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Problems of social sustainability: economic poverty and children's rights

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Abstract

The issue of poverty is important not only in developing societies, but also in those that are more economically and technologically developed. In the international context, Italy maintains critical situations with significant manifestations, on a quantitative and qualitative level, of absolute and relative poverty. The data confirms a growing and never-surpassed trend of dualisms between North and South, with critical issues that involve families and individuals. Interventions necessary to rebalance the situation require reflections on the level of fair reciprocity and redistribution of economic, social, health and cultural resources. Social policies called upon to design contrast strategies are inevitably involved. The issue of poverty opens up to more general problems relating to rights and their enforceability, especially for minors, who are often more exposed to the risks associated with the various forms of economic deprivation. The rights of minors are expressed, in the different dimensions of life, in terms of the necessary sustainability of protection and safeguard of social systems in which the phenomenon of poverty presents itself with significant criticality at the macro and micro-social level. In this regard, no less exempt from the duties of protection and safeguarding of minors is the social subsystem of large-scale communications.

Keywords – Poverty; Families; Food; Minors; Sustainability; Communication.

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

Sommario

Problemi di sostenibilità sociale: povertà economica e diritti dei bambini. – Il tema della povertà è rilevante non solo nelle società in via di sviluppo, ma anche in quelle economicamente e

tecnologicamente più sviluppate. Nel contesto internazionale, l'Italia mantiene situazioni critiche con significative manifestazioni, a livello quantitativo e qualitativo, di povertà assoluta e relativa. I dati confermano una tendenza crescente e mai superata di dualismi tra Nord e Sud, con criticità che coinvolgono famiglie e singoli individui. Gli interventi necessari a riequilibrare la situazione richiedono riflessioni sul livello di equa reciprocità e redistribuzione delle risorse economiche, sociali, sanitarie e culturali. Sono inevitabilmente coinvolte le politiche sociali chiamate a progettare strategie di contrasto. Il tema della povertà apre a problematiche più generali relative ai diritti e alla loro esigibilità, soprattutto per i minori, spesso più esposti ai rischi connessi alle diverse forme di deprivazione economica. I diritti dei minori si esprimono, nelle diverse dimensioni della vita, in termini di necessaria sostenibilità di tutela e salvaguardia dei sistemi sociali in cui il fenomeno della povertà si presenta con significative criticità a livello macro e micro-sociale. In questo senso, non meno esente dagli obblighi di tutela e salvaguardia dei minori è il sottosistema sociale delle comunicazioni su larga scala.

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1 Poverty, absolute poverty and relative poverty¹

Studying poverty on a macro-sociological level means building indicators and indices based on measurement tools and empirical data collection. ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) detects the degree of incidence of poverty in a given population by calculating the ratio between the number of families with a monthly expenditure for consumption equal to or below the poverty threshold and the total number of resident families; the measurement is carried out with reference to a specific historical period and a specific geographical area. The study of the phenomenon is carried out not only at the family level, but also with respect to individuals. The value obtained is given by the ratio between the number of people living in poor families and the total number of people resident in a given territorial reality. On a micro-sociological level, the analysis shifts to subjective experiences, motivational aspects, interactions and social and communicative relations, which contribute to defining the poverty paths of individuals and families. ISTAT distinguishes between an absolute poverty threshold and a relative poverty threshold, defined in relation to the different severity of the phenomenon. The absolute poverty threshold refers to the minimum expenditure necessary to purchase goods and services included in the absolute poverty basket and considered essential to people's daily life; this hamper varies according to the size of the family, the age composition of its members, and the territorial context of reference. The hamper of goods relating to the detection of the incidence of absolute poverty is made up of goods and services that, in the Italian context and for a typical family, are considered essential for a minimally acceptable standard of living. The relative poverty threshold is determined by referring to the average expenditure per person, we speak of pro-capite expenditure; this value is obtained by dividing the total expenditure for consumption sustained by the family by the total of its members. From this methodological clarification derive the concepts of absolute poverty and relative poverty, the related measurement tools and the data suitable for describing the situation in the Italian context.

Absolute poverty represents the most serious situation of poverty; absolutely poor are families whose monthly expenditure is equal to or lower than the absolute poverty threshold. Relative poverty defines the less serious condition: those families whose consumption expenditure is equal to or lower than the relative poverty threshold (poverty line) are considered poor. The Carbonaro equivalence scale provides a set of correction coefficients that are used to determine the poverty threshold for families with a number of members other than two. Families whose monthly expenditure is equal to or lower than the poverty line are classified as poor.

