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Sustainable Well-being through INvestment in Social Services

D3.2

Influence of Sustainable Welfare Goals on Universality and Conditionality

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Disclaimer

This deliverable is part of Task 3.2 "Explore the impact of sustainable welfare goals on the balance between universality and conditionality in social protection access.". This task will review at the European level, with deep dives on the most representative case studies, the political conflict/consensus around these balances, with a focus on how these principles are including eco-social goals. This will look at how both universality and conditionality principles incorporate sustainability criteria that go beyond work-first inertias to include long-term human capital development and sustainable welfare goals referred to both personal and social wellbeing. For example, assessing the role of lifelong education in improving both sustainable productivity and the autonomy and agency of persons.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Social Investment (SI) has probably been one of the most influential paradigms informing welfare state reform in Europe. Its core tenets - investment in human capital, activation over passive income maintenance, and the smoothing of life-course transitions - have driven major social policy expansions in areas such as early childhood education and care (ECEC), work-family reconciliation (WLB), Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP), and Lifelong Learning (LLL). By framing social policy as a productive investment rather than a fiscal burden, SI has been able to mobilise broad political support and to position itself as a progressive alternative to welfare retrenchment and austerity mantras (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Hemerijck, 2017)

At the same time, however, the strong reliance of SI on a productivist interpretation of the welfare state has been called into question. The growth or stagnation of income and wealth inequality, and the continuing path of labour market deregulation and employment precariousness, undermine the assumption that higher employability or a better educated and trained labour force necessarily translates into improved wellbeing or stronger social cohesion. In parallel, demographic ageing, the persistence of gendered care inequalities, and the accelerating climate and environmental crisis challenge the idea that welfare states can continue to rely on employment expansion and economic growth as their primary sources of legitimacy and sustainability.

Considering this, a vast literature with different origins joins forces to claim for an approach to social policy that moves from a narrow focus on employment and productivity outcomes to a broader paradigm that integrates issues of fairness, equality, agency, subjective wellbeing, and ecological sustainability (Gough, 2021; Dukelow and Murphy, 2022; Laruffa, 2022b). The SWINS project is situated at the intersection of these debates. Specifically, the project aims at seeing social investment and sustainable welfare paradigms not as mutually exclusive but as complementary. The key challenge thus lies precisely in finding the right points of intersection. The project's central question is whether - and under what conditions - SI can be reoriented to incorporate sustainable welfare goals while remaining politically viable and institutionally embedded. This question is closely linked to the logic of the Just Transition, which seeks to align climate and environmental policies with social justice, ensuring that the costs and benefits of economic transformation are distributed fairly across social groups and over the life course.

This deliverable contributes to this broader agenda by focusing on two foundational principles of welfare state design: universality and conditionality. The tension between universality and conditionality constitutes one of the foundational debates in comparative social policy. At stake here is the normative basis of social citizenship and welfare state principles. Universality refers to a welfare-state principle according to which access to benefits or services is grounded in social rights and membership in the political community, rather than in residual need (Jacques and Noël, 2021). Conditionality, by contrast, links access to welfare benefits to specific criteria - most commonly means-testing, labour market participation, or behavioural compliance with activation requirements (Bastagli, 2009; Larsen and Caswell, 2022). However, an important body of social policy research cautions against equating universalism simply with identical provision for all: universal systems may include differentiated or targeted elements while remaining universal if they preserve broad access and common social rights.

Since the early 1990s, most European welfare states have been introducing conditionality mechanisms by increasing workfare measures in different social benefits -most commonly minimum income and unemployment- and in labour market activation (Soler-Buades, 2025). Contemporary welfare states combine both logics in varying configurations across policy fields.

In the context of social investment and sustainable welfare, the relevant question is if and what forms of conditionality are more successful in enhancing the employability of individuals and at the same time, are normatively defensible and socially effective in promoting long-term wellbeing, capability

expansion, and ecological transition. In line with Task 3.2, this report explores the potential for integrating sustainable welfare goals in conditionality criteria at the level of policy design. We focus on labour market activation and lifelong learning policies. It asks how conditionality principles are being reshaped as welfare states confront the combined pressures of labour market transformation, ecological transition, and social cohesion, and how eco-social objectives are incorporated beyond traditional work-first logics.

The ambition of the report is to develop a conceptual and analytical framework that can be used to assess policy design across different national contexts and across policy fields. Activation policies and lifelong learning are treated as strategic policy areas in which the tension between an occupational-oriented social investment and sustainable welfare objectives become particularly visible.

The report is structured into eight sections, each contributing a distinct building block to the analysis. Following the introduction, Section 2 revisits the theoretical relationship between Social Investment and Sustainable Welfare through three major critiques of the Social Investment paradigm: its work-first and productivist orientation; its insufficient recognition of care and social reproduction; and its dependence on economic growth despite ecological limits. It thereby establishes the normative and analytical foundations for moving beyond employment-centred evaluations of social policy, while identifying areas of overlap and potential complementarity between Social Investment, capabilities-based approaches and Sustainable Welfare. Section 3 reframes the universality-conditionality debate through a capabilities and sustainability lens and develops four dimensions for analysing policy design: the scope of access; the content and intensity of conditionality; the flexibility of participation pathways; and the degree of decoupling from work-first logics. Section 4 applies this framework to active labour market policies and lifelong learning, two fields in which the tensions between employment-oriented Social Investment and broader sustainable-welfare objectives are especially visible.

