing on pension funds outside the scope of the CCNL (national collective labour agreement).

Companies have been committed to promoting reproductive health and fertility awareness, offering female employees regular screening, check-up packages and specialised gender medicine services, mainly through second-level bargaining and internal financing mechanisms. Pregnancy is increasingly being placed at the centre of attention: these measures have been evaluated positively, achieving an effectiveness score of 7 out of 10. Among the most appreciated initiatives is relationship counselling, which was rated 8 out of 10 for effectiveness.

Companies also give a score of 9 out of 10 for the effectiveness of measures to ensure career continuity for mothers, to address the *gender pay gap*, for the safety of pregnant mothers, and for mentoring programmes to facilitate a return to work after maternity leave. The fact that these measures have also been implemented through unilateral actions highlights the efforts of companies to help spread a culture based on equal opportunities among employees. Many of the initiatives we have described have been recognised for biological and adoptive parents, cohabiting couples and single parents alike.

In addition, companies have invested in performance evaluation systems in order to take into account employees' working hours throughout the year in a balanced manner, to avoid penalising mothers returning from maternity leave and to ensure career advancement where necessary. Finally, ergonomic workstations and special areas for rest breaks and medical examinations for employees have been provided.

2.4.9 Mobility support

Looking at the data on the types of measures relating to mobility, healthcare, training and education contained in the welfare plans implemented by the companies surveyed, it emerges that over the last twenty years, the portfolio of services in question has grown in several areas.

All the companies in the sample recognised the need to facilitate employee mobility by offering reimbursements for travel passes and agreements with local public transport operators. In a third of cases, agreements were signed at regional level, particularly in the central-northern regions (Lazio, Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Veneto) and Campania.

Such initiatives can only be welcomed (7.5 out of 10 average rating for effectiveness) because they address commuting issues and help to significantly reduce the financial burden associated with travel. Mobility measures have proved particularly useful for employees with school-age children, but some companies have also extended them to new parents and families with adult children. The fact that such initiatives can be guaranteed to specific demographic groups within the workforce shows that companies are able to understand the different needs and responsibilities of parents. Similarly, in the area of health-related measures, as we have seen, the aim is to cultivate the all-round well-being of employees. Mobility, health and education measures have been adopted through a combination of regulatory mechanisms, collective bargaining agreements, second-level company bargaining, internal resources and strategic partnerships that can guarantee sustainable solutions with a strong social impact.

2.4.10 Initiatives promoting a healthy lifestyle and prevention

Companies have developed supplementary healthcare plans and programmes for mental and physical wellbeing with therapists and coaches. Two-thirds of the sample targeted these measures at new parents and those with school-age children, while one-third also extended them to employees with adult children. All companies have promoted initiatives for proper nutrition for employees and forms of nutritional counselling, targeting them, in one-third of cases, at all female and male workers in the company. Employee health initiatives are viewed positively by the management interviewed, who rate their effectiveness with an average score of 7.5 out of 10.

2.4.11 Support for education and training

From an educational point of view, companies say they have supported the education of their employees' children through reimbursements for school fees, the purchase of school books, scholarships, homework tutoring, and by supplementing

the expenses incurred by families in early childhood. Scholarships are particularly appreciated: 9 out of 10 is the average rating for the effectiveness of the measure, 7.5 for the coverage of early childhood and home care expenses. Corporate welfare packages also include tax and legal assistance, measures for the cultural enrichment of employees, and other measures to make the lives of workers more comfortable. For example, guided tours of museums and art galleries are offered, or digital services are provided to help families better manage their time.

2.5 Experiences from partner companies

Analysis of the data collected shows a growing trend among companies to improve employee well-being, while support for childbirth emerges as a significant aspect of welfare policies. There is therefore a greater recognition than in the past of the importance of supporting employees not only in their professional lives, but also in their personal and family lives.

This is achieved through specific economic initiatives, more extensive parental leave and greater organisational flexibility at work, as well as through measures to promote mental and physical wellbeing, such as healthcare and psychological support programmes.

A comprehensive approach that is sensitive to the personal needs of workers not only helps to create a more welcoming and inclusive corporate environment, but is also strategic in attracting and retaining talent, improving employee satisfaction and productivity. Integrating support for childbirth and parenthood into broader corporate benefit and service packages becomes an important tool for social equity, where resources are allocated to employees not only in terms of salaries and bonuses, but also in support of significant events that contribute to their overall quality of life.

At the heart of this approach, which opens the door to deeper biopolitical considerations about companies' involvement in private and individual aspects of their employees' lives, is the 'positive' idea that corporate welfare can provide equal opportunities for all people in meeting their basic needs.

2.5.1 Jointly

Jointly's vision of welfare is based on three closely related elements: corporate culture, a comfortable working environment and various forms of financial and organisational support for employees. Corporate culture is the cornerstone on which the other two pillars rest, focusing on dialogue and working towards objectives.
"The ability to listen leads to a deep understanding of the person, their needs and requirements," explains Chairwoman Anna Zattoni. "We always aim to make



employees feel like an active part of the company; this is particularly true for parents and those returning to work after leave. People want to be listened to and recognised for who they really are, not just as resources, but as talents that, when cultivated, can bring great benefits to the organisation. In a goal-oriented corporate culture like ours, it is easier to implement flexible working arrangements at different levels and introduce effective tools that can be adapted to the real needs of the staff."

Jointly, therefore, also uses its wellbeing and engagement services portal for its own employees, offering them the opportunity to choose from the list of available services what they need, based on the needs that emerge over time. The use of the platform simplifies access to benefits and services, creating value for both the company and its employees, as the latter can save time by finding convenient solutions to their needs. The uniqueness of the platform allows it to provide a range of services to support parents, such as support for prenatal, neonatal and postnatal care, thanks to an easy-to-use digital interface.
The company encourages the use of smart working, part-time work and flexible working hours, which are useful for supporting pregnant employees and their return from maternity leave. The company's work-life balance practices protect the career continuity of mothers through courses and initiatives to support parenting, advanced services such as babysitter search and selection, as well as non-residential campuses and experiential stays or other extracurricular activities for children. Coverage extends to insurance, healthcare and domestic assistance costs: Jointly's healthcare fund allows for quick and direct reimbursement of expenses incurred by employees for extra-company services, with greater flexibility than traditional insurance policies and without the bureaucratic complexities typically associated with these services. The company pays the fund subscription and employees can choose whether or not to use a wide range of health and psychological well-being services: from prevention and vaccination campaigns to nutritional advice, to name just two examples. From a regulatory point of view, Jointly refers to Law 81/2017 to manage remote working and to the provisions of Article 51, paragraph 2 of the TUIR (Consolidated Income Tax Law) to establish its welfare plans. The regulatory framework is thus strengthened by enriching the range of services offered to employees.

2.5.2 WellMakers by BNP Paribas

The digitisation of welfare services is one of the good practices implemented by the companies that participated in the research. BNP Paribas has created WellMakers, a simple and intuitive web platform and app to support BNP Paribas' corporate clients who want to improve the well-being of their people by diversifying products and services according to the needs of employees and their families. The platform has expanded its scope to over 530 companies throughout Italy, impacting over 180,000 people (including nearly 20,000 employees of the BNP Italia group). This is a truly innovative model in the Italian corporate welfare landscape.

WellMakers represents the paradigm shift we have repeatedly referred to when describing companies' approach to improving the quality of life of their employees: a complete ecosystem, enriched by banking, insurance and financial products and services, with wellbeing solutions covering the spectrum of areas listed in the previous pages. At the heart of this vision is the bank's commitment to sustainability and social responsibility: the platform not only offers concrete benefits to employees and their families, but also reflects the company's environmental and social values, triggering a virtuous cycle that, starting from the concept of *well-being*, extends beyond the confines of the workplace. WellMakers pays particular attention to supporting new parents through highly customisable programmes designed to meet their needs. The platform provides comprehensive support for new mothers, including a range of assistance services and pre- and post-natal care, with the aim of facilitating a smooth transition back to work and ensuring a comfortable living environment for parents.

WellMakers also recognises the fundamental role of education in shaping the next generation. To this end, the platform offers solutions that provide financial support for children and students, with the aim of helping them reach their full potential. By investing in the educational paths of young people and children, the companies that are part of this ecosystem promote the individual growth of their employees' children on the one hand, and cultivate a healthy culture of learning and lifelong training within their organisations on the other. In 2020, BNP Paribas introduced an *Academy* to the platform, a *blended* learning programme designed to illustrate the benefits of the initiative and provide employees with all the information they need to use the platform in the best possible way. Stefano Colasanti, the manager responsible for WellMakers, explains the importance of cultivating the entire personal and professional dimension of employees and emphasises the need for new technological investments to successfully guide the transformation of well-being and welfare in the future: «WellMakers takes a holistic approach to employee well-being, recognising and valuing each individual as a person with unique needs and aspirations." With WellMakers, BNP has chosen to become a 'tricolour provider'

of wellbeing in our country, taking a big step forward in promoting a supportive, inclusive and sustainable corporate culture that is not limited to corporate social responsibility but has an impact on local areas and communities. The ambition is to bring together all those who believe in positive change in our country and contribute to this result every day through their choices.

2.5.3 Prysmian

In the case of the Prysmian Group, too, the commitment to corporate welfare in supporting parenthood goes beyond financial assistance and parental leave policies. Prysmian has strengthened its financial support measures for employees, providing a financial contribution of five thousand euros for each child, which will become mandatory from 2024.

The company also offers 90 days of fully paid optional parental leave for mothers, while parental leave and return-to-work programmes ensure a smooth transition for employees returning to the workplace. But the company has gone further, offering advice and support to help parents balance work and family life.

With its "Missione Genitori" (Parent Mission) initiative, Prysmian provides practical help to families by offering support throughout their children's upbringing, until they reach adulthood. This initiative includes services for mothers returning to work and also for fathers, as well as specialist training programmes on the meaning and mission of parenthood. The company also provides accessible healthcare support to families, for example through online paediatric consultations.

According to Daniela Miniace, *Group Internal Comms & Wellbeing Programmes & Employer Branding Director* at Prysmian, the company's approach reflects a fundamental belief in the value and meaning of parenthood, which cannot be considered an obstacle to employees' career progression: «Prysmian considers parenting to be a fundamental aspect of its employees' lives and actively supports them in managing the challenges and joys of parenthood and in pursuing their professional aspirations."

Once again, we are faced with a comprehensive approach to welfare, which is not limited to financial benefits but aims to promote well-being, value employees' professional achievements and ensure supportive and inclusive work environments.

2.5.4 Engineering

The Engineering group has also expanded the financial resources that employees can use or convert into welfare goods and services, linking these opportunities to increased performance bonuses: the agreements for the renewal of the

supplementary contract for the three-year period 2024-2026, reached in 2023, were judged by the trade unions to be a «fundamental step forward in terms of participatory industrial relations".

The company implements policies on wages, welfare and parenthood, providing a safety net for the health and well-being of employees through a system consisting of insurance instruments, supplementary healthcare (Engineering Internal Solidarity Fund - EFIS), healthcare reimbursements for specialist visits (Engineering Internal Solidarity Fund - EFIS) and other forms of support for the mental and physical health of employees (counselling services, courses and information on health and first aid, agreements for the physical and sporting well-being of individuals).

With the 2023 agreements, Engineering has further strengthened measures in favour of parenthood, increasing compulsory paternity leave and supplementing optional parental leave for one month up to 80% of salary. Up to 24 hours per year of paid leave in the event of a child's illness or medical appointments has been introduced, and a solidarity contribution has been established for the heirs of workers who die in service due to non-occupational illnesses, equal to one year's salary. Engineering recognises that the birth and upbringing of a child are fundamental stages in the lives of employees and, through its EFIS Solidarity Fund ( ), helps to address any financial difficulties associated with childbirth, as well as providing financial assistance for the purchase of essential maternity products such as formula milk. The company has developed a comprehensive welfare portfolio for families, which also includes bonuses for the purchase of school books and scholarships for employees' children, as well as offering agreements, meal vouchers and sustainable mobility services such as public transport season tickets. These forms of financial support allow new parents to enjoy unique moments, such as establishing an emotional bond with their newborn, with peace of mind. Engineering allows up to a maximum of 144 days of smart working per year, which corresponds to an average of three days per week, and gives special consideration to requests from parents with children up to 3 years of age, pregnant workers and employees in particular health situations (their own or those of cohabiting family members). These groups are granted the possibility of working remotely even beyond the 144-day limit provided for in the agreements. Flexibility at work reinforces a corporate culture that leverages trust between management and employees and a sense of responsibility within the organisation. In recent years, the company has also invested heavily in recruitment policies that reflect an approach linked to the promotion of gender equality and respect for diversity, broadening the spectrum of university disciplines useful for new hires. The *on-the-job* training programmes adopted by Engineering are tailored to the company's various skill requirements and offer employees the opportunity to grow in their careers, regardless of gender, educational qualifications or socio-

cultural background. In terms of continuing education, the subjective right to training has been strengthened, with the addition of 8 hours to the 24 hours provided for in the current CCLN, for a total of 32 hours.