¹ By Vincenzo Corsi.

For families of different sizes, the value of the line is obtained by applying an appropriate equivalence scale, which takes into account the economies of scale that can be achieved by increasing the number of members (ISTAT, 2023, p. 9).

ISTAT has released poverty estimates based on data relating to the survey on consumption expenditure of Italian families, taking into account the main social, economic and territorial characteristics of families resident in our country. The measurement is carried out for families, understood as a reference unit for the detection of the phenomenon, in relation to the characteristics of the nucleus and the specific needs of the members. In identifying essential needs, ISTAT places the following goods and services: adequate nutrition, the availability of a home suitable for the family in terms of size and dimensions of the nucleus (a home heated and equipped with the main services, durable goods and related accessories), the availability of the minimum necessary for dressing, communicating, informing oneself, moving around the territory, educating oneself and maintaining one's health by its members. In building the poverty threshold, it is necessary to consider, writes ISTAT (2023, p. 11), that:

it is not a single threshold, but as many thresholds of absolute poverty as there are combinations between family typology (obtained as a combination of number and age of the members), region and type of municipality of residence (distinguishing between municipalities in the centre of the metropolitan area, periphery of the metropolitan area and municipalities with 50,001 inhabitants or more and other municipalities with up to 50,000 inhabitants other than municipalities in the periphery of the metropolitan area).

The analysis proposed by ISTAT allows us to detect different forms of poverty in the Italian population. Economic poverty, an aspect that unites and from which, for different aspects and causes, the forms of poverty (relational, educational, food) derive, can be defined as a state of indigence that is expressed and clarified, in the existential determinants, as a function of an income level that is too low to be able to satisfy the basic needs of life. The lack of economic resources sufficient to satisfy the essential needs of the person, also measured with regard to the society and the historical and cultural period of reference, determines the formation of situations that are also serious of deprivation in vulnerable groups of the population starting from the youngest age groups and minors. The level of income determines the basket of goods and services that families and individuals can access during their existence, starting with food products, which represent one of the critical points of the system. These goods and services are of primary importance since their lack of availability and adequate access derives from other situations of marginalization and social exclusion. Poverty is a growing phenomenon

both globally and in individual national realities, including Italy. The effects are manifested, with different consequences in terms of incidence and territorial articulation, in the socioeconomic and sociocultural expressions of inequalities and opportunities for growth and social mobility. The sociological analysis allows, on a comparative level, to define the countries and regional areas at greatest risk of poverty, the families and social groups involved, the structural variables that are the cause; the effects are determined at the micro level, for individuals and groups, and at the macro level for the social system as a whole, for its stability in terms of integration and for the forms of social solidarity of welfare policies.

Poverty is a phenomenon of great importance for contemporary societies; it determines strong impacts for the economic, social and demographic development of individual countries. In the context of the definition of poverty, the World Bank has developed measurement indicators and has identified the causes and consequences for the people involved such as inadequate or insufficient school education for the development of the person and the cultural capital of a country, difficulty in accessing social, health and health care services. These are forms of vulnerability and social exclusion that determine significant inequalities in guaranteeing equal access to consumption and services by the populations involved. Data on economic poverty in the world highlight how a considerable number of individuals must also face the problem of hunger on a daily basis. This is a critical aspect especially on an ethical and social justice level. The lack of shelter, the difficulties in accessing education, health care, equally represent forms of deprivation of people of essential goods for existence, in a circular relationship of cause and effect: the difficulty in accessing such goods and services is a consequence and cause of poverty. The World Bank has defined the monetary value of poverty as the threshold or minimum level of income below which a person or family struggles for survival. People who find themselves in this situation are unable to provide for their basic needs, such as having adequate housing, access to health care, food (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2020). Families living below this international poverty line, equal to \$2.15 per person per day, have significant limitations in their daily lives. At a global level, the World Bank, in measuring poverty, has found:

the international poverty line is set at \$2.15 per person per day using 2017 prices. This means that anyone living on less than \$2.15 a day is in extreme poverty. About 648 million people globally were in this situation in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic dealt the biggest setback to global poverty-reduction efforts since 1990, increasing the number of people in extreme poverty from about 70 million, to 719 million people. Rising energy and food crises, caused in part by the war in Ukraine, and the effects of climate change contribute to an uneven recovery².