Sections 5 and 6 then apply the framework to Spain and Italy. Section 5 examines the reorientation of Spanish activation and lifelong-learning policies under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, focusing on personalised employment pathways, training, the green and digital transitions, and two targeted programmes for women in agricultural contexts and unemployed young people. Spain is treated as a heuristic case that reveals both the possibilities and the continuing limits of moving from work-first towards more enabling forms of conditionality. Section 6 analyses the Italian reform trajectory, particularly the expansion of activation and skills policies, alongside the more restrictive reorganisation of minimum-income protection. The Italian case is used to show how enabling and punitive forms of conditionality may coexist within the same reform cycle. Section 7 compares the two countries, identifying shared Southern European constraints and important differences in the relationship between activation, income protection, territorial inequality, productive structure and political-institutional dynamics. Finally, section 8 draws together the conceptual and comparative findings and considers what would be required to align activation, lifelong learning, social protection, care policy and labour-market regulation with Sustainable Welfare and Just Transition objectives.

2. Sustainable Welfare and Social Investment

One of the most salient criticisms made to the social investment (SI) paradigm has been its narrow productivist focus in the overall framing of social policy, where social policy is primarily seen as a tool for enhancing employability and economic productivity rather than ensuring broader wellbeing, equality, or ecological sustainability. In broad strokes, the integration of sustainable welfare (SW) within social investment needs to consider understandings of welfare and wellbeing detached at least to some extent from labour market performance and participation. The main point of friction between SI and SW is the implicit assumption that SI-oriented policies create a virtuous cycle of wellbeing and labour market participation and hence, welfare mainly relies on economic growth and productivity gains. This fundamental critique has been advanced by scholars from three different although interrelated strands of literature: (1) empirical welfare state research that point to the limitations of social investment to address structural inequalities in societies; (2) feminist scholarship that stress the underplay of care work despite the centrality of gender equality in social investment strategies and, finally, (3) the still incipient but blooming literature that reflect on how the growth-dependent logic of the modern welfare state fails to acknowledge environmental limits. In what follows attention is given to all three critical insights..

2.1 The limits of a productivist work-first approach

One of the strongest criticisms of the social investment approach concerns its reliance on paid employment as the primary route to well-being. Priority is given to human capital development and active labour market policies to promote transitions toward high-productivity in knowledge-based economies (Hemerijck, 2017; Hemerijck, Ronchi and Plavgo, 2023). This assumption is increasingly problematic amid growing empirical evidence indicating a significant expansion in low-productivity, low-wage service sectors and high in-work poverty triggered by labour market dualization. For instance, the OECD's Employment Outlook (2019) highlighted that, following the 2008 financial crisis, job creation in Europe was disproportionately concentrated in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and care work - areas characterized by stagnant productivity and precarious working conditions. Similarly, the European Commission's report on industrial policy (2020) noted that although high-tech industries have expanded across the EU, their employment share remains limited compared to low-value-added services, which accounted for nearly half of net job growth.

Critics attribute this mismatch to structural economic changes that social investment policies alone cannot remedy. While deindustrialization has occurred across all advanced economies, its pace, depth, and character have varied considerably - not only in the extent of service sector growth but also in the balance between high- and low-productivity, high- and low-skill jobs (Wren, 2013). In many European countries, deindustrialization has entrenched a bifurcated labour market, with social investment failing to address demand-side weaknesses such as the limited creation of high-skilled jobs or the growing disconnect between skill level and pay. Many new service jobs remain poorly paid and insecure despite rising workforce qualifications (Eurofound, 2021). Although occupational upgrading has accompanied educational expansion and technological change, "skills polarization" has also intensified - meaning that some workers, with wide cross-country variation, have not benefited from these trends (Oesch and Rodríguez Menés, 2011). In the context of widespread labour market deregulation and the erosion of wage floors and collective bargaining following the

2008 crisis and the austerity political turn, upskilling strategies often reinforce a “low-wage equilibrium” (Crouch and Keune, 2012).

In this scenario, a focus on supply-side solutions becomes increasingly problematic. (Palier and Thelen, 2010), for example, argue that without complementary industrial policies to steer innovation and labour market reforms to curb precarity, social investment risks subsidizing flexible, low-productivity employment. This critique aligns with the ILO’s World Employment Report (2022), which found that Europe’s service-sector expansion has largely reflected corporate cost-cutting strategies rather than a genuine high-tech transition. Thus, while social investment enhances individual employability, structural economic constraints explain why its promise of high-productivity growth remains unrealized for many (Streeck, 2017).

The issue, therefore, is not only that certain groups face “employability” challenges, but also that the available jobs often fail to provide a foundation for a better life. Moreover, for those “beyond employment,” the options for securing well-being have diminished. The shift toward social investment has coincided with a weakening of traditional redistributive mechanisms - such as universal cash transfers and progressive taxation - and a rise in the conditionality of minimum income support. Subordinating social protection to labour market participation means that those unable to work - due to disability, care responsibilities, or long-term unemployment - are increasingly confined to residual welfare programs. The erosion of welfare states’ “insurability” capacity has led to persistently high in-work poverty and a diminished ability to reduce overall poverty rates across many European countries (Cantillon, 2022b).

A related criticism to SI is its tendency to benefit the better-off disproportionately, thereby exacerbating rather than reducing inequality. These so-called “Matthew effects” have been empirically documented across policies that are pretty much the cornerstone of SI strategies such as early childhood education and care (ECEC), active labour market policies (ALMPs), and parental leave schemes. In the case of ECEC, empirical evidence suggests that these services often work to the advantage of middle-high income families, who possess the resources and cultural capital to access and benefit from them, while disadvantaged groups, particularly families on low incomes and of migrant origin, often face barriers to participation or derive fewer benefits due to cumulative socioeconomic constraints (Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2016; León, 2017).