Marcella Tesone, *Group Talent Change and DE&I Director* at Engineering, emphasises the importance of the support network for parents and families that the company has developed over time, highlighting its people-centred approach to talent selection and development. At a time when social changes and geographical distances are reshaping traditional family structures, Engineering appears focused on defining welfare policies that guarantee essential services such as healthcare and employee wellbeing.

"Parents and families need a support network which, especially in large cities, cannot coincide with the parental or family network, both because it is distant and because it is impossible to guarantee continuous help," explains Tesone. «In this sense, it is essential to provide adequate services to ensure the care of children." As in the other cases of good practice examined in the research, the spirit of the EFIS fund goes beyond the company's simple contribution to the medical expenses incurred by employees, offering a solidarity-based approach that also innovates in the area of corporate social responsibility.

Final considerations on the experiences described

All these corporate experiences further reinforce the belief that a country's 'wealth' can no longer be measured solely by traditional metrics such as GDP, but that new indicators such as equitable and sustainable well-being (BES) are needed.

Furthermore, it is necessary to promote social innovation in public policies to further support the actions of companies committed to recruiting young talent. Today's new talents seem more aware of their professionalism and, when looking for work, they now think differently from their parents: income is important, but so is finding workplaces that protect their wellbeing and support their role as parents. In this sense, it could be said that it is no longer companies that choose workers, but workers who choose companies: this is a radical change from the past. On the other hand, as the research shows, the very concept of 'corporate culture' is undergoing a process of *reinterpretation*, whereby the traditional production-oriented definition of 'human resources' is being replaced by the idea of 'people', which is placed at the centre of the relationship between business and work, becoming the cornerstone of corporate organisation. This is all the more true given that the post-pandemic phase seems to have accelerated these internal processes to promote measures supporting the integral well-being of the person (psychological, physical, emotional), with a particular focus on *work-life balance*. What seems most urgent, at least with



regard to the objectives of this research, is to be able to productively combine public policies with more extensive and innovative corporate welfare programmes, focused not only on economic benefits but on a broader idea of personal well-being, and therefore on diversified and customisable services. From this point of view, in the coming years it would be appropriate to give greater support to companies' interventions on various aspects of parental life, such as pregnancy and childbirth, breastfeeding, parental leave, return to work and work-life balance, as well as further promoting good corporate practices that invest in professional training, guidance and investment for women in STEM subjects. It would also be useful to make national contracts on supplementary assistance or flexible working (working hours, leave, smart working), decentralised bargaining and solidarity funds, where provided for by companies, more effective. All this should take into account the fact that, as we have seen, companies have already strengthened their welfare programmes with unilateral actions, with success stories that should be analysed and integrated into public policies.

The picture that emerges from the research shows how companies have become aware of the centrality of parenting, making it one of the objectives of measures aimed at ensuring the well-being of workers and providing specific services to support the needs of mothers and fathers. l corporate welfare measures are not considered an obstacle to productivity, but rather an incentive to transform the employment relationship, conceived as a family environment attentive to the needs of private life.

It is clear that corporate welfare policies, appropriately supported by public policies, can contribute to countering demographic decline.

2.6. Policy proposals: guidelines for a policy to support the birth rate

In light of the field research carried out with the companies involved, in 2023 the Magna Carta Foundation and its partner companies submitted a set of guidelines and policy proposals to policy makers with the aim of integrating corporate welfare with a public policy to support birth rates. To understand the relationship between corporate welfare and birth rates, we examined the programmes through which large companies support parents and various aspects of their employees' lives, analysing their broader social effects. Companies that adopt good practices that meet the needs of workers, such as flexible working hours, extended parental leave, childcare assistance, as well as measures to ensure the financial stability of employees, not only demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and ethics in their work, but also have an impact on work-life balance and, therefore, potentially on birth rates.

Italian and European corporate welfare initiatives can significantly improve people's well-being in the workplace, leading to greater employee satisfaction and a potential increase in their productivity. Studies on people's behaviour within organisations suggest that employees who feel respected and supported in their private choices and personal commitments are more likely to be more productive: this result triggers a virtuous circle[20] . When companies implement programmes that are useful to employees with children or who want to have children in an organic and widespread manner, this choice can make parenthood more attractive and thus help to stabilise demographic trends.

As emerged in the first part of our research, economic uncertainty and anxiety about failing to achieve professional or career goals, combined with concerns about the responsibility of having a child, often discourage young people from starting a family. If companies were able to compete not only in terms of profits but also in terms of the quality of welfare services offered to employees, this could lead to substantial changes in regulations in favour of work-life balance. The responses given by younger people to the Magna Carta questionnaire show that Millennials and Gen Z are more inclined to consider becoming parents when they see the possibility of a better balance between their professional goals and personal life, within a framework of economic stability. If younger workers had greater certainty that they could manage family life with more time and services, they would probably also be more inclined to have children.

20 See, among others, Christian Krekel, George Ward, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, *Employee wellbeing, productivity, and firm performance: Evidence from 1.8 million employees*, CEPR 2019; AA.VV., *Work-life balance and its impact in modern organisations: An HR review*, World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024; Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, Sarah Crichton Books 2014.

Introduction of measures to support education and work-life balance in the early years

The first proposal put forward to the government by the Foundation and its partner companies was to promote the experience of so-called 'widespread' or 'local' nurseries, a model that brings together companies, private educational facilities and the local area to provide childcare services for employees with children aged 0 to 3[21] . On the one hand, widespread nurseries make it possible to overcome the chronic shortage of places in public nurseries and, on the other, they offer an alternative to company nurseries, which are not always sustainable due to costs and changes in the world of work during and after Covid. Experimenting with new forms of social innovation is strategic if we consider the fact that the municipal allocation of nursery places is often complicated by bureaucratic procedures and that limited availability generates fierce competition among families. Easy access to a network of widespread nurseries, geographically integrated into the business and production system, would be an excellent solution for many parents. Companies, in collaboration with professionals working in the corporate welfare sector, would be responsible for identifying and selecting childcare facilities based on their affordability and the quality of services offered, giving priority to those with high educational and safety standards and capable of creating a welcoming environment for children. Once the facilities have been mapped, employees could have 'priority' when enrolments open, with a twofold effect: reducing and simplifying the time needed for parents to enrol their children in nurseries and mitigating the stress factors that characterise this delicate moment in family life. In addition, employees could enjoy reduced rates on tuition fees, financed in part or in full by companies thanks to existing corporate welfare legislation. Greater public policy support, aimed primarily at small and medium-sized enterprises and based on a genuine network approach, would help to further reduce the financial burden on parents, promoting accessibility to a whole range of experimental childcare services: widespread nurseries, but also 'family nurseries' and well-established experiences in some areas of Italy, such as *tagesmutter*.

This approach, which integrates corporate welfare and local welfare, also helps workers in small and medium-sized enterprises and should also support the objectives of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), which focuses on

21 "Jointly, with the active contribution of a number of professionals in the sector, selects private nurseries based on information received from client companies, allowing employees to enjoy priority access to enrolment within a predefined time frame. In addition, workers have access to reduced fees with a discount of up to 15%, which can be financed in whole or in part by the companies themselves, as already provided for in corporate welfare legislation," Valentino Bandoni and Lorenzo Bandera, *Asilo nido diffuso: una sperimentazione di welfare aziendale a sostegno dei genitori* (*Widespread nursery: a corporate welfare experiment to support parents*), Percorsi di Secondo Welfare, 29 February 2024.

strengthening social infrastructure. Options such as the one we have described would have a number of positive overall consequences: parents would return to work with greater peace of mind after their leave period, knowing that their children are being cared for effectively; the company would be able to attract more talent and skills by offering innovative corporate welfare tools that protect parenthood and promote birth rates; equal opportunities and greater social equity would be guaranteed; trust between employees and employers would be strengthened, also enhancing the company's reputation in the community.

Babysitting vouchers

The proposal for widespread nurseries could be further enhanced by integrating it with a 'babysitting voucher' provided by companies to their employees' families. The voucher would have a pre-determined number of *babysitting* hours, which would cover the cost of the service, available to new parents according to their needs. The implementation of such a service could help to regularise and professionalise babysitting, with higher standards of care, improving training requirements for employees and their working conditions. A qualified 'nanny' would ensure a higher quality of care for children. The integration of vouchers with technological innovation could enable companies to include services such as 'last-minute babysitting' in their packages, providing a valuable, timely and 'backup' solution for employees facing sudden personal or professional emergencies. These integrated systems could be applied in other areas, such as improving transport options for parents or helping children with their homework, once again allowing parents to manage their work and home lives more flexibly. In order to evaluate innovative corporate welfare models such as those described, it would be advisable to examine their functioning in greater depth and verify the replicability of regulations such as the *Chèque emploi service universel* (CESU), introduced in France in 2005. The CESU is a voucher co-financed by employers to support work-life balance, which facilitates access to various services such as babysitting, elderly care, domestic cleaning and tutoring. This versatile tool allows families to reduce their expenses when deciding to hire a domestic worker and simplifies the mechanisms related to hiring, payment, and handling the various tax and social security aspects of the collaboration. In France, the CESU ' ' is used to combat undeclared work, promoting employment in the domestic services sector and providing tax advantages for both workers and families. Domestic workers employed through this scheme are entitled to health insurance, unemployment benefits and pension contributions. In the case of babysitters, formal recognition of the profession makes it safer, offering greater protection to those who carry it out, something that is lacking in a scenario characterised by irregular or informal work. In this sense, the emergence of the 'black' economy in the domestic sector would also lead to an increase in state revenue.

Support for childcare during school closures

A third proposal submitted by the Foundation to policymakers was to strengthen public/private initiatives to partially or totally reduce the cost of summer camps (up to 90 days). The weekly costs for children to attend summer camps are often very high for families who cannot rely on family or extended family support networks. Therefore, differentiated costs based on family income could be envisaged, as well as forms of direct sponsorship by companies through funding or special events (including the centres in corporate CSR programmes), or even ad hoc scholarships for the most disadvantaged children and adolescents, co-financed by local authorities or through private donations and *crowdfunding*.

Community involvement appears to be essential for the success of such proposals: civil service volunteers could be used to create forms of participation in the management of summer camps. Summer camps could achieve this by forming partnerships with local businesses and/or non-profit organisations involved in childcare, with appropriate incentives. Institutions should apply strict quality and safety standards for camps, with regular inspections and mandatory staff training. Finally, summer camps committed to environmental education, i.e. facilities that improve the learning experience of students and promote a healthier lifestyle, should be rewarded. It should be noted that in April 2024, the Ministry of Family Affairs took a step in the desired direction, announcing that it had secured €60 million for summer camps[22] .

Enhancement of parental leave

With regard to parental leave policies, the objective should be to stabilise this measure, consolidating it with respect to the measures taken in the latest budget, in line with the state's budgetary requirements. The proposal in this case is to make the 80% compensation structural, bringing it to at least three months (up to the child's sixth year of life) and also providing for strong contribution relief mechanisms for companies that invest internal financial resources in strengthening these measures.

Incentives for businesses

Tax credits should also be extended when companies demonstrate that they are able to plan incremental or additional investments specifically aimed at supporting work-life balance, birth rates and parenthood. In the latter case, the 'Formazione 4.0' tax credit mechanism could be borrowed, which encourages companies to invest in digital training for their staff: all financial resources allocated by companies

22 Domenico Pacifico, Roccella*: 'Summer camps, funds found. Sixty million from the ministry to finance the plan'*, Il Messaggero, 21 April 2024. The minister also announced the allocation of more resources to family centres and a mechanism to limit the impact of the single allowance on the ISEE.

to employees with children should be eligible for tax credits. This benefit should be granted to companies resident in Italy, including organisations of non-resident entities operating permanently in our country, regardless of their legal status, economic sector or size. The enjoyment of these benefits should be subject to compliance with workplace safety regulations and the correct fulfilment of social security and welfare contribution obligations in favour of workers. In this regard, the Foundation has also planned to introduce a 'Birth Support' certification for organisations that promote 'corporate social welfare' initiatives open to the local community, involving local authorities and the third sector. This initiative will serve as a useful experiment in integrated forms of local welfare through inter-company collective bargaining, network contracts and local bargaining to support small and medium-sized enterprises.