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/measuringpoverty>

According to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)³, 828 million people in the world suffer from hunger⁴. For them, access to food resources is limited. The relationship between economic poverty and food poverty, a critical aspect of the system, especially for minors, presents a strong correlation, with effects on the dimensions of a person's life: priorities change and opportunities for individual and social development are reduced. The issue of food leads to focusing the attention of social policies on the forms and consequences of economic inequalities for the population; the phenomenon concerns not only societies that are backward in terms of economic and technological development, but also Western ones, which are richer and more industrialized, including Italy. The issue of access to adequate food for all is an urgent topic, for which solutions must be found at global and local levels (Atkinson, 1998).

2 Poverty as a permanent phenomenon in Italian society⁵

The sociological analysis of poverty focuses on the plurality and multidimensionality of the phenomenon. A central theme is represented by the concept of capability deprivation (Sen, 1999), which includes, Morlicchio points out, “the possibility of eating adequately and in accordance with one's values, the availability of housing, basic education, as well as being able to participate in community life and be able to appear in public without shame” (Morlicchio, 2020).

Poverty in Italy, in the forms of absolute and relative poverty, involves a significant number of families and individuals. It is an economic condition characterized by difficulty in accessing goods and services that are necessary and adequate for daily life: a greater number of members and the presence of minors in the family unit are conditions that increase the risk of the family finding itself in situations of poverty.

ISTAT (2024) detects significant forms of absolute poverty for Italy:

according to preliminary estimates, in 2023, families in absolute poverty stood at 8.5% of the total resident families (they were 8.3% in 2022), corresponding to approximately 5.7 million individuals (9.8%; a share almost stable compared to 9.7% in 2022). The intensity of absolute poverty at a national level is also unchanged (18.2%).

³ <https://www.fao.org/home/en/>

⁴ <https://www.compassion.com/poverty/poverty-and-hunger.htm>

⁵ By Vincenzo Corsi.

The historical perspective (Baldini & Bosi, 2007) shows that territorial differences have never been definitively overcome (Brandolini & Saraceno, 2007; Brandolini & Torrini, 2010; Commissione di indagine sulla povertà e sull'emarginazione, 1998); the economic disadvantage is found above all in the Southern regions. Taking absolute poverty as a reference, a greater incidence of families in this condition emerges in the South, with a growing value, from 10.1% in 2022 to 10.7% in 2023. In Italy, poverty is the consequence of structural characteristics of the country, on which cyclical situations of a multidimensional phenomenon insist: work and its lack are relevant aspects of the condition of poverty, to which are added the increase in forms of job insecurity, the involvement of people in poor and low-income jobs, the limited female participation in the labor market, the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the social protection system, the poor and unequal territorial availability of services for the conciliation between family activities and external work, the differences in the distribution of wealth (Saraceno, Benassi, & Morlicchio, 2022). The relationship between economic poverty and food poverty is confirmed in the empirical analysis (Campiglio & Rovati, 2009) by highlighting the need for change in welfare systems and social policies (Maroncelli, 2017). The sociological perspective highlights static and dynamic analyses of the phenomenon (Biolcati-Rinaldi & Ciampaglia, 2011), which open up to different interpretations, forms of intervention and possible social policies. The dynamic perspective highlights that in life one is not poor forever: there may be moments in which one is poor; the condition of poverty can change even several times in the life cycle of a family or a person, and manifests itself in different forms and levels of severity. The condition of being poor, in the dynamic perspective, has the character of being temporary (Siza, 2009), it can also last a short time and reappear at several moments in the life cycle. The static perspective describes a permanent condition of poverty for specific social groups, identifiable on the basis of structural variables that affect the economic well-being of families and people (Bosco & Negri, 2003). In Italy the phenomenon is growing. In 2005, families in absolute poverty were 819 thousand, with an incidence of 3.6%. In 2022, ISTAT detected just over 2.28 million families in absolute poverty, equal to 8.3% of the total (1.9 million in 2021). The data describes a situation that has been increasing over the years; those most affected by poverty are families residing in the municipalities of Southern Italy (ISTAT, 2023). The trend of poverty in the different areas of the country defines a plurality of forms and expressions of social inequalities. In Southern Italy, the incidence of individual poverty was higher than in other geographical areas of the peninsula, with a value of 12.1% in 2023. In the same year, the North worsened its situation: it went from an incidence of 8.5% in 2022 to 9.0% in 2023, with 2.4 million people affected by the phenomenon (ISTAT, 2024). The data confirms that the families in greatest difficulty remain the largest ones: in 2022, poverty affects 22.5% of families with five or more members and 11.0% of those with four. Families with three members are also worsening: they are 8.2%