Similarly, ALMPs designed to enhance workers’ skills frequently favour those already well-qualified, as training programs often prioritize sectors requiring foundational competencies - leaving behind low-skilled or precarious workers who are in greatest need of support (Bonoli, Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2017). The recent expansion of paternity leave provision in many countries shows a comparable pattern: fathers with stable employment are the primary beneficiaries of longer well paid paternity leave (Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2016; León, 2017).

These dynamics are reinforced by conditionality requirements attached to social safety nets, which oblige recipients to engage in job search or training activities that certain population groups may struggle to fulfil due to care responsibilities, health problems, or housing instability. The result is that while SI rhetorically seeks to break cycles of disadvantage, in practice it may direct resources toward those already well-positioned in the labour market, leaving the most vulnerable dependent on residual, means-tested support that lacks the transformative potential of true social investment.

The combined effect of weakening traditional redistributive mechanisms and strengthening SI policies has produced increasingly dualized welfare systems, with two distinct tiers: a core tier for workers with stable employment trajectories, who benefit from contributory schemes and SI programmes, and a peripheral tier for the “less insurable,” left with minimal, stigmatized and conditional assistance (Cantillon, 2022a, 2022b). In classic Social Investment terminology, however, this architecture is not meant to dispense with income protection. “Buffer” policies, such as unemployment benefits and minimum-income schemes, are intended to maintain income security and protect household liquidity during life-course transitions, thereby giving individuals the material basis from which to engage in activation, retraining or other forms of social investment (Hemerijck,

2017). The problem is that, under stronger productivist and work-first pressures, these buffers can themselves become subordinated to punitive activation objectives, with access increasingly tied to behavioural requirements, sanctions and rapid labour-market re-entry. In that form, income protection risks shifting from a supportive precondition for enabling transitions towards a disciplinary mechanism. Buffer policies may therefore remain formally present while becoming less effective in counteracting the dualizing dynamics generated elsewhere in the welfare system.

2.2 The neglect of care work

The feminist critique of the productivist logic underpinning SI centres on its insufficient attention to unpaid care work as a foundational component of social and economic life, thereby exacerbating inequalities for those—primarily women—who bear the brunt of care responsibilities. SI's emphasis on labour-market activation and human-capital accumulation has contributed enormously to the development of policies aimed at enhancing female labour-force participation. At the same time, however, care work remains either invisible or undervalued. This narrow focus on paid employment sidelines those who engage in caregiving—disproportionately women, migrants and low-income households—deepening their economic vulnerability and reinforcing gendered divisions of labour.

Thus, work–family balance policies under the SI logic, despite their progressive veneer, often instrumentalise care as a means to facilitate employment rather than valuing it as an intrinsic social good (Daly, 2021, 2025). For instance, childcare subsidies and parental-leave policies are frequently designed to maximise parental, and especially maternal, labour-force participation, while failing to address the devaluation of both paid and unpaid care work. This productivist logic facilitates the employment of women with care responsibilities but may simultaneously reproduce a double or even triple burden of paid work, unpaid care and household labour, particularly where the redistribution of care between women and men remains limited. It can also neglect the structural conditions that channel many women into precarious and low-paid employment, often within the care sector itself (Daly & León, 2022).

The situation of single-parent households is a case in point, as conditional cash transfers and activation requirements disproportionately penalise single mothers and informal caregivers who lack the time or resources to comply with rigid job-search or training demands (Millar & Ridge, 2009; Andersen, 2020, 2026; Offredi, 2026). These policies assume a linear trajectory from caregiving to employment, ignoring the temporal and spatial constraints imposed by unpaid care work. Fraser's earlier distinction between the universal breadwinner, caregiver parity and universal caregiver models is particularly relevant here. Whereas the universal-breadwinner model seeks gender equality primarily by incorporating women into employment, the universal-caregiver model implies reorganising both employment and care so that care responsibilities become a normal part of the lives of women and men alike (Fraser, 1994). This shifts the objective from simply enabling caregivers to conform to existing employment norms towards transforming those norms themselves.

Fraser's later analysis (2016) places this problem within a broader contradiction of capitalism: the economic system depends on social-reproductive activities that it simultaneously devalues and undermines. From this perspective, the limitation of a productivist SI strategy is not simply that it insufficiently supports caregivers, but that it continues to treat care as an external constraint on employment rather than as a central pillar of social reproduction and wellbeing.

2.3 Social Investment and the sustainability critique

From a sustainability perspective, and strongly connected to the previous two, the main critique to social investment (SI) lies in its heavy reliance on employment and productivity growth - both of which often depend on economic activities with significant environmental costs, such as transport and logistics, infrastructure construction, and intensive agriculture or livestock farming. A growing body of scholarship (Dukelow and Murphy, 2022; Gough, 2022; Laruffa, 2022a, 2022b) calls for rethinking the welfare state through a post-growth or degrowth paradigm, which places environmental sustainability at the centre of social and economic evaluation. Although still in its early stages, this emerging perspective suggests a radical reorientation of welfare thinking and practice.

For instance, whereas full-time employment remains a central tenet of most SI frameworks, scholars of sustainable welfare advocate reducing or restructuring consumption and production patterns so as to lessen dependence on waged labour and encourage more pro-social and pro-environmental activities (Dukelow and Murphy, 2022; Gough, 2022; Laruffa, 2022b). Drawing on the capabilities approach, Laruffa (2020) proposes combining income benefits and universal basic services to expand individuals' freedom to exit poor-quality jobs, access better employment, and engage in activities beyond paid work. Similarly, from a post-growth standpoint, Dukelow (2022) advocates job guarantee programs that, together with minimum income schemes and reduced working hours, link improved working conditions to care and eco-social employment. However, efforts to articulate a sustainable welfare state are fraught with tensions and contradictions.