Policies to support birth rates

[23]Finally, with regard to public policies to support birth rates, Magna Carta has developed a set of guidelines for the education system, smart working, administrative simplification, supplementary pensions, guidance and vocational training for those entering the world of work. Firstly, companies are calling for full-time schooling and solutions for the summer months when families struggle to balance work with caring for children who are at home. In this regard, the provision of optional and elective activities in the education sector should be further extended beyond compulsory education, making schools a formidable ally for families. This approach should place greater emphasis on experiential educational models that go beyond traditional school environments and integrate learning more closely with natural environments. In this way, not only would the educational experience be enriched, but a greater culture of environmental awareness and sustainability would also be fostered, contributing to the physical, emotional and social growth of the younger generation. Schools should allow families to choose the paths that best suit the interests and developmental stages of students, thus promoting a more personalised educational experience, cultivating children's unique talents and inclinations, and ultimately improving academic performance and learning processes. Here too, the government should be credited with introducing measures to help manage family time with the adoption, for a two-year period, of the 'Summer Plan', which allocates approximately €400 million to schools that are able to run projects for students during the summer months, when children and young people

23 See, for example, the experience of preschools in the United States of America: Ann Selmi, *Preschool Without Walls*, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Vol. 76, 2021; also Giuliano Bonoli, 'Childcare Policy in a Comparative Perspective Get access Arrow' in *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective*, Oxford University Press 2023.

cannot count on other experiences for personal enrichment, leisure and growth[24] .

Smart working and flexibility

On the smart working front, considering the paradigm shift experienced in the labour market in our country during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, it is essential not to lose sight of the value of a more agile and flexible working time culture, based on alternating between presence and distance. Law 81 of 2017 provided for a series of measures aimed at promoting parenthood through a more flexible organisation of working hours, guaranteeing special rights and protections on access to and use of smart working by fathers and mothers. During the pandemic, Decree Law 34/2020 stipulated that, until the end of the health emergency, parents employed in the private sector with at least one child under the age of 14 were entitled to work flexibly, even in the absence of individual agreements with their employer. This legislation was extended by various measures (Article 1 of Law 191/2023, converting Decree-Law 145/2023), but was never made permanent. Since April 2024, remote working has once again been regulated by the 2017 legislation, thus eliminating the simplifications that were useful to parents and reintroducing individual agreements for the activation of the measures. It is essential that legislators carefully assess the ongoing transformation of the labour market: hybrid working models, which emerged as an innovative response during the tragic years of the pandemic, must be supported by clear and stable regulations over time. Company bargaining and the revision of collective agreements are extremely important in the evolution of the system.

Additional economic support measures

With regard to measures such as the Universal Child Allowance (AUU), the procedure for submitting information for AUU applications is currently managed directly by the INPS (National Social Security Institute); this prevents large companies from having accurate information on the number of employees with children in their databases. This information would be extremely valuable for the internal planning of company welfare services, in a context in which companies have already strengthened their internal listening mechanisms during and after the pandemic. It would therefore be appropriate to provide for new procedural mechanisms for transmitting information for the application for the Single Allowance, taking into account current privacy regulations. Furthermore, with regard to supplementary pensions, tax relief for PIPs (Individual Pension Plans) and FIPs (Supplementary Pension Funds) could be specifically increased, with the guarantee of tax exemption until the employee retires from working life.

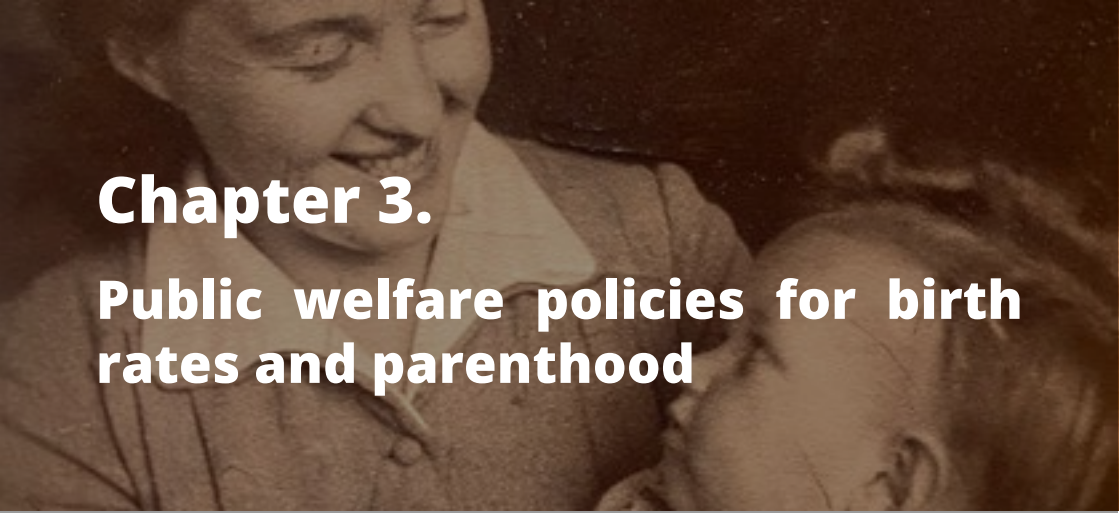
24 *School, Minister Valditara signs decree: €400 million to keep primary and secondary schools open during the summer*, La Repubblica, 12 April 2024.



Finally, tax incentives and deductions should be developed for companies that promote 'inbound' guidance and training services, especially for technology companies that hire female STEM staff[25] . Considering the extreme importance of policies aimed at supporting female employment in the technology sector, support measures could be provided for companies that offer technical and scientific guidance and training, with additional tax deductions for internal or external resources dedicated to this purpose. From a public perspective, the possibility of strengthening guidance starting in lower secondary schools could be considered in order to combat the gender gap in science, particularly in STEM subjects. In the latter case, a more integrated and essential approach is needed to increase women's participation in the labour market, especially in technological sectors where women are often under-represented, such as in tech, or where pay gaps between female and male workers persist. The gender pay gap is a phenomenon that affects women not only during their working lives but also when they retire, creating significant social imbalances.

Finally, in order to continue supporting the good corporate welfare practices we have described, it is necessary to strengthen the legislative framework for corporate welfare referred to in the second paragraph of Article 51 of the Consolidated Income Tax Law (TUIR). These rules, as we have repeatedly argued, were designed to improve the overall well-being of individuals and families through tax incentives, and this is the path that needs to be strengthened. From a financial point of view, the ceilings for fringe benefits should be stabilised, as they were changed for the sixth time in five years in 2024, bearing in mind that true corporate welfare should be encouraged because it also generates value in communities and territories as part of a systemic approach to a policy that promotes birth rates, as the research clearly shows.

25 In February 2024, the Ministry for Family Affairs promoted the event 'STEM. The key to the future: young people, women, businesses', on the occasion of the first National Week of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, which is celebrated every year from 4 to 11 February. See Department for Equal Opportunities, 2 February 2024. See also Maria Lombardi, *National STEM Week, Minister Roccella: 'Two million to update teachers and bring children closer to science'*, Il Messaggero, 3 February 2024.



Chapter 3.

Public welfare policies for birth rates and parenthood

Incentives such as tax credits or the possibility for companies to participate in calls for tenders that support corporate *well-being* and welfare policies should be multiplied, linking them to companies' signing of the 'Code for Companies in Favour of Motherhood' drawn up by the Ministry for the Family and aimed at companies that want to implement policies in favour of motherhood and in support of the career paths of working mothers. From a regulatory point of view, the regulatory framework needs to be clarified and strengthened in order to preserve the social and contractual purpose of corporate welfare: this purpose is broader than just income support or simple tax breaks and allows for the changing needs of workers to be met.

As we have seen, the challenge of birth rates also depends on the welfare choices made by companies. Here, it is necessary to provide a summary of public policies relating to parenthood. Today in our country, people who have children or decide to have children have access to various public programmes ranging from financial assistance to leave policies, which reflect the intention of policy makers to ensure greater well-being for mothers, fathers and families.

However, it is necessary to examine the policies implemented in recent years to understand whether there has been a uniform, truly equitable and effective distribution of available resources among different social groups or at a geographical level. For example, it is important to ask whether financial assistance has been adequate to meet the rising costs associated with family life, especially for low- and middle-income families, taking into account the higher cost of living in some areas of the country compared to others[26] . Similarly, it is necessary to verify the accessibility and inclusiveness of public policies to understand whether all parents benefit equally, considering the participation or economic opportunities that women have in our country[27] ; differences between self-employment and employment, or between single parents and those living as a couple, could also be considered.

In any case, Italy boasts some of the best maternity and parental leave legislation in the 27-country European Union. As regards measures in favour of women, compulsory maternity leave is provided for new mothers who are employees (5 months' leave from work, generally around the time of childbirth or the arrival of an adopted or foster child in the family), with a daily allowance of 80% of their salary paid by the INPS (National Social Security Institute). Maternity leave can be extended up to seven months after childbirth in certain specific cases. Along with parental leave ( ), mothers have other options for extending their time off work, such as breastfeeding leave or unpaid leave.

26 A survey conducted in 2023 by Welfare, Italia using 22 KPIs (key performance indicators) that assess both aspects related to welfare spending and aspects related to the results of this spending (social policies, health, social security and training) shows that the southern regions are all at the bottom of the ranking (Calabria, Campania, Basilicata, Sicily, Molise, Puglia, Abruzzo, Sardinia) and northern regions at the top (the Autonomous Province of Bolzano in first place, followed by Trento, Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Valle d'Aosta, Lazio, Veneto and Lombardy), see the *2023 Welfare, Italia Report. Laboratory for social policies*.

27 If we consider the latest *Global Gender Gap* report compiled by the World Economic Forum, we can see that Italy remains at the bottom of the world rankings in 2023, despite having gained six places, moving from 110th to 104th place last year. These rather low figures are also reflected in women's access to education (60th place) and in the health and life expectancy segment, where we have moved up from 108th to 95th place. The global gender gap for women in the workplace is wider than might be expected, for example in terms of childcare. According to the World Bank, women enjoy less than two-thirds of the rights of men worldwide, *New Data Show Massive, Wider-than-Expected Global Gender Gap*, The World Bank, March 2024.

Parental leave is a period of optional leave from work granted to parents to care for their child in its early years. For employees, the right is valid within the first 12 years of the child's life (or from the date of entry into the family in the case of national or international adoption/foster care) for a total period between the two parents not exceeding ten months, which can be extended to eleven if the working father takes leave from work for a continuous or split period of at least three months. For workers enrolled in the separate pension scheme, the entitlement applies within the first 12 years of the child's life (or from the date of entry into the family in the case of national or international adoption/foster care) for a total period between the two parents not exceeding 9 months. For self-employed workers, the entitlement is for three months for each parent, to be taken during the first year of the child's life (or from the date of entry into the family in the case of national or international adoption/foster care).

In 2022, parental leave was taken by 348,864 workers, 78% of whom were women. The 2024 'manoeuvre' intervened on this leave by introducing an extra month of 80% compensation in addition to the seven months at 30% and the 80% already available to employees[28] . Although limited to 2024, the doubling of the months at 80% can be seen as a signal from the government towards the incremental development of these measures. From 2025, however, parental leave is expected to fall to 60% for the extra month (compared to 80% in 2024) and remain at 30% for the remaining months. Optional leave such as parental leave and compulsory leave such as maternity and paternity leave appear to be strategic measures for work-life balance and another lever that may prove useful in countering negative demographic trends. As we have seen, helping parents to care for their children without giving up their jobs and career prospects is one of the essential objectives of the legislator.

Our legal system also provides for maternity allowance, which was introduced in the late 1990s and increased to around €400 in the latest budget law, in addition to allowances for the self-employed and freelancers. The maternity allowance is payable for each child born or adopted under the age of 6 to mothers who are unemployed or who, despite working, are not entitled to other maternity allowances. A new feature introduced in 2024 is the maternity bonus in the pay packet, a total exemption from social security contributions for working mothers, which is in addition to the bonus for unemployed mothers and incentives for tax deductions

28 Working mothers also take many more days off work: 54 on average, compared to 23 for working fathers. 'Two years ago, the possibility of taking parental leave was extended (by Legislative Decree 105/2022) to self-employed fathers: almost 500 benefited from this,' Valentina Melis and Alessandro Rota Porta, *Parental leave, months paid at 80% doubled*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 27 January 2024. However, the increase in the allowance to 80% in 2024 excludes self-employed workers and workers registered with the INPS separate pension scheme.

for those who hire working mothers. The contribution exemption has been granted from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2026 to working mothers of three or more children, until the youngest child reaches the age of 18. On a trial basis, for 2024, it is also granted to working mothers with two children who are employed on a permanent contract, until their youngest child reaches the age of 10. From May 2024, mothers employed in the public administration will also receive the 2024 working mothers' bonus (until now, only employees in the private sector had been eligible). The contribution relief is a form of social recognition for mothers and focuses on the family and equal opportunities. This measure also serves to combat the problem of working mothers resigning from their jobs, helping them to perceive motherhood as a choice that is compatible with professional fulfilment. The 2024 budget law also confirmed paternity leave for employees, the duration of which has been increased to ten days before or after the birth of a child. The marriage leave allowance, on the other hand, is a social security benefit granted on the occasion of a civil or concordat marriage.