compared to 6.9% the previous year (ISTAT, 2023). The risk of poverty increases among families with minor children. ISTAT (2024, p. 5) writes:

the presence of minor children continues to be a factor that exposes families to hardship and poverty phenomena; the incidence of absolute poverty is confirmed to be more marked for families with at least one minor child (12.0%), while for those with elderly members it stands at 6.4%.

Poverty affects families with foreign members more than families with only Italians. ISTAT (2023, p. 5) writes:

there are over one million and 700 thousand foreigners in absolute poverty, with an incidence of 34.0%, over four and a half times higher than that of Italians (7.4%). However, for the latter there is an increase in absolute poverty at a national level (7.4% from 6.9% in 2021), but also in the North and in the South (respectively 5.4% and 11.4%, from 4.9% and 10.6% in the previous year) [...]. Families with at least one foreigner in which there are minors show an incidence of poverty equal to 30.7% (322 thousand families); the subset of families of only foreigners with minors shows greater signs of hardship (36.1%), over four and a half times higher than that of families of only Italians with minors (7.8%). In the South and the North, the incidence in families with foreigners where there are minors exceeds 30%, 37.6% and 30.8% respectively, compared to 12.6% and 4.5% of families of only Italians with minors.

The condition of poverty of families in which there are minors has effects that involve aspects and dimensions of their daily life: poverty determines limitations in access to goods and services that are fundamental for the growth of the minor (Agostini, 2023). The effects that economic poverty has on them prove difficult to interrupt (Caritas Italiana, 2022) and are such as to affect different dimensions of life, from health conditions to the development of the person as a whole (Saraceno, Benassi, & Morlicchio, 2022), determining other forms of poverty (food, educational, cultural) attributable to the difficulties of families in adequately coping with the needs of the daily life of its members.

3 The right of minors to the sustainability of at least “one healthy meal a day”⁶

“The families suffering the most are especially those with three or more minor children”. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Adolescent is certainly the essential and dutifully most recalled reference when dealing with minors: it is the world charter for their protection and safeguarding and for the protection and safeguarding of their rights. It marked the beginning of an international institutional attention, of a culture of intent rich in declarations which were and are followed by concrete action. It is not only the document that proclaims the rights of minors, it is testimony. The Convention, in defining what is due to them, testifies to what has been, is, and can still be inflicted on them: discriminated (art. 2), forgotten (art. 3), killed (art. 6), torn away (art. 9), ignored (art. 12), abandoned, violated, exploited, mistreated, abused (arts. 17, 19, 33, 34), malnourished (art. 24), deprived (arts. 28, 29, 30, 31), sold (art. 35), tortured (art. 37), recruited (art. 38), deviated (art. 40). With the ratification of the document, for the States Parties, the best interests of the minor must definitively be a permanent consideration in all decisions that concern them, within the competence of public or private social welfare institutions, courts, administrative authorities and legislative bodies (art. 3).

In particular, the right not only to life (art. 6), but to a standard of living necessary for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (art. 27) commits to ensuring “the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health” (art. 24) and therefore also to “combat disease and malnutrition [...] through [...] the provision of nutritious food and safe drinking water” (art. 24, c); to “ensure that all groups in society [...] receive information on child health and nutrition, the advantages of breastfeeding, hygiene and a healthy environment and the prevention of accidents and receive assistance to enable them to put this information into practice” (art. 24, e); to assist materially and through support programmes parents or persons responsible for them in difficulty with regard to food, clothing and housing (art. 27, 3).

According to the documents of the V and VI Report to the UN Committee – a commitment that Italy fulfills every five years to update on its state of application of the Convention – there are essentially three areas of planning and social intervention that involve nutrition: support for poverty, behavioral disorders and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. These are areas that have required, and consolidated, inter-institutional collaboration with the School.

The measures undertaken to support poverty are:

⁶ By Sabrina Speranza.