First, different ecological policies entail uneven redistributive outcomes across social groups, countries, and generations. Any radical transformation of production and consumption patterns must therefore confront entrenched distributive conflicts (Gough, 2022). Second, many of the most ambitious eco-social proposals still lack broad political traction or visibility in mainstream policy debates (Büchs and Koch, 2019; Laruffa, Schulze Waltrup and Kaasch, 2026). As Büchs and Koch (2019) observe, the growth paradigm remains deeply embedded in the goals, assumptions, and practices of major political and economic actors at both macro and micro levels. The dependence on unsustainable growth extends beyond the economic system itself to the political, welfare, and cultural systems that have co-evolved with postwar capitalism. In this context, degrowth ideas have yet to generate a broader "repoliticisation" of public discourse. On the contrary, since the 2008 financial crisis, rising economic and identity insecurities - coupled with growing mistrust of political elites - have often fuelled populist, nationalist, and far-right pro-growth narratives.

Given the political limits of post-growth and degrowth strategies, several national governments and international organisations (e.g., the EU and OECD) have instead promoted the pursuit of "green growth." This approach seeks to replace high-emission, resource-intensive models of economic expansion with forms of growth that are environmentally sustainable, decoupling development from material throughput and ecological degradation. However, the extent to which economic growth can be truly decoupled from pollution and resource depletion remains highly contested, with no definitive empirical evidence supporting strong or absolute decoupling (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Meran, 2023).

Regardless of whether the future lies in greener forms of growth or in alternatives to growth altogether, both paths will profoundly reshape labour markets. Initial employment losses in carbon-intensive and other affected sectors will test welfare states' capacity to provide adequate income protection and facilitate large-scale reskilling and upskilling through robust adult learning systems.

Importantly, many critiques of SI share normative foundations with SI itself, drawing on the capabilities and human rights paradigms. This overlap raises crucial questions about the potential for theoretical and policy-oriented exchange between these frameworks. Ultimately, the future of social investment will depend on its ability to align with sustainability and capability goals - moving

beyond employment strategies reliant on greenhouse gas emissions and integrating ecological limits with a richer understanding of people's capacities to lead meaningful, flourishing lives.

3. Rethinking the Universality and Conditionality debate

The central debate in comparative social policy between universality and conditionality revolves around the principles that underlie welfare provision and their implications for equity, efficiency, and social solidarity. Universality advocates that welfare benefits and services should be available to all citizens irrespective of income, labour market participation or behavioural conditions. This approach is grounded in the notion that social rights are unconditional entitlements essential for human dignity, the reduction of stigma, and the strengthening of collective responsibility (Marshall, 1950; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hemerijck, 2017; Gough, 2015). Universalist models view welfare as the fulfilment of individual rights regardless of personal or social background. As a matter of fact, universalist principles underpin some of the most significant achievements of the post-war welfare state such as universal health care, access to compulsory education or public pensions. These welfare institutions have enhanced social cohesion and maintained middle-class support, illustrating what Korpi and Palme (1998) termed the paradox of redistribution: welfare systems that are universal, rather than targeted, tend to redistribute more effectively.

However, critics contend that universality neglects important discussions regarding the efficiency and fairness of social programmes. Providing benefits to all is fiscally unsustainable and inefficient, as resources could be allocated to those who might not need them, non-conditional, universal benefits would end up diverting funds from poverty alleviation and other targeted priorities. In contrast, conditionality links welfare access to specific requirements - such as income thresholds, job-search training, or sanctions in case of no compliance - so that support is directed to the most vulnerable or to incentivize participation in the labour market (Le Grand, 2003; Oliver, 2013; Bonoli, 2013). Conditionality debates are thus not limited to efficiency or workfare concerns; they also engage with the complex interactions between welfare design and inequality. The literature on Matthew effects discussed earlier in this paper, illustrates this complexity (Cantillon, 2014; Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013).

The tension between these principles has a rather structural nature. Universality prioritises equality of status and collective risk-sharing whilst conditionality prioritises targeting and criteria associated with higher efficiency in social spending. In practice, though, welfare states rarely embody either principle in pure form; instead, they combine universal and conditional elements in varying configurations across policy fields. The key question, therefore, is what kind of combination is proposed, and with what mechanisms, for the different policy fields.

This tension is particularly evident in debates over Minimum Income Support (MIS). Should income support be provided universally or conditionally, based on participation or need thresholds? Advocates of a universal MIS conceive it as a fundamental social right guaranteeing every individual a basic standard of living, independent of income, employment, or social circumstances. The most ambitious version of this idea is the Universal Basic Income (UBI) - an unconditional, universal cash payment intended to ensure wellbeing, security, and personal autonomy (Van Parijs and

Vanderborght, 2017). UBI also promises administrative simplicity by reducing the complexities of means-tested schemes. Nevertheless, concerns about fiscal sustainability, political feasibility, and labour market disincentives have limited the adoption of UBI. Most existing MIS schemes remain conditional through means-testing and workfare principles.

This report seeks to advance in the operationalisation of the universality–conditionality debate in relation to ALMPs and lifelong learning. Drawing on the theoretical discussion and on evidence from the Spanish and Italian case studies presented in the following sections, it reconsiders the analytical dimensions that can guide future empirical work. Building on the literature on minimum-income programmes (Natili, 2020; Jessoula & Natili, 2020; Soler-Buades, 2025) and enabling activation (Bussi, 2014; Whelan et al., 2021; Dukelow, 2022; Bussi et al., 2024), four main areas are particularly relevant.