In Italy, forms of financial support for parents include bonuses for newborns, childcare subsidies, tax deductions for dependent children, and a series of measures designed to ease the economic burden on families, particularly those with low to medium incomes. However, at a time when most European countries, and Italy in particular, are grappling with the dramatic issue of declining birth rates, it would be important to decide on long-term measures to support the birth rate that are not limited to one-off interventions. It should be noted that the difficult international economic situation, tight constraints on public spending and overall scarcity of resources do not make life easy for the governments that have succeeded each other at the helm of the country since the end of the pandemic crisis. In any case, there are general trends that need to be investigated, focusing on the differences between the intentions behind the choices made by policy makers and the actual impact of public policies on all the different segments that make up society. Italy, like many other European countries, has faced a significant economic contraction during the pandemic, which has led to a sharp increase in public debt. Governments have spent heavily to support health services, stabilise the economy and enable social safety nets to withstand the shock of an extraordinary crisis. The 'rebound' in GDP in subsequent years has more recently been hampered by the difficult international situation marked by strong geopolitical tensions with inevitable repercussions on our economy. Added to these problems are the fiscal rules of the European Union, which, even in a scenario softened by the need to support member countries after Covid, still impose stringent constraints on public spending. Italy must operate within the narrow confines of these rules, seeking to stimulate growth and reduce a debt-to-GDP ratio that is among the highest in Europe. The combination of an ageing population and low birth rates is putting a strain on

public pension and healthcare systems. Politicians and institutions therefore find themselves in a difficult situation, having to strike a balance between the necessary social policies and the strict budgetary controls that are essential to contain the increase in debt. Given this scenario, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni recently stated that public spending on birth rates and demographic issues 'must be considered a productive investment' and that Europe 'must address the issue of how to consider investments in birth rates'. It is 'good' spending, an investment with a very high multiplier effect that 'cannot be considered like many other items of expenditure in our budgets'[29] .

The government therefore aims to encourage birth rates with a direct investment of £2.5 billion over a year and a half and total net benefits for Italian families of over £16 billion in 2024 alone[30] . The 2024 Budget Law confirmed the set of measures launched in previous years, reshaping the so-called 'family package' with some new features. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the efforts to expand the capacity of nurseries (despite the downsizing of the initial objectives due to the remodelling of the PNRR), some 'tweaks' made to measures such as parental leave, social security relief for working mothers and the wide range of subsidies and benefits aimed at providing financial support to parents to help them meet family costs and educate their children (from mortgages on first homes to the purchase of groceries, including accommodation for students living away from home).

Remaining on the subject of childcare, it is worth noting the renewal of the nursery bonus, an initiative that has been in place for about a decade and is aimed at promoting work-life balance. The Meloni government has strengthened the measure with new funding (an additional €150 million) to make it easier for families to access nurseries from their second child onwards. In 2024, the maximum amount of the subsidy will reach €3,600 for families with a child born after 1 January this year, if there is already at least one other child under the age of ten in the household and

29 Barbara Gobbi, *Demography/Mattarella: Enabling young couples to realise their life plans. Meloni: The EU should consider spending on birth rates as an investment. Roccella: Collective mobilisation against empty cradles*, Sanità 24 / Il Sole 24 Ore, 12 April 2024.
30 *From maternity bonuses to nurseries: over £16 billion for families in 2024, here are all the incentives*, Corriere della Sera, 18 February 2024.

the household's ISEE does not exceed €40,000[31] . The planned increases therefore guarantee an increase in the coverage of fees for children after the first. Another new feature introduced by the Budget Law is that any BOTs held by families will no longer be counted as movable investments for ISEE purposes, so as not to penalise savings.

Nurseries are extremely important facilities for promoting the birth rate, both because they help to balance work and family life and because the early years of life are considered fundamental for the psychological, physical and emotional development of the child. In Italy, nurseries were established in the early 1970s, but the number of places in nurseries and supplementary early childhood services, both public and private, is not sufficient to meet demand. According to Istat data, the number of nurseries has fallen over the last ten years. there is also a problem of regional inequality, and the cost of fees is often prohibitive for families. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan provides for more than 2,500 projects for the construction (or renovation) of nurseries throughout the country; thanks to the Plan, it is estimated that around 150,000 new places will be funded by the end of 2025. This line of investment in the NRRP, valued at around €4.6 billion, aims to increase the provision of education for children aged 0-6 throughout the country, particularly in the south, with new nurseries or the refurbishment of existing ones. The restructuring of the PNRR presented by the government and approved by the EU Commission last year has led to a reduction in the number of places in nurseries and kindergartens that are to be created by the Plan (from 264,480 to 150,480), although the government has assured that the projects awarded will not be defunded and that the current account resources already allocated to municipalities will be maintained[32] . According to a study by the Local Authorities Study Centre based on data released by the Ministry of the Interior, around 30,000 new places have already been added in 2024, with more than half of the financial resources (65%) allocated to municipalities in the south (19,646 additional places)[33] . However, it will not be easy to achieve the targets set by the EU in 2022, with 33% coverage of

31 INPS, *Subsidies for attending public and private nurseries and for using forms of support at home. Applications for the year 2024*, 11 March 2024. For children under the age of three (first child), a maximum bonus of €3,000 remains unchanged with a valid ISEE for minors of up to €25,000.99; a maximum of €2,500 with an ISEE for minors from €25,001 to €40,000; a maximum of €1,500 in cases of ISEE for minors above the threshold of €40,000, absence of ISEE for minors, ISEE with omissions and/or discrepancies in the data on movable assets and/or self-declared income data, ISEE discrepancies, ISEE for minors that cannot be calculated. See also Michela Finizio, *Nursery bonus 2024: €3,600 for the second child, almost free*, Sole 24 Ore, 17 October 2023.

32 This is MISSION 4-C1 – INVESTMENT 1.1 child of the PNRR. See also *Nurseries, cuts on the way: 100,000 fewer places but the government tries to patch things up*, La Stampa, 26 November 2023.

33 *Nurseries, 30,000 new places funded, 65% of funds in the South*, ANSA, 13 April 2024.

places (never achieved in Italy) and after the European recommendation to reach 45% coverage by 2030.

The Universal Child Allowance (Auu), introduced in 2022 to replace a series of previous bonuses and deductions and which 'reaches' around 9 million children in Italy, rose by 5.4% in 2024 to meet the needs of large families (an increase is provided for the first year of the child's life), with a variable amount calculated on the basis of ISEE up to a maximum of almost €200 per month[34] . The single allowance is a form of financial support granted for each child from the seventh month of pregnancy until the age of 21 (under certain conditions) and with no age limit for disabled children. In 2023, this measure was already set to undergo a series of increases on a three-year basis, doubling for newborns and families with three children aged between one and three (ISEE up to 43,000 euros), while it had been increased on a flat-rate but structural basis for families with four or more children. Over time, it has been observed that one of the 'undesirable effects' of the Auu is the impact it can have on the ISEE, in the sense that as the income of the family receiving the subsidy increases, there is a risk of seeing other benefits reduced or cancelled, such as bonuses for nurseries, school canteens, utility bills or psychological counselling services. The paradox is that by taking one bonus, you risk losing others, a problem that is not new, but was also seen, albeit to a lesser extent, at the time of family allowances. From this point of view, the current government has stressed the importance of a review of the ISEE, which is currently underway. In any case, the single allowance is in a state of limbo after coming under scrutiny from the European Commission[35] . In November 2023, the Commission sent Italy a reasoned opinion setting a two-month deadline by which our country would have to comply with EU law; According to Brussels, Legislative Decree 231/2021, which established the Auu, violates EU law on the coordination of social security and the free movement of workers by 'imposing the requirement that the beneficiary ‹dependent› must have been resident in Italy for at least two years, even if not consecutively'.

Among the decisions taken in the 2024 Budget Law was to review the amounts of *fringe benefits* for employees[36] . Decree Law No. 48/2023, converted into Law No.

34 The allowance may be increased in the case of large families (for children after the second); mothers under the age of 21; families with four or more children, with both parents earning an income; children with disabilities; children under the age of one; children between the ages of 1 and 3 for households with three or more children and an ISEE of up to €45,574.96. The allowance may also be increased by a supplement to compensate for any economic loss suffered by the household. See *'Single allowance rises by 5.4%: maximum amount set at £199 per month. And in February, the adjustment arrives*', Sole 24 Ore, 10 February 2024.

35 *Family Act, the delegation has expired. Single Allowance: negotiations with the EU*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 29 April 2024.

36 Mario Cassaro, *Fringe benefits for employees: limits, rules and requirements for application*, Ipsoa, 5 January 2024.

85/2023, for the year 2023 only, provided for an increase to €3,000 in fringe benefits for employees with dependent children, leaving the original limit of €258.23 for other workers. Among the new features, it was possible to include rent payments, mortgages on first homes and sums paid or reimbursed for domestic utilities such as water, electricity and natural gas within the limits. The 2024 Budget Law intervened on the regulation of fringe benefits by extending the tax and social security contribution exemption threshold: the non-taxable threshold for the allocation of fringe benefits to all employees has been raised to €1,000 (compared to the ordinary ceiling of €258.23), while for workers with dependent children, the threshold has been lowered to €2,000.

The 2024 tax reform and the IRPEF reform introduced numerous deductions, allowances and tax relief for families (sports activities, mortgage expenses, university expenses, dependent children, rent, public transport, nurseries and school canteens, condominium expenses and medical expenses). However, as we have repeatedly emphasised, based on the results of research carried out with partner companies, it is advisable for corporate welfare to remain anchored in Article 2 of the TUIR (Consolidated Income Tax Law).

Tax benefits for employees with dependent family members include deductions for employees that reduce income tax on their paychecks; school and university bonuses (the latter provides for total or partial exemption from enrolment fees); bonuses for school trips offered by the MiT; the 'Carta cultura e merito' (Culture and Merit Card), which has replaced the 18app culture bonus; the 'bonus cicogna' for the children of certain categories of civil servants; contributions for school books provided by the regions; and bonuses and discounts for IMU (property tax). In addition to these measures, there are other welfare instruments such as the 'Carta risparmio spesa' (shopping card) for families with incomes below €15,000, provided by local councils and designed to combat the high cost of living; the 'food income' aimed at people in absolute poverty, which provides food parcels with unsold products from food distribution shops that would otherwise be thrown away; the 'shopping card', which can be used to pay for food, healthcare and bills for parents with children under the age of 3 and certain income characteristics. Among the measures reconfirmed in the budget are the social electricity bonus to help with the cost of electricity and gas bills and other similar measures to tackle price increases in the energy sector (energy income, photovoltaic bonus, pellet bonus); the wide range of home bonuses such as those for families (and for green homes, renovations, air conditioners, furniture, awnings, mosquito nets, architectural barriers, etc.), what remains of the 70% Superbonus, and bonuses for drinking water, boilers and household appliances. The subsidy for new families (young couples and under 36s) for first-time home mortgages guaranteed by the Consap fund has also been reconfirmed. In addition,



Children, work, careers:
an analysis of the main regulations and some experiences of corporate welfare in Germany, Sweden and France

there is the Internet bonus to encourage families' access to broadband, the petrol bonus for private sector employees, which is in addition to the public transport bonus, and the inclusion allowance, which complements the Work Training Support (measures that have replaced the Citizenship Income).

The overview of the measures offered so far undoubtedly indicates an approach by the legislator aimed at creating a socio-economic environment favourable to families and, therefore, a desire to make the issue of birth rates central to public policy. However, it should be noted that many of the solutions provided by governments in recent years have been short-term and are likely to have temporary rather than structural effects. At the same time, considering the large number of initiatives we have described, it would be desirable to rationalise them in order to simplify the system. Finally, for a genuine and lasting policy to promote birth rates, it is important to set up measures to encourage people to have their first child, rather than only targeting those who already have one or more children.