- the adoption of the National Plan for the fight against poverty and social exclusion and the forecast of the Support for Active Inclusion (SIA) to be guaranteed as a priority to families with minors;
- the Operative Program I relating to the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), approved by the European Commission to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (MLPS), consisting mainly in the financing of the purchase and distribution of food products for the period 2014-2020;
- at local level, school canteen services as an element of combating food poverty and the Canteen Commissions, in collaboration with the municipal administration and stakeholders, for the control of the quality and quantity of food administered to pupils in reference to the current dietary tables⁷.

In 2013, the National Action Plan for Mental Health (PANSM) recommended early and timely interventions for mental disorders in adolescents and young people (age group 15-21 years), including in the area of eating disorders, for which the Ministry of Health developed in 2017 the National Guidelines for nutritional rehabilitation in eating disorders and monitored and updated the National Map of Services for the treatment of Eating Disorders.

Strategic planning for the promotion of healthy lifestyles has included programs (e.g. the Prime Ministerial Decree of 4 May 2007 – Earning Health: making healthy choices easy where poor nutrition is indicated as one of the risk factors for chronic-degenerative diseases) and surveillance systems for data collection (for example Okkio alla salute carried out five data collections, in all Italian regions and in the school system from 2008/09 to 2015/2016, on overweight and obesity in childhood, as well as on children's lifestyle; for example the HBSC project, Health Behaviour in School-aged Children, carried out two national surveys, in 2010 and 2014, on overweight in all age groups).

The National Prevention Plans of the last ten years are aimed at increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables, promoting breastfeeding, improving and controlling the nutritional quality of school canteen menus (for example the national strategy of the EU Fruit, Vegetables and Milk in Schools Programme for the period 2017-2023).

⁷ The National Plan for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion is a gradual progression plan, from 2016 onwards, for the achievement of essential levels of welfare benefits to be guaranteed throughout the national territory to combat poverty. The FEAD reaches approximately half of the minor population in conditions of absolute poverty and approximately a quarter of those in relative poverty. Central coordination takes place between the MLPS, the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF) and the Agency for Agricultural Payments (AGEA). The national coordination structures of the lead partner organizations are Associazione Banco Alimentare of Rome, Banco delle Opere di Carità, Caritas Italiana, Comunità di S. Egidio, Croce Rossa Italiana, Fondazione Banco Alimentare. <https://www.minori.gov.it/it/minori/v-e-vi-rapporto-allonu-su-infanzia-e-adolescenza-italia>

In the projects promoted by the Ministry of Health in the field of physical activity, nutrition is one of the vectors of psychophysical well-being (for example the project Movement in 3S: promotion of Health in Schools through Sport and the project SBAM! Sport, Well-being, Nutrition, Mobility, School, activated respectively by the Regions of Friuli Venezia Giulia and Puglia, in relation to the National Plan for the Promotion of Sporting Activity).

Currently, a point of reference for national initiatives is the European Child Guarantee (EU, 2021), the European Guarantee System for vulnerable children, especially due to the economic and social impact of the pandemic. It is the document that urges to allow minors in need to have free and effective access to at least one healthy meal per school day:

access to healthy and sustainable food is especially challenging for low-income families. Programmes promoting healthy food and diet can help address issues such as unhealthy eating habits, lack of physical activity, obesity or alcohol and tobacco consumption, thereby reducing malnutrition and poor nutrition, which are more prevalent among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Experience with the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of school feeding programmes for some children, who were suddenly deprived of a reliable source of nutrition during the lockdown. It is therefore crucial that children in need have access to at least one healthy meal per day at school, which could be achieved by providing such meals or by ensuring that parents, guardians or children are able to provide them, taking into account specific local circumstances and needs (EU, 2021).

In Italy, the implementation of the Child Guarantee is represented by the 5th National Action Plan and Interventions for the Protection of Rights and the Development of Subjects in Developmental Age 2022-2023. Education, Equity, Empowerment and above all by the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee (Piano di Azione Nazionale della Garanzia Infanzia-PANGI). These Plans also experiment with mechanisms for the active participation of minors in order to guide the target actions in the most appropriate way. The YAB (Youth Advisory Board) was established for the PANGI, whose recommendations are an integral part of it. As regards nutrition, one of the priority themes of the Child Guarantee, the YAB's reflections have been consolidated into three orders of perceived and/or experienced difficulties:

- a) we need more information about eating disorders and how to prevent them;
- b) we need regulations to protect girls and adolescents from the spread of harmful images, perfect bodies and stereotyped beauty standards, which make adolescents tend towards unattainable and unrealistic models;

c) we should make quality food more accessible and less expensive, educate about healthy eating and provide support for families or at least the guarantee of a balanced lunch every day at school [...] (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022).