The first is access, which concerns who is formally and effectively able to enter a programme or benefit from a service, and whether access is broad, targeted, categorical or status-based. The second is adequacy, referring primarily to the level and duration of income support and the extent to which it provides effective protection against poverty, assessed in relation to poverty thresholds, median disposable income and, where appropriate, other measures of minimum living standards. The third concerns the content and intensity of conditionality, together with the flexibility of participation pathways. This captures not only whether participation is mandatory and the consequences of non-compliance, but also the substantive obligations attached to support—such as rapid job search, acceptance of available employment, participation in training, personalised counselling or broader capability-enhancing activities—and the extent to which these requirements can be adapted to individuals' skills, care responsibilities, health conditions, previous educational experience and employment aspirations. The fourth is the degree of decoupling from work-first logics in the pursuit of enabling activation. This examines whether policies are evaluated primarily in terms of immediate job entry, or whether they also recognise longer-term learning, occupational progression, job quality, social participation, autonomy and wellbeing as legitimate outcomes.

An eco-social perspective affects the content of what may count as enabling conditionality. Participation requirements need not be confined to rapid job search or acceptance of available employment but may include training and activities that contribute to socially and environmentally valuable transitions. These could include, for example, retraining for renewable energy, energy-efficient renovation, sustainable mobility or care occupations, as well as participation in environmental restoration or community-based ecological projects. The point is not simply whether such activities are required, but whether they expand participants' capabilities, are adequately supported and adapted to individual circumstances, and provide realistic pathways towards decent and sustainable forms of employment or social participation. In this sense, eco-social conditionality differs from conventional work-first activation by linking obligations to activities that are simultaneously enabling for individuals and supportive of wider social and environmental objectives.

Taken together, these dimensions shift attention away from the simple presence or absence of conditionality towards the institutional conditions under which it operates: who can access support, whether that support is adequate, what recipients are required and enabled to do, and which outcomes welfare institutions recognise as valuable. Their more detailed operationalisation, including the identification of indicators suitable for comparative empirical analysis, will be developed further in D3.4.

These dimensions make it possible to distinguish between different configurations of activation and lifelong learning. A programme may remain conditional while becoming less punitive if obligations are linked to meaningful training and personalised support. Similarly, a programme may not be formally universal but may nevertheless expand effective access if it removes practical barriers such as costs, transport, digital exclusion, care responsibilities, and so on. The analytical value of this framework therefore lies in moving beyond a simple opposition between universality and conditionality, and in assessing how policy design shapes real access, obligations, flexibility and the range of socially valuable activities that can be recognised by welfare institutions.

4. Reconciling social investment and sustainable welfare: life-long learning and labour market activation.

Over recent decades, workfare conditionality has expanded across Europe, influencing even social-democratic activation policies (e.g., Denmark, Sweden) search to redirect resources from “passive” support towards enhancing employability. Many national activation agendas, at least at the rhetoric level, have emphasized ALMPs to enhance employability. Yet, the stringency of access requirements, benefit levels and sanctions varies widely, reflecting differing interpretations of the universality-conditionality balance (Knotz, 2020).

The outcomes of this shift are mixed. While workfare-based activation has occasionally increased employment rates, it has also contributed to the rise of in-work poverty and precarious employment. Many beneficiaries find themselves stuck in treadmills made of mandatory ALMP participation, low-paid jobs, unemployment and back to ALMP (Ingold, 2024). This reflects what Ferragina (2022) calls a double movement: the simultaneous expansion of social investment-oriented policies and retrenchment of traditional redistributive ones. By prioritizing rapid job placement over quality employment, workfare conditionality often undermines job security and prospects for advancement (Marchal and Van Mechelen, 2017). Moreover, punitive sanctions have proven both ineffective and stigmatizing, further marginalizing vulnerable groups (Raffass, 2017; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Critics thus view the rise of workfare as symptomatic of a broader erosion of social rights (Peck, 2001). Besides, as decent employment becomes increasingly inaccessible to many, scholars argue that conditionality should not be limited to labour market participation but should also encompass broader social inclusion objectives (Dukelow, 2022).

Despite broad trends, important cross-national variations persist. In some countries, conditionality has developed through an enabling framework (Bonoli, 2010), emphasizing human capital development via education, training, and supportive policies such as childcare. Rather than coercing individuals into work, enabling conditionality focuses on long-term skill enhancement, aligning with social investment principles (Hemerijck and Huguenot-Noël, 2022; Hemerijck and Matsaganis, 2024). This logic can also acquire an eco-social orientation when participation requirements are linked to training or activities that support decarbonisation, environmental repair or socially valuable forms of employment. Green-skills retraining, participation in energy-efficiency renovation, renewable-energy projects, sustainable agriculture, care services or environmental restoration provide examples of how activation can be connected to Just Transition objectives rather than merely to rapid labour-market entry.

While enabling and workfare conditionality are often presented as opposites, many welfare regimes combine both - mixing sanctions for non-compliance with investments in skills and employability. Marchal and Van Mechelen (2017) find that liberal regimes tend to emphasise sanctions, whereas social-democratic systems lean toward enabling approaches. Notably, flexicurity models such as those in Denmark and the Netherlands seek to reconcile universal income protection with active

labour market engagement, and have become influential references in EU employment policy (European Commission, 2016).

The debate between work-first strategies, human capital development, and freedom of choice exemplifies how welfare design shapes access to benefits and services. It reflects enduring ideological divisions between egalitarian and utilitarian approaches - universality emphasizing solidarity, conditionality stressing responsibility and efficiency - each entailing trade-offs between inclusivity and targeted impact.