4. Children, work, careers: an analysis of the main regulations and some experiences of corporate welfare in Germany, Sweden and France

The last part of our research analyses corporate welfare programmes implemented at European level and the main regulations, concluding with a summary demographic overview of the individual national situations. By investing in *work-life balance* and promoting gender equality, European companies contribute to creating a more stable family life, influence the decision to have a child and encourage their growth. This means, first and foremost, providing workers with greater financial security but, as we mentioned earlier, it is not just a question of guaranteeing economic benefits for employees, but of addressing the complex web of socio-cultural factors[37] that influence the decision to become mothers and fathers.

Considering that European welfare spending[38] is still largely public compared to private spending, it may be useful to start by examining the regulatory framework in the countries of reference. Germany's structured approach to parental leave and allowances, France's focus on tax incentives, and Sweden's commitment to gender equality and childcare are all examples of policies that demonstrate the willingness of European states to protect birth rates.

The German model of social market economy, with its emphasis on co-management and worker participation in corporate decision-making, fosters a collaborative approach between the public and private sectors, involving institutions, companies, social partners and research institutes. In Germany, the combination of parental leave and allowances is designed to facilitate the return to work of employees with children, protecting their careers and the financial security of their families. Over the course of a century, Sweden has developed a universal welfare model with extensive social protection programmes based on gender equality: the *Folkhemmet* stands out for its generous parental leave and subsidised childcare services, which serve as a model for other European countries. France, too, after creating a strong legal basis for job protection and extending access to social security to significant segments of the population, has embraced a strategy of direct state intervention to support businesses and workers through measures such as family allowances, leave and tax incentives. The introduction and strengthening of paternity leave indicates that Paris increasingly recognises the central role of fathers in family life and responsibilities.

37 'The shift from work-remuneration to work-well-being will make it easier to reconcile private and working life, representing a lever for prosperity and increasing worker productivity'. Nicola di Turi, *Corporate welfare, better French*, Corriere della Sera, 21 November 2015.
38 Giulia Baconcini, *ProWelfare: Voluntary Occupational Welfare in 8 EU Countries*, Percorsi di Secondo Welfare, 3 August 2015.

[39]The difference lies in the models established by the three European countries: on the one hand, the Northern European experience, which offers numerous public services, and on the other, that of countries such as France, where 'second welfare', complementing public spending, allows businesses and labour to play a more open and inclusive game. In Sweden, too, private spending has grown since the 1990s and is considered complementary to public spending: Swedish companies focus on human resource development, flexible working and the involvement of both parents in the care and education of their children. From generous parental leave (*Föräldraledighet* in Sweden) to forms of financial assistance for families (*Elterngeld* and *Kindergeld* in Germany, *Allocation Familiale* in France), the three European countries have adopted gender equality policies that allow parents to take time off work to care for their children and strengthen family ties, protecting women during maternity and encouraging fathers to take an active role in parenting. The aim is to reduce the inequalities caused by traditional family roles and to promote the sharing of responsibilities within family life.

Germany and France have also introduced flexible working time arrangements (*Langzeitkont* and CET) to allow employees to accumulate time that can also be used for family purposes. The corporate welfare systems of the three countries offer a series of common practices and equally unique approaches: all give priority to tools that can increase family well-being, but common measures may differ in terms of the duration of leave, the amount of financial support and tax breaks, the flexibility of working hours, the provision of childcare services or other benefits.

Considering the cultural, economic and social factors that characterise the recent history of the three countries under review, we can delve into the analysis of the specific legislative measures incorporated by governments into public policies to facilitate the development of corporate welfare systems[40] . In Germany, *Elterngeld und Elternzeit* provides leave and financial support after the birth or adoption of a

39 The corporate welfare systems of the three countries examined offer a series of common practices and equally unique approaches: all give priority to tools that can increase the family well-being of workers, but the common measures may differ in terms of the duration of leave, the amount of financial support and tax breaks, the flexibility of working hours, the provision of childcare services or other benefits. 'In Scandinavian countries, where the state is still strongly present and manages to absorb most of the needs of individuals and families, a 'low-incidence' corporate welfare model has developed, which is essentially limited to projects concerning working hours and flexibility,' while in countries such as France, 'a concept of 'high-impact' welfare has taken hold, with companies increasingly seeking to respond to growing employee demand for healthcare, training and family support'. *A positive-sum game*, Generali 2018.

40 See ReFlex*, Corporate welfare: approaches and tools. Background analysis of needs and mapping of corporate welfare experiences*, 2020, and Anna Maria Battisti, *Occupational welfare in Europe: models compared, Italian Labour Law* e-Journal Issue 2, Vol. 15, 2022, with an extensive bibliography on the subject of corporate welfare.

child to various types of parents residing in the country (mothers, fathers, single parents, same-sex couples and immigrants with regular residence permits). To be eligible for leave (up to 14 months per child), parents must have reduced their working hours or stopped working to care for their children. The amount of financial support varies according to the parents' income prior to the birth of the child and the tax regime. The allowance can be flexible, with an additional incentive in terms of monthly payments for parents who can prove that they have a lower income after the birth of the child[41] . *Kindergeld* supports the expenses and needs related to children and is available until the age of 18, with an extension to 25 for young people who are studying or undergoing vocational training. Eligible expenses include education, healthcare, food and clothing. There are no age limits for families with sick or disabled children. The amount of the benefit depends on the number of children and is subject to periodic adjustments by the government[42] .

The programme also includes foreign residents, such as EU and EEA citizens and immigrants with regular residence permits. Another useful private welfare tool is the *Langzeitkont*, a long-term account that falls under the concept of a 'time bank' and allows employees to accumulate unused working hours such as holidays or overtime to obtain leave, work suspensions or access to early retirement. The *Langzeitkont* can also be cashed out. In Germany, these mechanisms, together with working time regulations such as the *Telzeit und Befristungsgesetz* and the *Arbeitszeitgesetz*, improve the management of time spent by parents at home or on holiday. Germany has addressed the gender pay and career gap to ensure equal participation in the labour market and support fertility. Affordable housing, childcare and quality education are other priorities for Germans. Many sectors of the economy have customised contracts with flexible working arrangements, certified by organisations such as the Hertie Foundation's *Berufundfamilie*.

In France, the *Allocations Familiales* system provides financial assistance to families based on the number of children; the amount of the measures varies according to income and other mechanisms linked to the age of the children (maximum 20 years). Families with low to medium incomes receive between £140 and £180 per

41 Almost two million people in Germany receive parental allowance. The German government is considering applying new rules to families who have had children since 1 April, including lower income limits, Thomas Heuzeroth, *Einkommensgrenzen, Steuern, Beträge – das sollten Sie zum neuen Elterngeld wissen*, Welt, 8 April 2024. Options such as *Elterngeld plus* offer more extensive support if parents accept a reduced monthly amount that allows them to work part-time, while the *Partnerschaftsbonus* allows cohabiting partners to share parental allowance adjustments.

42 In Germany, in addition to family allowances, low-income families can apply for a child supplement. The amount of Kindergeld in 2024 could rise to €292 per child, Alexander Riechelmann, *Kindergeld: Große Änderung 2024 für Familien – bis zu 292 Euro mehr pro Kind in Diesen Fällen*, Der Westen, 11 April 2024.

month (from the second and then third child), and the system provides additional benefits for different situations, such as single-parent families, disabled children and housing assistance [43] . France offers parents various types of paid leave: maternity leave provides up to 16 weeks for the mother to recover her health and establish a deeper bond with her newborn after giving birth, with possible extensions in the event of multiple births or complications; paternity leave allows fathers or partners 11 days of leave with the option of an additional 18 days, although these are not fully paid; parental leave allows parents to care for children up to the age of 3, with variable income support from social security. Eligibility and other details may vary based on length of service, changes in public policy, the worker's tax status and social security contributions.

The *Quotient Familial* is part of a system of tax relief introduced to take into account the number of dependents in a family: the rationale behind these relief measures stems from the recognition of the additional costs associated with the birth and upbringing of children on the family budget. The quotient is calculated on the basis of income divided by the number of members in the household and criteria related to age. Initially, the quotient mechanism was strongly 'pro-natalist', with the number of 'quotas' decreasing if families did not have children after the first three years of marriage; today, that principle remains in granting more benefits to large families.
The *Compte épargne-temps* (CET), similar to *the* German *Langzeitkont*, allows employees to save time for future use by converting overtime or unused leave into holidays, paid leave or cash. The CET can be used by parents to obtain days off or additional remuneration, and it is possible to transfer the funds to a pension savings plan[44] .

The *Chèque emploi service universel* (CESU) is a voucher introduced in 2005, co-financed by employers, to simplify recruitment and support the work-life balance of families. Millions of French families have used the CESU for services such as healthcare (excluding medical care), childcare, domestic cleaning and care for the elderly. Employees receive a substantial tax deduction and companies enjoy benefits such as exemption from contributions, a tax credit on co-financing and other deductions. The CESU has proved to be an effective tool for regularising undeclared work in the

43 In France, there is currently a debate about whether to favour families with only children by providing family allowance for the first child. From a fiscal point of view, French public policies for families tend to favour the second and third children. But the 'baby boom' model is showing its limitations as the number of single-child families increases, Julien Damon, *La France doit verser des allocations familiales dès le premier enfant*, Slate, 14 April 2024.

44 President Macron's attempt to extend the use of the CET by making it a universal measure for workers, a move that would allow the Élysée Palace tenant to reopen dialogue with the unions after the highly controversial pension reform, does not seem to have been successful to date, see Coline Vazquez, *Emploi des seniors: le compte épargne temps universel (Cetu) écarté de la négociation de la dernière chance,* La Tribune, 8 April 2024.



personal services and domestic work sectors. Finally, *the Organisme commun des institutions de rente et de prévoyance* (Ocirp) is a public-private welfare system linked to collective bargaining that provides , among other things, supplementary health insurance, training incentives, and protection for workers and families in the event of unforeseen events.

In general, French government investment in childcare facilities such as subsidised nurseries ensures early education is accessible to all families, while French working time regulations, with a 35-hour working week and generous annual leave, allow parents to prioritise family life. During the pandemic, flexible arrangements such as teleworking laws and the *Droit à la déconnexion (right to disconnect)* were introduced to prevent burnout due to constant digital connection.

Sweden allocates a significant share of its GDP to social protection systems, giving priority to families, with over €1,400 invested for each child under the age of 16. *Föräldraledighet* offers 480 days of leave for both parents (in the past, the amount was even higher), of which 390 are paid at 80% of the average salary for the months prior to the request[45] . Each parent is entitled to 90 individual days out of the total amount, while the remaining days can be managed jointly. The law provides for flexible planning, allowing parents to choose full-time, part-time or intermittent leave to return to work without any problems, and employers are required by law to ensure this transition. Stockholm promotes gender equality through shared parental leave and accessible childcare services, encouraging fathers to be involved in childcare and supporting mothers' return to work. Parents are protected in terms of employment and can return to their position or similar positions after their leave period. Other government measures in Sweden address the gender pay gap by ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources, while company boards of directors include increasingly substantial gender quotas.

45 Parental allowance is paid for approximately 16 months per child. For 390 days, the allowance is based on income (sickness benefit). For the remaining 90 days, the compensation is set at 180 Swedish kronor per day. The measure is available to all parents residing in Sweden, including same-sex parents, and aims to promote shared responsibility for childcare and protect parents' careers.

Subventionerad Barnomsorg offers quality childcare through various types of facilities accessible to all families: preschools (*förskola*), family daycare centres (*familjedaghem*), open preschools (*öppen förskola*) and after-school programmes (*fritidshem*) create a safe and stimulating environment for children to grow, offering opportunities for learning, play and socialisation. These programmes are available in Sweden for children aged 1 to 12, with age ranges varying according to decisions made by local authorities. They are means-tested, so families with lower incomes have reduced costs or are exempt from payment. The aim is to make childcare accessible to all families regardless of their financial situation . Parents choose the childcare provider that best suits their needs, taking into account factors such as location, hours, educational approach and services offered.

When analysing the national regulations of the three European countries, it is worth adding a few considerations on the problems that may arise as a result of the dynamics described above. The allocation of public resources to the private sector may lead a government to give certain companies an asymmetrical advantage over others that are unable to obtain the same benefits, raising concerns about whether the state is ensuring a level playing field for all market players. If not managed properly, subsidies can lead to undesirable distortions in the market and its real needs.