4 The duties of commercial communication⁸

The YAB recommendations to the PANGI Working Group reported above question communication: more information, i.e. more content to understand and non-deceptive commercial communication, i.e. honest in the objectives it aims for and the meanings it intends. Minors have the right to question communication: they are, must be, free to go through it (“freedom to seek, receive and disseminate information”, art. 13 of the UN Convention⁹) and to be able to rely on it because on the other hand the media must perform the function of disseminating information and materials of “social and cultural utility” for “their social, spiritual and moral well-being as well as their physical and mental health” (art. 17, UN Convention).

The Advertising Self-Discipline Institute (Istituto dell’Autodisciplina Pubblicitaria-IAP) has been thinking about the protection and safeguarding of minors in commercial communications since 1966. The Institute was founded in Milan with the aim of promoting “honest, truthful and correct” commercial communication, which “must avoid anything that could discredit it” through the application of the Self-Discipline Code of Commercial Communication/Codice di autodisciplina della comunicazione commerciale (art. 1 Fairness of Commercial Communication). Periodically updated (the last time in 2024), the Code dictates a series of procedural and substantive rules, which require compliance with fundamental principles to protect the consumer public, fair competition between operators, human dignity and minors.

The Code dedicates three specific rules to minors in particular: art. 11, Children and adolescents; art. 22, Alcoholic beverages; art. 23 bis, Food supplements and dietary products.

According to art. 11, both messages addressed to minors and those received by them “must not contain anything that could harm them psychologically, morally or physically and must not abuse their natural credulity or lack of experience, or their sense of loyalty”. In particular, commercial communication aimed at the sale of food and drink products must not induce “belittling the role of parents and other educators in providing sound dietary advice” and “adopt the habit of unbalanced eating habits, or neglect the need to follow a healthy lifestyles” (IAP, 2024a).

⁸ By Sabrina Speranza.

⁹ Signed by 196 countries (as of 12 July 2022).

Article 22 on alcoholic beverages recommends

not to oppose [...] consumption models inspired by moderation, correctness and responsibility. This is to protect the primary interest of people, and in particular children and adolescents, in a family, social and working life protected from the consequences connected to the abuse of alcoholic beverages. [...] not to address or refer, even indirectly, to minors, and represent the latter or subjects who clearly appear to be such as to be intent on consuming alcohol; [...] not to use signs, drawings, characters and people, directly and primarily linked to minors, which may generate a direct interest in them (IAP, 2024a).

Commercial communication of food supplements and dietary products (art. 23 bis)

must not boast properties that do not conform to the particular characteristics of the products, or properties that are not actually possessed [...] and must be made in such a way as not to lead consumers into nutritional errors and must avoid references to medical recommendations or attestations. These rules also apply to dietary foods for early childhood, to those that replace breastfeeding in whole or in part and to those that serve for weaning or for the nutritional integration of children (IAP, 2024a).

Integral parts of the Code are the Regulation for commercial communication relating to food products and beverages, to protect children and their correct nutrition (Regolamento per la comunicazione commerciale relativa ai prodotti alimentari e alle bevande, a tutela dei bambini e della loro corretta alimentazione: IAP, 2024b) and the Regulation on commercial communication of food supplements (Regolamento sulla comunicazione commerciale degli integratori alimentari: IAP, 2024c).

The limits imposed by the first Regulation highlight everything that a commercial communication, of which advertising is one of the forms, can imply/generate/contain. The presentation of food products and beverages must avoid any misleading statement or representation, even “through omissions, ambiguities or exaggerations [...], especially with regard to the nutritional characteristics and effects of the product, the price, the fact that it is free, the conditions of sale, the distribution, the identity of the people represented, the prizes or awards”; it shouldn't “lead to believe that the failure to consume the product which is the object of the commercial communication means inferiority, or failure of parents or other educators to fulfill their duties” (IAP, 2024b, point 4).

Audiovisual commercial communication must not “accentuate the positive qualities of the nutritional aspects of food products or drinks dependent on fats, trans fatty acids, sugars, sodium or salt, whose excessive intake in the general diet is not recommended” (IAP, 2024b, point 5).