Activation policies offer a unique lens to explore these trade-offs. They link income support with services such as education and training, both essential for long-term employability and inclusion. In this context, scholars propose different emphases: some prioritize universal basic benefits (Standing, 2004; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017), others advocate for universal basic services (Coote et al., 2019; Coote and Percy, 2020), while recent perspectives argue for integrating both (Büchs, 2021a).

How educational and training systems balance these universal-conditional and income-service dimensions will ultimately shape access to learning trajectories, influencing how ALMPs design strategies that enable participants' long-term learning preferences and life choices. Recent reforms in Spain and Italy provide emerging examples of this shift, although often at the level of programme design rather than fully developed eco-social conditionality. In Spain, RRF-funded activation programmes increasingly incorporate green-skills components, while TándEM combines training and paid work experience in activities such as photovoltaic installation, natural-area maintenance and green-area landscaping. In Italy, GOL and the Fondo Nuove Competenze have been brought together within the Piano Nuove Competenze–Transizioni, explicitly linking skills policy to the green and digital transitions, although evidence that training provision has been systematically redirected towards sustainable employment remains limited. These examples suggest that the eco-social dimension of activation should be assessed not only by whether "green" activities are present, but by whether they expand capabilities, improve job quality and contribute to genuinely sustainable transitions.

As with regards lifelong learning, major processes of transformation such as digitalization, the transition toward a decarbonized economy and population ageing have underscored the growing relevance of adult learning (Coote, 2022; Dukelow, 2022; Plavgo, 2023; Hemerijck and Matsaganis, 2024; OECD, 2024a, 2025a; Evans et al., 2023). As debates on broader activation agendas increasingly incorporate reskilling and upskilling goals, lifelong learning (LLL) has become central to academic discussions. It has also become a major policy priority for many governments and international organizations (OECD, 2024a, 2025a; European Commission, 2020b, 2025; European Council, 2022). Although since the rise in unemployment during the 1970s, the contribution of adult learning to the reskilling and upskilling of unemployed and low-paid workers has been an objective of welfare and labour market policies (Ingold, 2024), the enduring tension between universality and conditionality is reflected in how access to adult education and training is structured and supported.

Historically, the universal right to education has progressively expanded to cover broader age groups. This expansion followed a principle of universal education that did not imply equal learning paths but rather different views of equitable access to educational resources across diverse needs, attributes, preferences and circumstances. Questions concerning equitable access and the age boundaries of universal education - whether it should end at 14, 16, 18, or 21 - remain open. Beyond age 25, access to non-compulsory education becomes even more contested and varies widely across countries. Although adult learning differs significantly from education during childhood and youth, the right to education, training, and lifelong learning is recognized in the European Pillar of Social Rights (Principle 1) which aims for 60% of adults to participate in training by 2030, while the Council of the European Union's New European Agenda for Adult Learning (2021) stresses the importance of broadening adult participation in formal, non-formal and informal learning across Europe (Council Resolution 2021/C 504/02).

Education remains one of the most contentious areas of welfare policy in terms of balancing universality and conditionality. Access to different educational pathways often depends on merit, effort, aptitude, or resources. For instance, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) states that "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." Yet selection procedures based on merit rarely operate independently of broader structural inequalities. As Bourdieu (1986) argued, these selection procedures are key mechanisms through which existing social hierarchies are reproduced. Defending the universality of education thus means ensuring access regardless of income, class, gender, or ethnicity - an approach that promotes both individual well-being and collective development, since better-educated societies are more capable of fostering sustainable growth and democratic participation (UNESCO, 2021).

Recent advances to broaden access to non-compulsory education include tuition-free higher education, financial grants, open and distance-learning education, flexible scheduling, targeted pathways for adult learners, quotas for difficult-to-reach groups, tuition exemptions, and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, balancing merit-based selection, scarce resources, and persistent social inequalities remains a significant challenge. Moreover, the differentiation of occupational structures - shaped by the interplay between education and employment systems - is far from matching the diverse aspirations and aptitudes of learners. These two forms of differentiation are distinct in nature, governed by different logics, and together they complicate the relationship between education at all stages of life and the labour market.

This central tension between occupational demands and educational aspirations also frames any discussion on universality-conditionality balances in LLL and ALMPS. Political and theoretical perspectives on adult learning and training range between two broad poles. On one end, work-first approaches - aligned with the neoliberal paradigm - prioritize maximizing total hours worked and labour productivity. Learning and training are often valued primarily for their expected contribution to employment and GDP growth. Its view of adult learning tends to favour short, employment-oriented programmes such as apprenticeships or on-the-job training. In the more extreme versions of this model, educational goals are sidelined altogether in favour of quick labour market reintegration, regardless of workers' preferences or job quality (Mead, 1997; Card et al., 2018 - for a meta-analysis of different programs).

At the opposite end, critical and sustainability-oriented perspectives emphasize the negative effects of contemporary labour markets on the environment and the well-being of most workers. They advocate decoupling education from GDP growth and strengthening the role of education-for-its-own-sake in promoting democratization, social participation, and well-being (Coote, 2022; Dukelow, 2022; Laruffa, 2020).

These two poles are deliberately simplified in the former paragraphs for clarity. In practice, initiatives such as fast-track courses or apprenticeships within well-paid green jobs may not be so distant from informal community-based learning experiences. Between these extremes lies a diverse landscape of approaches to adult learning and activation policies, each with specific implications for low-income groups. Table 1 (below) illustrates how these approaches have evolved across Europe since the 2008 crisis.