As demonstrated by the discussions in the German Parliament on caps on the family allowance system, subsidies have a cost for the public budget; if not managed prudently, they can contribute to 'stressing' a country's finances, leading to an increase in the tax burden or a rise in the deficit. State subsidies, which are often complex and costly, must therefore be rationalised to avoid diverting funds from other essential services. Fraud is also an issue to be taken into account. In 2022, France recorded €351 million in fraudulent family allowance payments, an increase on previous years. While governments have to contend with budgetary constraints and monitoring the measures introduced, companies and workers face administrative burdens and bureaucratic regulations that could discourage them from participating in corporate welfare programmes. Simplifying procedures appears to be essential to ensuring a more efficient and equitable distribution of resources. Finding a balance between the specific needs of employees and the demands of company management also remains a complicated challenge. Berlin is seeking to strengthen parental leave arrangements to make them more flexible, but the robust, and in some respects corporatist, protections in the German labour market can hinder forms of social innovation. Measures such as *Elterngeld* do not provide for a complete replacement of parental income, and these limitations risk becoming problematic for lower-income families who may find it difficult to fully cover the expenses incurred during leave. The result may be a consolidation of

traditional family roles, hindering the progress made by women in the workplace. In many EU countries, there is still a cultural expectation that mothers are the parents who should take on the main responsibility for childcare.

Parental leave in Germany is also relatively short compared to countries such as Sweden, and there is ongoing debate about how to manage access to welfare for the self-employed or irregular workers in order to avoid creating too much social inequality in the enjoyment of benefits or discouraging some parents from having children when they find themselves unable to take parental leave. Stockholm, which, as we have seen, has been aiming to reduce gender inequalities since the 1970s, has had to deal with the distribution of leave, where mothers tend to take longer periods of leave from work than fathers. Hence the need to ensure that measures designed to promote motherhood by guaranteeing greater flexibility in women's work do not undermine their career advancement opportunities (*mummy track*).

Despite the efforts of Swedish governments to promote equal opportunities, we are faced with the fact that men still tend to predominate in sectors such as engineering and technology, leading to a gender pay gap and limitations in women's career opportunities. Sweden has expanded its subsidised childcare infrastructure more than any other EU country, but there are still bottlenecks in access to services during periods of high demand and in some peripheral areas of the country. The flip side of welfare in the Nordic countries is a high tax system, which, combined with problems such as a shortage of housing in major Swedish cities and the high cost of living, puts pressure on low-income families and immigrants seeking to integrate, affecting their quality of life and potentially limiting their ability to access benefits.

In recent years, France has tried to break with the culture of long working hours, but the 35-hour working week has been criticised because it risks hampering productivity and economic growth. Paris wants to ensure equal participation of both sexes in parenting, but although French women have made significant strides in addressing the issue of equal opportunities, they still face a number of challenges in the workplace, including the pay gap and a certain under-representation in senior positions. This is particularly true for middle-class women, who have lower fertility rates than those in the wealthy or working classes.

France is seeking to simplify bureaucracy, considering that the difficulty of applying for and the eligibility criteria for *Allocations Familiales* may lead some families to make only partial use of the benefits available. This regulatory rigidity can also be a problem for companies, especially when they are facing unfavourable economic conditions or when they need to hire new employees. At a time when the French pension system is facing major sustainability challenges due to an ageing population

and demographic changes, with governments struggling to guarantee long-term pension security, the combination of tax pressure and labour costs needed to sustain the welfare system could discourage economic growth, job creation and the effective integration of immigrants, affecting the general well-being of families ( ). Finally, there is the question of how the subsidies and social measures taken over the last few decades by the governments of the three countries intersect with the issue of immigration ([46]).

After providing an overview of the regulations governing business conduct and social partners, we can move on to look at the welfare practices implemented by large German, Swedish and French companies, in line with Corporate Social Responsibility programmes and the latest European regulations on 'Sustainability Reporting'.

It is useful to contextualise these experiences in the post-pandemic landscape, which has brought corporate initiatives aimed at protecting the physical health and psychological well-being of workers to the forefront. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the very fabric of production has undergone a metamorphosis, ushering in the era of remote working and strengthening various forms of flexible and smart working. Focusing the analysis on corporate strategies is therefore important for understanding how companies are adapting to the paradigm shift and for a number of other reasons that we will try to list: by taking the initiative, companies can better adapt, on the one hand, to the specific needs of their employees (so as to plan more fruitful welfare initiatives that are linked to the corporate culture and the social and psychological characteristics of the staff) and, and, on the other hand, to the local context in which they operate (an element which, together with flexibility in decision-making processes, can enable them to remain competitive in the market and attract or retain talent and skills). By organising welfare programmes more independently, companies also contribute to reducing the burden on the state by

46 In the columns of Le Figaro, French President Macron, retracing the stages of the unrest that broke out in France in early July 2023 after the killing of Nahel, a young man of North African origin, in Nanterre, insisted that 'punitive policies' are needed for young people and families who receive benefits but are unable to show themselves to be 'responsible'. The families of the rioters, most of whom were under 18, should be 'supported', Macron explained, by giving them more resources and opportunities. But the president pointed out that '75% of the young people brought to justice (following the riots, ed.) were either recipients of child benefit or young people from single-parent families'. According to Macron, caring for these young people represents 'a great challenge for us because they are the society of tomorrow'. The challenge is to empower young people and families without 'taking away child benefit'. The French right wing has gone further, calling for the suspension of child benefit for the parents of hooligans. See Loris Boichot, *Emmanuel Macron au Figaro: 'Nous avons toujours été un pays d'immigration et nous continuerons de l'être'*, Le Figaro Magazine, 2 July 2023. See also *Suppression d'allocations familiales: Eric Ciotti appelle le gouvernement à reprendre sa loi*, Le Figaro/AFP, 4 July 2023.

triggering a general mechanism of simplification and streamlining of processes. Finally, by gaining greater autonomy and demonstrating a sense of responsibility, major brands will further commit themselves to strengthening the well-being of their employees in order to improve their reputation.

Corporate welfare programmes have been developed by companies[47] operating in various sectors of the economic and productive system of the three countries in question. Corporate welfare is considered a kind of accelerator of social progress, capable of protecting the well-being of employees, taking care of them through various forms of healthcare, helping parents to achieve a work-life balance and improving the quality of life at work. Companies support their staff in finding a more harmonious balance between professional and family life, offering insurance and healthcare benefits such as access to high-quality care for the vast majority of employees, benefits such as meal vouchers, paid maternity and paternity leave, and workplaces that are accessible to people with disabilities. In this way, each employee can proactively optimise their personal level of well-being. *Work-life balance* is placed at the centre of a more comprehensive vision of the adaptability of work organisation to new social perspectives, responding to employees' need to work in a different, more agile way and allowing them to experience parenthood without compromising their aspirations and career advancement. This vision also has an impact on the quality of life when employees are in the workplace, where they use dynamic, inclusive spaces and environments that foster creativity and staff efficiency. Flexible working arrangements allow mothers to take their children to and from school or attend important family events; childcare services are offered on site or in partnership with external service providers. Making life easier for parents allows them to focus better on their work, knowing that their children are in good hands. Thanks to corporate coaching and mentoring services, working mothers are supported in managing their time, professional and family responsibilities, career advancement and return to work after leave. HR plays a key role in this, including through technical questionnaires to assess the performance levels of social services offered by multinational companies, with the aim of achieving a minimum service base wherever they operate with their subsidiaries.

Large French companies seem to be moving on two levels: benefits and services

47 Sectors such as cosmetics, food, tech, banking, automotive, energy, large-scale distribution and retail, consulting and insurance, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, furniture and furnishings, household appliances and equipment, and fashion. In particular, this chapter analyses cases such as the French company L'Oréal, the German company SAP and the Swedish company Ericsson. For further information, see Pelin Sekerler Richiardi, *Multinational enterprises and social protection: A case study of the L'Oréal Share & Care Programme*, International Labour Office 2019, and Nathan Hegedus, *How can paternity leave change your life?*, Ericsson Perspectives, 18 November 2019.



provided to permanent employees regardless of the different levels of national social security, on the one hand, and other additional benefits recommended to the branches of the individual countries where they operate, on the other. In France, the vast majority of multinational employees have access to healthcare and financial protection, but some national brands have added services to their packages to help employees with elderly dependent parents, computer kiosks, concierge services and fitness rooms, to name a few examples. The basic idea, however, is to transform each country in which the brands operate into a laboratory for social innovation, encouraging different national entities to implement initiatives that meet workers' expectations[48] .

French companies pioneering corporate welfare offer their employees a wide range of services, extended leave, support for single parents, and flexible return-to-work options that ensure a smooth transition for fathers and mothers. There is a tendency to create corporate networks that provide resources, advice and mentoring to employees facing the challenges of parenthood. These practices seem to work because they address various aspects of a parent's life journey, from planning parental leave to post-work support; a 'holistic' approach, therefore, in the sense that the company is committed to the well-being of its employees throughout their working lives. Flexible return-to-work options allow employees to gradually resume their roles, reducing stress and making the transition back to work smoother. Flexibility is essential to meet the different needs and challenges faced during the early stages of parenthood. New mothers are provided with information on their rights during pregnancy, the psychological aspects of motherhood and nutrition education. Channels of communication between the company and employees remain open even during leave, keeping mothers up to date on company news and projects. Maternity leave pay and the number of days of paid paternity leave are also increased, with products for child development donated and financial contributions made towards childcare and education.

48 In many cases, French companies have received approval from the International Labour Organisation and have been included in *the Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index* for creating an inclusive and equal workplace.

In terms of flexible working, the company adapts to childcare legislation and extends it, as in the case of sick leave for employees with teenage children. French companies' parenting policies stand out for their comprehensive, flexible and employee-centred approach, with a significant benefit in terms of corporate reputation. It is an inclusive parenting policy that caters to all types of parents, including single parents; an approach that recognises the diversity of modern family structures and provides equal support to all employees. The idea is clear: workers who feel supported during parenthood are more likely to be productive in the workplace.

The company's commitment to supporting families is rooted in the positive energy that comes from parenthood, from caring for vulnerable people and from the valuable skills that parents can bring to the team through their experience. This belief has been a driving force behind the corporate welfare programmes of large French groups over the last ten years and has produced significant benefits for employee well-being and productivity. Digital outreach projects supporting parenthood aim to provide ongoing support to new parents and s, addressing the regulatory, legal, psychological and pedagogical aspects of motherhood and fatherhood, but also to support employees who care for elderly parents, sick, disabled or dependent persons. New digital platforms dedicated to these corporate welfare services offer support to caregivers through services and advice.

In Germany, too, there are initiatives to help employees who have taken a career break to get back into the game, with a structured training plan and supportive environments that encourage career relaunching. The paid programmes include workshops, *coaching* and a dedicated mentor for each participant. This 'guide' helps with the return to work, providing guidance, advice and a support network. Employees can 'explore' positions in various professional areas and benefit from solutions that ensure a smooth transition back into the workforce. Participants are guaranteed periods of structured training to help them update their skills and knowledge, ensuring they are up to date with the latest industry developments and technological trends.

Programmes such as these allow participants to expand their professional network by connecting with a community of people who have already experienced parenthood and returning to work, providing a valuable opportunity for sharing and emotional support among colleagues. By offering such a comprehensive return-to-work programme, German companies enable participants to regain the professional momentum they need to get back on track.

The structured training component ensures that participants are equipped with the skills they need to succeed in their roles by filling any gaps that may have emerged

during their time away from work. The mentoring element provides practical and emotional support, helping participants overcome challenges and gain confidence in their reintegration. The flexibility and personalisation of the programmes ensure that individuals receive the support best suited to their specific circumstances. Return-to-work programmes are increasingly common in Germany and are designed to provide a structured path of support for people who wish to relaunch their careers after a more or less prolonged break. They therefore help to highlight the actions of companies by showcasing their achievements in the areas of *diversity*, inclusion and personal development of employees. It is clear that these aspects of corporate welfare can be strengthened with a view to protecting the experience of motherhood and parenthood, enabling workers to better manage the birth and upbringing of their children, as well as the relationship between work and family life. By combining training, mentorship and flexibility, German companies enable employees to successfully navigate the important transition phases within a career path[49] .

Large Swedish companies have taken a progressive approach to paternity leave, an experience that has the power to transform a person's life. This measure not only reflects a commitment to gender equality but also recognises the vital role that fathers play in the early stages of parenthood and later in the upbringing and care of their children. Although the specific details of measures such as these may vary according to national regulations and employment contracts, the general principles prioritise financial support and flexible working hours for new fathers.