“Performance claims must be reflected in an adequate scientific basis and must reflect the characteristics and boastable properties of a product” (IAP, 2024b, point 7.1); they must not “use approvals, recalls and recommendations or medical certifications that result in attributing health characteristics outside of the cases in which this is permitted by current legislation” (point 7.2). Furthermore, commercial communications must not: “show situations that suggest excessive or unbalanced consumption, in contrast with correct eating habits” (point 7.3); “represent behavior by adults that endorses incorrect eating habits” (point 7.4); “ridicule correct eating habits, inducing people to break them, or inciting them to adopt incorrect eating habits” (point 7.5); “represent situations that lead to the belief that failure to consume the product will lead to rejection by friends or exclusion from the peer group or community” (point 7.6); “[...] belittle the importance of an active life” (point 7.7); “show scenes of children who, alone, consume food in front of a screen so as to encourage a particularly inactive lifestyle” (point 7.10).

The Regulation on commercial communication of food supplements does not refer to minors, but it is important for everything that, reaching them, can influence them, especially if they are pre-adolescents and adolescents. Consider, for example, the induced confusion of the concept of health with that of weight loss: “it is not admissible to present the products in question as ‘slimming’. The role of supplements aimed at controlling or reducing weight is that of ‘adjuvants of low-calorie diets’. Furthermore, the concept of weight loss as a synonym of health must not be emphasized” (IAP, 2024c, point 1).

Then there are green claims. These are advertisements that present a brand image characterized by environmental commitment and that can induce the purchase of products considered more suitable for an eco-friendly lifestyle, even for children and teenagers. The environmental benefits of a product boasted and promised by an advertisement must however correspond to a concrete commitment by companies to protecting the environment. Ecological, organic, compostable, biodegradable, recyclable, eco-sustainable are potentially misleading claims. Article 12 of the Code, Protection of the natural environment, imposes precise standards of correctness, so that ecological slogans do not become phrases of mere common use, watered down with promises (green washing) devoid of concrete meaning for the purposes of characterizing and differentiating products and companies¹⁰.

¹⁰ The requirements for correct environmental advertising are: clear and comprehensible information (without ambiguity); indications on the scope to which they refer (product, process, packaging, entire life cycle or part of it); evidence to support what is stated (relevant, significant data, verifiable according to updated standards of the recognized scientific methodology); no vague and generic statements (consistency between the promised environmental benefit and the function of use); no peremptory claims (Zero emissions, Zero impact, 100% green, 100% natural, Sustainable project). See IAP, 2023.

The Institute is also remembered for: the signing with the Ministry of Health and other associations in the food sector of the Guidelines for commercial communication relating to food products and beverages, to protect children and their correct diet on the risk of overweight and obesity; the Memorandum of Understanding with the Authority for Children and Adolescents (AGIA) to jointly monitor compliance by advertising operators with the UN Convention; the Framework Agreement with the Authority for Communications (AGCOM) to coordinate their respective competences (exchange of data and information, guidance and prevention activities aimed at consumers and businesses and aimed at promoting correct commercial communication, verification of regulatory conditions – obligations, prohibitions – in the field of advertising and protection of consumers and users, organization of seminars, study groups and training activities in matters of common interest); the recent development of a Digital Chart that provides a picture of the most widespread forms of commercial communication on the Internet, in the digital world in general and that details the theme of the recognizability of digital commercial communication.

The last decades have certainly been full of intentions and exercises of responsibility even if the behavior of communication operators is certainly not resolved “with legal or para-legal regulations and with punitive interventions”. Violations in the media field always pose a “problem of custom, mentality, culture, civil and not only civil ethics”. Communication remains “an area of freedom and conscientious choices”, and with human-social costs of a non-accountable nature (Rossi, 2004).

5 Conclusions

The work, in examining the relationship between poverty and nutrition, focuses on the issues related to the spread of poverty in Italy and highlights the correlation between economic and social determinants, and the recognition of minors’ rights. There is an increase in the spread and incidence of the phenomenon of poverty, in the aspects of absolute poverty and relative poverty, in all Italian geographical contexts. In particular, the essay highlights the growing involvement of minors with respect to whom it is necessary to rethink the actions of contrast starting from the identification of rights and their enforceability in the different territories and relational contexts. The analysis, in detecting the poverty of families and minors, investigates the consequences that this condition has on the level of cultural, educational and lifestyle sustainability, as recommended and become areas of special protection in international conventions and in the commitments undertaken by Italy.

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