From a human rights and capabilities perspective (Orton, 2011; Bussi, 2014; Whelan et al., 2021; Dukelow, 2022; Laruffa, 2022b), the main aim of lifelong learning and activation policies should not be merely to increase employment rates or reduce benefit dependency. Rather, they should promote high-quality occupational paths and long-term well-being. There is evidence showing that activation policies are most effective when they enable and enhance participants' skills, rather than simply conditioning benefits (Heins, 2023; Ingold, 2024). For participants, recognizing an activity as meaningful and suitable is crucial to the programme's success. This also involves providing personalized guidance and counselling on aptitudes, skills, and realistic labour market options. A capabilities-oriented agenda, therefore, sees ALMPs as part of wider activation and adult learning systems. This combines employment, training, and wellbeing goals. In fact, countries that invest

heavily in ALMPs - such as Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany - tend to have more generous and integrated welfare systems overall (OECD, 2024a).

In many respects, the differences among welfare state traditions and literatures on adult learning also reflect the distinct social groups on which each approach focuses. Social investment appears particularly well-suited to individuals whose additional educational attainment may translate into significant gains in employability and productivity - such as working single mothers, young adults with incomplete education but high employability, or workers in transitioning sectors who possess transferable skills and require reskilling. Its emphasis on productivity and employment risks overlooking other vital dimensions of well-being, including job quality, autonomy, and participation in decision-making (Dukelow, 2022; Laruffa, 2022b). In their view, the value of lifelong learning extends far beyond paid employment. For individuals with limited employability, it can substantially enhance quality of life by enabling engagement in meaningful activities. This potential is reflected in the growing interest across two distinct fields: the literature on the scarcity of quality jobs and disability studies. Both have shown how non-employment-oriented learning - through community education and cultural participation - promotes autonomy and social inclusion, independent of occupational outcomes (Laruffa, 2022b; Ingold, 2024).

Accordingly, when considering adult learning, the optimal combination of benefits and services needs considering each group's socioeconomic circumstances, employability prospects, and personal preferences. Drawing on previous research (EUROSHIP, 2023) and recent literature (Johnson and Majewska, 2022; Holford and Milana, 2023; OECD, 2025a), evidence suggests that some low-paid workers may benefit from combining quality part-time employment with flexible learning pathways leading quickly to qualifications that enhance their occupational prospects. Such flexible arrangements may integrate on-the-job training, short programmes, distance education, and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning acquired in the workplace. Others - those unemployed but with high employability - may instead require minimum income support coupled with intensive full-time training or apprenticeships.

For those on low-paid employment and for the unemployed, the existence of alternative training pathways is crucial. Across Europe, only a minority of high-skill professions (e.g., doctors, judges, university professors) require extensive training pathways lasting close to a decade. But for most other occupations in the largest economic sectors such as care, logistics, construction, and hospitality, the required training and accreditation vary significantly, creating clear disparities in opportunity. While some countries mandate one or more years of higher education, others provide access to stackable credentials through shorter programs or on-the-job learning (Gruenewald and Mueller, 2024; OECD, 2025a).

However, as previously noted, adult learning may also offer significant benefits for people living in poverty and with low employability. Ultimately, non-employment-oriented learning can enhance well-being across all socioeconomic groups, but the availability of these opportunities is shaped by institutional arrangements and the specific ways welfare states balance universality and conditionality, as well as income and service provision.

Table 1 Employability, activation approaches

	WORK-FIRST	HUMAN CAPITAL	SUSTAINABLE ACTIVATION
Priorities	more GDP, more total employed hours	more GDP, productivity per hour, redistribution	more decoupling wellbeing from employment Empowering work autonomy
Policies	Benefits conditionality to accelerate employment entry	more education, skills that bring more productivity in the long-term	more education that bring more sustainable activities and social participation
Privileged practices	Market formal education Conditional ALMPs Apprenticeships, on-the-job-training	Public-sector formal education from ECEC to adult learning	Mixed settings, combining formal, non-formal and informal education
Privileged actor	Employers	State, social partners	Civil society, commons
Formal adult learning	Stress on flexibility to combine training with full-time jobs	VET, reskilling, upskilling	Stress on non-employment oriented
Informal and non-formal adult learning	Attached to on-the-job-training	Stress on validation, accreditation, and life-course stackability	Area of social participation Democratization of knowledge

Source: own elaboration

5. The Showcase of Active Labour Market Policies in Spain: Activation, Training and the Just Transition

This section uses Spain as a single illustrative case to assess how these former debates are reflected in recent policy changes in ALMPs and LLL within the framework of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) during the period 2021-2026. The Spanish case serves as a heuristic device to examine if and how activation and lifelong learning policies are being redesigned under the combined influence of Social Investment logics, sustainability goals, and the Just Transition agenda, and how these changes reshape the balance between universality and conditionality in practice.

Spain is particularly well suited for this purpose for three reasons. First, it represents a welfare regime traditionally characterised by weak activation capacity, strong labour market segmentation, and limited investment in adult learning (Bertheau et al., 2023; Asensio and Ferreira, 2024). Second, it has been the recipient of substantial European-level influence and funding through the RRF, explicitly linked to green and digital transitions (European Parliament, 2023) (Corti and Ruiz de la Ossa, 2023), and the European Semester Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs). Third, recent reforms provide concrete examples of how conditionality is being reconfigured rather than simply intensified or dismantled, allowing us to observe emerging forms of “enabling” activation within a context still marked by structural constraints (Im et al., 2025; BDE, 2024, 2025).

5.1 The Recovery and Resilience Plan as a Catalyst for Reorientation

Historically, Spanish labour market and social policies were primarily oriented toward income compensation rather than activation. Despite persistently high unemployment, ALMPs played a marginal role in supporting transitions to stable and higher-quality employment. While aggregate spending on ALMPs was not negligible by European standards, it was largely driven by the size of the unemployed population and concentrated on hiring subsidies, particularly for employers, rather than on training, counselling, or long-term human capital development.