Swedish multinationals offer substantial periods of paid paternity leave (up to 12 weeks) to give workers the time they need to bond emotionally with their newborns and support their partners during this crucial phase of their lives as a couple. Recognising that every family's needs are unique, companies offer considerable flexibility in how employees can use their paternity leave, which can be taken as a continuous block or spread over a longer period depending on individual circumstances. Employees are supported by ensuring they are aware of their rights and options regarding leave; managers and colleagues are encouraged to be supportive and understanding during the period when the employee is taking leave. The paternity leave policy applies to all staff regardless of sexual orientation or family structure, ensuring that every parent can be an active part of their child's life.

49 Leading German IT companies such as SAP have analysed how focusing on well-being can improve productivity and staff engagement. Feedback from employees shows that initiatives to improve health and wellbeing are appreciated, prompting companies to continuously improve their service portfolio. See the annual *Business Health Culture Index* (BHCI), which assesses factors related to employee wellbeing in the workplace and measures their impact on results (from engagement to retention to employee profitability).

As global organisations, Swedish companies also recognise the importance of supporting progressive paternity leave policies in countries where such benefits may not be the norm. By setting an example, companies contribute to the broader European and international debate on *work-life balance* and gender equality. By building a work, family and social environment that is supportive of new fathers, community ties are strengthened and people are encouraged to become actively involved in childcare. These policies help to break down traditional family roles by creating a more inclusive work environment and fruitfully fuelling the discussion on equal opportunities in both professional and personal life. By supporting a progressive approach to paternity leave, a significant step is taken towards creating a more balanced working life, both within and outside the organisation: paternity leave is an experience that can 'change the cards on the table' in parenthood, affecting fathers' lives in various ways, both privately and career-wise. People from other countries who go to work in Sweden tend not to expect to be able to take such long leave; this benefit therefore opens up an important personal journey during which they have to come to terms with their own ambitions and aspirations. Some employees hesitate to take paternity leave because of financial concerns and the perception that it may hinder their career advancement, an uncertainty that stems from the stigma that still surrounds flexible working arrangements and which the governments of the countries under review are trying to combat with the help of the business world.

From this point of view, the behaviour of leaders within organisations becomes strategic, i.e. management should set an example by using parental leave to change perspectives on the idea of family, not least because, as we have seen, at least in the case of Sweden, taking leave means significant time and financial benefits. Good practices such as leave allow fathers to become more involved and participate more deeply in their children's lives, in line with the benefits highlighted by OECD economists' studies on this assumption of responsibility, which include better health for mothers, better cognitive and emotional outcomes for children, and more satisfied and happier families. The benefits of paternity leave also extend to companies, with more or less positive effects on productivity, profitability and employee morale: it is only in the years following the use of leave that fathers fully understand the importance of the time they had available to establish a deeper connection with their children. Men come to terms with their personalities and develop greater emotional intelligence, becoming more aware of the kind of parent or partner they want to become. It can be said that this change in perspective not only improves their personal lives but also makes them more understanding and empathetic colleagues in the workplace. Adopting a more gender-balanced approach to parental leave also helps women return to work after having children

and pursue their own career goals. The importance of diversity, flexibility and innovation in promoting productivity at work is a central theme in the Swedish companies' experience of leave: it is not a question of rejecting the culture of work, but rather of experimenting with a transformative experience freed from an extreme performance-based logic, allowing for a lifestyle that rewards both family and professional values, considering them crucial factors for achieving success in today's dynamic world.

It is worth noting that welfare initiatives taken by large European companies must always be subject to internal verification to ensure their success with maximum transparency, to prevent these programmes from appearing superficial. It is not just a useful PR gesture, but actions that can have a tangible impact on the lives of workers. If a company promotes CSR but does not keep its promises or is found to be engaging in unethical practices, it can suffer a significant blow to its reputation. Consider some cases in the 1990s involving multinationals criticised for alleged labour abuses in their factories abroad. Even when companies try to respond to their mistakes, it is not easy to regain lost ground in terms of ethics and international image. This is especially true given that implementing corporate welfare programmes involves additional costs, for example to improve working conditions, coordinate departments within the organisation or keep up to date with labour laws and regulations and social practices. If programmes are not managed effectively, they can have a negative impact on financial performance.

To mitigate risks, clear and well-defined internal welfare strategies should be adopted, prioritising transparency, involving stakeholders, evaluating and readjusting initiatives, and keeping abreast of regulatory developments and expectations in the surrounding context[50] . A thoughtful approach to corporate welfare can lead to positive results but requires careful management of potential risks. Gender equality, work-life balance and leave remain key objectives for large companies, but to have a lasting impact, they must be achieved through a genuine ethical commitment on the part of the business world. The set of corporate welfare initiatives we have described cannot fail to influence the decision to have a child, thus helping to define

50 Companies with complex supply chains, for example, must ensure that all their suppliers adhere to the same CSR standards, as any unethical practices in the supply chain can reflect negatively on the company. Consumers and stakeholders, who are increasingly attentive to social issues, expect large companies to be committed to the concrete realisation of their welfare vision.

the European demographic trend[51] . German couples know that they have access to a certain percentage of replacement income accrued prior to periods of leave, which will help them maintain their standard of living after the birth and during the upbringing of their children. The same applies to Swedish parents, who can count on the progressiveness and duration of parental leave and on government-guaranteed investments in childcare services. French families, in turn, can enjoy a wide range of leave options, in addition to the family quotient, which helps reduce the financial pressure of raising a child.

Government intervention, corporate initiatives and the evolution of the idea of the family in the 20th century, with the increasing importance given to gender equality, are all factors that influence German, Swedish and French . Fertility seems to be higher where women go to work than where they tend to stay at home, although it must be said that services and financial incentives can encourage families to take advantage of the benefits guaranteed in a given historical context but may not prove to be a structural element in the demographic composition. In Sweden, for example, the set of birth policies promoted by the government between the 1970s and 1980s led to a surge in fertility until the early 1990s; subsequently, fertility aligned with that of other European countries, while remaining among the highest in advanced economies. Finally, it should be noted that the demographic trends in the three countries under review are the result of a number of factors, including 'spontaneous' population growth, public and private welfare policies, and the contribution made by controlled immigration.

Looking at the last thirty years, the German, Swedish and French populations have grown steadily, despite the fact that the fertility rate has been below the 'replacement' level on average, i.e. the number of births needed to compensate for deaths and ensure that the size of the population remains stable over time. In 1991, the German population was around 80.8 million, rising to 84.4 million in 2022, almost 20% of the total population of the European Union. The French population was 57.2 million, rising to around 68 million in 2023, 15% of the entire European population. During the same period, the Swedish population grew from

51 To analyse demographic trends in Germany, France and Sweden, reference was made to the Eurostat 2023 Report on Demography in Europe, data provided by *the Statistische Bundesamt* (Destatis), the German Federal Statistical Office (www.destatis.de); *the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (Insee), the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies; and the *Statistiska centralbyrån* (SCB), the Swedish official statistics institute. Research by Stein Emil Vollset, Emily Goren, Chun-Wei Yuan, Jackie Cao, Amanda E Smith, Thomas Hsiao et al., *Fertility, mortality, migration, and population scenarios for 195 countries and territories from 2017 to 2100: a forecasting analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study*, The Lancet, 14 June 2020, along with information from other specialist institutes, such as the *Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research*, *the Institut National d'Études Démographiques* and the *Swedish Institute for Social* Research at Stockholm University.

8.6 million to 10.5 million[52] . Over the last ten years in Germany, economic growth, the set of public interventions we have described, combined with the constant flow of migrants (think of the decision taken in 2015 by the German government to welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly young people) seem to have stabilised demographic trends, albeit on a downward trend. In 2022, the German population grew by 1.3% (+1,122,000 people), a slight increase compared to the previous year (+82,000 people). In the same year, approximately 739,000 children were born. However, the number of births was 5.6% lower than the average for the years 2019 to 2021 and decreased by 7.1% compared to 2021, a year characterised by a high number of births. According to Destatis, the birth rate remained low at the beginning of 2023. In the first quarter of 2023, approximately 162,000 children were born in Germany, a decrease of 4.8% compared to the same period last year (170,000 newborns). The fertility rate in Germany has risen from 1.3 to 1.6 children per woman since 2012 and is expected to settle between 1.35 and 1.39 by the end of the century, according to Lancet.

In France, the number of births has fluctuated over the last thirty years, but since the late 1990s, the fertility rate has begun to rise again. From 2001 to 2021, the birth rate in France and Sweden was on average one of the highest in Europe; in 2021, France had the highest fertility rate among EU member states (1.8), a figure that is expected to remain stable or decline slightly between now and the end of the century, according to The Lancet. By prioritising demographic stability, Paris intends to pave the way for sustainable economic growth and a more prosperous society in the years to come. In Sweden, as in France and Germany, projections indicate that the fertility rate could increase or stabilise at current levels, between 1.7 and 1.8.

The demographic trends in the three countries under review must take into account the changes that have occurred with the spread of urbanisation and the widening of regional disparities, with a gap in population growth between metropolitan areas and rural areas, where there has been greater demographic decline and ageing of residents. A large number of people have moved to large urban areas and metropolitan regions, leading to population growth in these areas. Immigration, as mentioned above, has had a significant impact on demographics, with the growth

52 Average life expectancy has also increased, with a steady ageing of the population. In 1991, the percentage of people over 65 in Germany was 15.8%, rising to 22.8% in 2021. In France, the over-65s rose from 15.5% to 20.8%, and in Sweden from 17.3% to 20.4%.



of new arrivals both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population[53] . By attracting immigrants, particularly those of childbearing age, governments aim to integrate the native population and increase the birth rate. Migration policies can serve to counteract the effects of demographic winter, mitigating the decline in births among the native population, for example where programmes have been implemented to bring in workers from other countries to meet the demand for skilled labour. In truth, migration policies have had mixed results[54] : while immigrants have contributed to population growth, their integration or assimilation poses a challenge in terms of cultural diversity and social cohesion. The challenge lies in integration, investing in language training for immigrants, access to education and job opportunities.

Corporate welfare can contribute to these processes through labour agreements and work-life balance tools that promote the inclusion of skilled workers, accommodating the diverse needs of immigrant employees. Corporate training programmes and government investment in education systems play a strategic role

53 Germany has seen significant immigration over the last 30 years, particularly since 2010, partly due to the increase in refugees and asylum seekers. The number of immigrants has almost doubled, from 6.6 million in 1991 (8.2% of the population) to 13.2 million in 2021 (15.9%). In 2015, there were over 476,000 asylum applications in Germany. The main countries of origin for German immigrants include Turkey, Poland, Italy and Romania, and in recent years, with the refugee crisis, Syria has also been added to the list. France is perhaps the European country with the longest history of migration, and immigration continues to be an important factor in demographic stability. In 1991, there were approximately 5.4 million immigrants in France (9.3% of the population), rising to 8.4 million in 2021 (12.4% of the population). The main countries of origin are Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Portugal, with a gradual increase in arrivals from other European, African and Asian countries. In 2021, Germany and France welcomed the largest number of immigrants among EU countries: 874,000 people in Germany, 23% of all immigrants in Member States, and 336,000 in France (9%), just behind Spain. Sweden also saw a sharp increase in the number of immigrants, particularly in 2000 and 2010. From 1.2 million immigrants in 1991 (14.4% of the population), the number rose to 2.4 million (23.1% of the population), doubling the number of immigrants from neighbouring Finland and Poland and then increasingly from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran.

54 Some studies seem to suggest that in France and Germany, the fertility rate of women from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey or Eastern European countries is higher than that of the native population, but in Sweden it has been observed that the fertility rate of immigrant women tends to decrease as new arrivals integrate into the host society.

in enabling immigrant families, particularly large ones, to harmonise family life with the parents' professional activities. In many European countries, where the fertility rate is below replacement level, there is a tendency to think that the problem of labour shortages (currently occurring globally after the post-Covid recovery) can be solved by resorting to immigration, in the belief that this can have an impact on low birth rates, at least in the medium to long term. By 2030, there will also be a peak in retirements among the baby boomer generation, another gap that will need to be filled.
But demographic ageing and unskilled immigration complicate the picture for companies looking for new recruits[55] . Another risk associated with the 'demographic marketing' pursued by European countries to attract skilled labour is that newcomers may prefer to return home at some point in their professional lives.

The relationship between corporate welfare and demographic stability therefore appears to be very multifaceted. Assuming that fertility rates in Germany, Sweden and France are likely to remain below replacement level, and given that population growth appears to be linked at least in part to immigration, one of the challenges ahead is to bridge the skills gap within the immigrant workforce in order to meet the growing demand for skilled professionals. In this sense, the impact of corporate welfare can be extended by helping families access better education systems and promoting the integration of 'second generations'. This approach would help to create service-rich work environments capable of attracting talent, with knock-on effects on the well-being of the entire population.

It is necessary for discussions on the influence of corporate welfare on social development to become more widespread: corporate welfare initiatives in Germany, Sweden and France are not limited to promoting the economic security of families, helping fathers and mothers to mitigate the economic burdens that come with choosing to have and raise a child. As we have seen, they can help stabilise demographic trends in countries that invest in pro-birth policies, but above all they

55 In Switzerland, there was a shortage of 120,000 jobs last August. Switzerland can be taken as a reference country for the other advanced economies we have examined, especially as there is full employment (unemployment rate of 2.2% in 2022). Over the last twenty years, the Swiss Confederation has encouraged immigration by signing the Bilateral Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) with the EU in the late 1990s, with the result that 30% of its population is now made up of people who were not born in the country. The result seems convincing: the Swiss population has increased by 20% and will reach 9 million in 2023. However, the presence of immigrants has not cushioned the decline in the workforce and skilled professionals, as the level of education of foreigners tends to be lower on average, creating a gap between the skills required by the market and those offered by the world of work. Switzerland is experiencing the phenomenon of the Portuguese diaspora: many young Portuguese people are returning en masse to their country of origin thanks to the policy of incentives for returning home implemented by Lisbon since 2019.

strengthen the resilience of a society. The corporate welfare systems of the three countries examined have an extremely varied impact that extends deeply into the lives of individuals and families. In addition to representing a pragmatic solution to the economic challenges of our society, these initiatives allow parents to find a balance between individual aspirations, career goals and the emotional universe of family life. The use of parental leave, flexible working arrangements and forms of financial support for childcare are all tools that can reduce many of the barriers parents face in their family life, thereby contributing to social sustainability. As we have seen, these experiences challenge traditional gender roles and established family structures, reflecting the changes taking place in European societies towards gender equality, the shared value of care work and social inclusion.

The role of corporate welfare in education, training, mentoring and coaching should be extended: childcare and educational assistance programmes for employees' children, continuing education for workers, and the creation of a sense of community within corporate teams are all factors that enable parents to continuously improve their skills and pursue their professional opportunities without having to give up the equally crucial experience of raising a child. This improves skills in the world of work, increases people's well-being and contributes to the long-term economic prosperity of a country. In this sense, corporate welfare is both an accumulation of human capital and a form of social capital capable of generating networks, building relationships and shared norms, making companies more productive and communities more cohesive.

If we reflect on the broader implications of this research, we can conclude that corporate welfare is not just a policy to protect jobs, but a real social milestone that redefines the fabric of families and communities. Corporate welfare makes companies and countries more competitive and therefore more attractive to global talent, indicating a nation's core values, how it perceives itself and how it is perceived internationally[56] . In this way, corporate welfare plays a significant role in shaping European social history, identity and future .

56 The idea behind social capital theory is that 'social networks have value', Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster 2001, p. 9.

Conclusions

Per una Primavera demografica (For a Demographic Spring) is a step on a journey that the Magna Carta Foundation intends to continue. It is a model characterised by field surveys that have involved and will continue to involve all the key players in this area. We believe that the main original feature of the research has been to go beyond socio-economic developments to investigate the anthropological depth of the issue.

In Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, it is stated that love for procreation is such because it represents what 'can be ever-nascent and immortal in a mortal' and 'always leaves behind another young being in place of the old'. Well, from the data analysed and the interviews with young people and privileged witnesses, it seems that this human yearning to 'procreate' has faded in the historical phase we are currently experiencing. In addition to the economic and work-related reasons that hinder the decision to have children, there are fears, resistance and new fragilities. The impression is that a society is emerging in which people will be more alone and in which we risk losing the beauty of the empathy that a child can establish with its parents from birth, in particular the experience of awareness of the existence *of another being* that is unique to the mother's experience after giving birth.

The danger is losing some of the most authentic characteristics of human beings, which manifest themselves in our relationship with otherness, in educational growth, in hope for the future, in the projection of our supportive and unselfish existence, and in mutual aid.

For these complex reasons, we need to stimulate the strong and positive energies of families to build communities that welcome new lives. It is necessary, of course, to safeguard freedom of choice, but also to support the social value of motherhood so that women are not forced to give up their personal and professional fulfilment when they decide to have children. It is also important to ensure that new inequalities are not created.

A son or daughter cannot become a 'luxury' for those with higher incomes and more comfortable living conditions. On the other hand, the Western world also has a responsibility to support continents such as Africa, where women still die in childbirth and children are often not guaranteed acceptable health conditions. The warning for institutions and politicians is to devise long-term, systemic actions and invent new solutions, such as European budgetary policies in which demography is seen as an investment and not just a cost. It is also desirable to launch monitoring

initiatives that go beyond the succession of governments.
However, our research reveals a positive note of openness towards the future. Sixty-seven per cent of those under 22, i.e. the youngest part of the sample, imagine having children (a trend that is confirmed by a recent ISTAT survey, according to which 69.4% of Italian boys and girls want to become parents), a figure that, however, drops sharply as the age of the respondents increases.

In light of all this, a calm and constructive dialogue between political parties is needed to implement measures capable of reversing the demographic trend. Nurseries, schools, wages, housing and work-life balance are the pieces of the puzzle that must be put back together to boost the birth rate. We are convinced that strengthening public policies and public/private collaboration, as has already been happening recently, can support young people and families in facing the choice of parenthood with peace of mind, without feeling too much fear.

The important initiatives undertaken by companies to support the birth rate presented in this volume also go in this direction; they aim to foster a positive climate in the workplace, not only through material interventions (such as increased wages or work-life balance), but also by promoting the psychological and physical well-being of workers. The challenge is to foster a virtuous circle between businesses, local communities and institutions in order to create the conditions for the development of a balanced and sustainable social environment.

In order to continue this research work, the Magna Carta Foundation will set up an *Observatory on the Demographic Crisis* with the aim of closely monitoring the evolution of these issues, involving businesses, institutions and associations.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted under the direction of Annamaria Parente. Sabrina Camerini, Veronica Conti, Carlo Mascio and Roberto Santoro coordinated and edited the volume. The interviews and thematic focus groups were conducted by Web Solutions Roma, under the guidance of Salvatore Venditti.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the companies that partnered with us in this research: Jointly - Il welfare condiviso, Engineering, WellMakers by BNP Paribas, Prysmian, and in particular to Anna Zattoni, Marcella Tesone, Stefano Colasanti, Luigi Maccallini and Daniela Miniace. We would also like to thank Annalisa Ferretti for her contribution.

Special thanks go to Professor Gian Carlo Blangiardo.

Buy in our bookstore

sallux.eu/bookstore

A European Africa Agenda

ISBN: 978-94-92697-38-7
Towards effective long-term strategies for migration. Edited by Dr. Arleen Westerhof

A European Africa Agenda 2025-2100 is a collection of diverse articles, complemented by an interview. The collection attempts to understand the push factors behind migration from the African continent. Contributors and interviewees include Dr. Simon Polinder, Don Ceder LLM, Gregory Modunga and Dr. Arleen Westerhof (ed.).



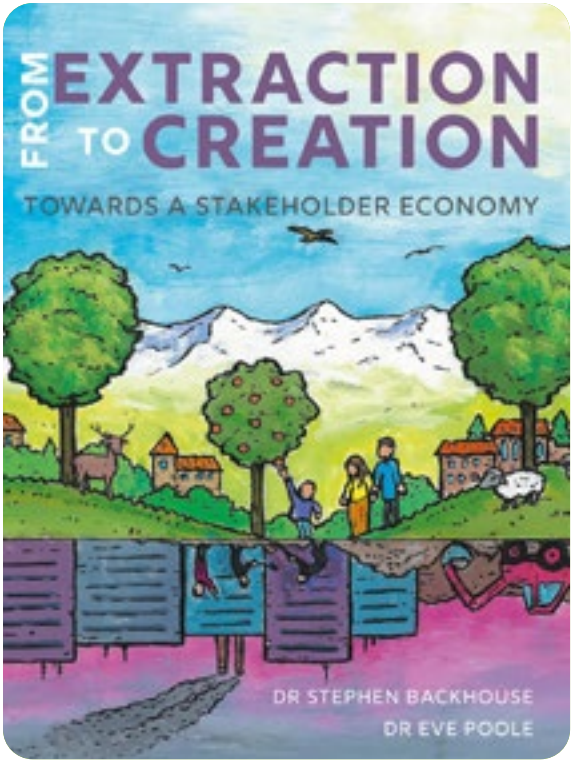
Buy Here

From Extraction to Creation

ISBN: 978-94-92697-27-1
Towards a Stakeholder Economy. By Dr. Stephen Backhouse, Dr. Eve Poole

The aim of this report is to help us imagine a better common economic life, one which rewards all the stakeholders in business, rather than privileging the shareholding few. Such a move can and does benefit people, planet and profit, but it will only do so when we move from a story fuelled by extraction to one formed by creation.

The authors of this report work in politics, economics and management, but are also trained in theology. As such they are steeped in the deep stories that have shaped our economic, political and social life. A full consideration of these deeper ideas that underly our institutions (for good and for ill) is necessary if we are to truly imagine a better way to conduct our business and how we shape our economic policies.



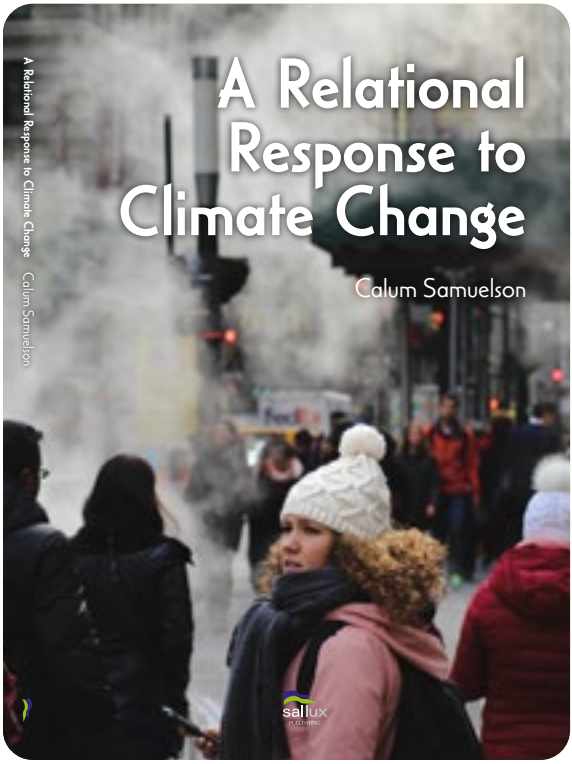
Buy Here

A Relational Response to Climate Change

ISBN:978-94-92697-23-3
By Calum Samuelson MA

The challenge of climate change is one of the defining issues the world is facing at the start of the 2020s. It has mobilised a whole new generation of social activists, some of whom are going to extreme lengths to confront the public and especially political leaders with the threat that climate change makes to their future and the planet as a whole.

Arguments about the causes of climate change are usually underpinned by the assumption that more human beings living on the planet are inevitably bad for the environment and climate. However, a careful biblical reflection on these issues yields a more nuanced and hopeful view, and this report seeks to stimulate fresh conversations about how best to respond to Climate Change now and in the future.



Buy Here

In 2023, the Magna Carta Foundation published 'For a demographic spring'. The research is based on two main pillars. The first part, through thematic focus groups, investigated the underlying reasons for the decline in the birth rate in our country. The second aspect of the research concerned the corporate welfare initiatives that companies implement to promote motherhood, fatherhood, work-life balance and, in general, the well-being of workers. Based on an examination of the positive dynamics, guidelines were drawn up, which the Foundation has already shared with public decision-makers. Finally, the volume contains an analysis of Italian policies on birth rates and an overview of the main regulations and experiences in three European countries: France, Sweden and Germany.

Did you like what you read? Please consider a donation!

Your donation has real impact on European Society: every euro donated to Sallux will result in an additional 19-euro subsidy from the European Parliament.

Donate online or bank transfer

Bank transfer:	Rabobank Amersfoort.
Reference:	donation Sallux
IBAN:	NL75RABO 0153731095
BIC (SWIFT code):	RABONL2U

Follow us on Social media

sallux
ECPP FOUNDATION

Since 2011, the activities of Sallux have been financially supported by the European Parliament. The liability for any communication or publication by Sallux, in any form and any medium, rests with Sallux. The European Parliament is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Contact

Sallux | ECPP Foundation
Office room: 2.10
Koningin Wilhelminalaan 5
3818 HN Amersfoort
The Netherlands

info@sallux.eu

www.sallux.eu
Towards a Relational Europe