This configuration reflected deeper structural features of the Spanish political economy. Labour market dualisation, weak coordination between education and employment systems, and a production model heavily reliant on low-productivity sectors such as tourism, construction, and personal services, limited the demand for high-skilled labour. As a result, activation policies were often trapped in a low-level equilibrium: incentives for hiring did little to improve job quality, while training measures were fragmented, short-term, and poorly integrated into coherent learning trajectories.

Pre-reform Spanish ALMPs combined high conditionality with limited universality. This involved restricted access to meaningful training and personalised guidance, while benefit receipt was increasingly tied to job-search obligations that prioritised rapid labour market entry over sustainable

employment or skill formation. This configuration aligns closely with a work-first activation model, even if implemented unevenly and with limited enforcement capacity (Bertheau et al., 2023; Asensio and Ferreira, 2024; BDE 2024, 2025).

Spain's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, approved in July 2021 and implemented from 2021 to 2026, may mark a significant turning point in this trajectory, since it designates ALMP reforms and investments as central to achieving sustainable employment (Spain NRRP, Gobierno de España, 2021). Under strong European guidance, ALMP reforms became a central component of a broader strategy to address structural weaknesses in the labour market while supporting digitalisation, decarbonisation, and social inclusion. A substantial share of RRF-funded ALMP expenditure has been earmarked for upskilling and reskilling measures, signalling a departure from the historical dominance of hiring subsidies. Within the NRRP, the Spanish Employment Activation Strategy (2021-2024) further outlines the overarching logic of ALMPs during this period (Royal Decree 1069/2021) .

Of the NRRP's €4.61 billion investment in ALMPs, €2.91 billion is allocated to upskilling and reskilling (Gobierno de España, 2021; European Parliament, 2023). The main reforms seek to a) improve training for employment and design personalised employment pathways; b) enhance young people's access to employment through a redesigned Youth Guarantee; c) expand adult learning and competency recognition systems; and d) reinforce qualification programmes and provide targeted support for older workers.

These reforms are implemented primarily through Components 23 and 19 (Gobierno de España, 2021) and target the NRRP's transversal objectives: training for skills and promoting employment that favours the green transition, improving digital skills across the population, and reducing social, territorial and gender inequalities. Even if the promotion of green skills and jobs still receives less political attention than absolute employment levels or working conditions, it has gained importance. According to a recent OECD (2025b) report, several ALMP training initiatives now include modules on green competencies - such as energy-efficient renovation, waste management, forestry, and photovoltaic installation - with some programs guiding up to 35% of participants through individualised green-skill pathways.

The importance of the RRF lies less in the absolute volume of funding than in the redefinition of policy objectives. ALMPs were explicitly reframed as instruments not only for employment promotion, but also for supporting long-term employability, human capital development, and transitions into emerging sectors associated with the green and digital economy. This reframing is clearly SI driven but it also opens up the space for integrating sustainable welfare considerations, particularly where training and learning are prioritised over immediate job placement.

Key regulatory reforms accompanied these investments. The 2023 Employment Act (Ley 3/2023) aimed at modernizing ALMPs by strengthening coordination between different administrative levels (including the creation of the Spanish Employment Agency) and expanding profiling, individual mentoring and career-path design. One of the core objectives of the law was to strengthen employability. Article 3 introduced the requirement for unemployment-benefit recipients to sign an activity agreement, obliging them to actively seek employment and participate in designated employability measures. Failure to comply with or interruptions to this agreement may result in the suspension or withdrawal of benefits (CES, 2024, 2025). Since 2023, there has also been renewed emphasis on hiring incentives for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, young jobseekers and the long-term unemployed. Royal Decree-Law 1/2023 redirected hiring subsidies toward those facing the greatest labour-market barriers.

Further reforms linking unemployment protection to activation measures, strengthening personalised employment plans and individual profiling for unemployment-benefit recipients have also been introduced (Royal Decree-Law 2/2024). These itineraries function as structured roadmaps outlining progressive steps to enhance employability. From the standpoint of universality and conditionality, these reforms signal an attempt to move away from purely standardised activation requirements

toward more differentiated and individualised pathways. Benefit levels have also increased by raising the IPREM reference percentage for calculating the amount. It also extended the right to receive the subsidy to new groups, and favoured more compatibility between subsidies and employment, to eliminate disincentives for returning to work, establishing the employment support supplement (complemento de apoyo al Empleo, CAE). During 2024, the coverage rate (i.e. the percentage of beneficiaries of benefits out of the total number of registered unemployed persons) increased, reaching 72.%% (4.1 pp above the previous year) (CES, 2025).

At the same time, the reform has focussed on older unemployed people as a main target group. They represent a large proportion of the beneficiaries of unemployment benefits (62.7% of unemployment benefit recipients in 2023, were aged above 52, (MITES-SEPE, 2024b). For beneficiaries aged above 45, this law planed detailed measures expected in the coming years under the so-called Global Strategy for the Employment of the Long-Term Unemployed and Older Workers.

However, the optional nature of profiling has been criticised as inconsistent with the principles of the 2023 Act, since the discretion of public employment services in relation to the individualized profile, could lead to potential inequalities (CES, 2025). There are also other inconsistencies in how the specific support of the access of certain vulnerable groups (older unemployed people, >45) to main services may conflict with the alleged universal right to these services of all unemployed persons.

Also in 2024, the Royal Decree 1248/2024 expanded activation programmes for young people (<30), integrating NRRP measures, while the 2024 Annual Plan for the Promotion of Decent Employment (PAFED) strengthened performance-based funding of ALMPs.

Finally, the Active Employment Support Strategy 2025-2028 (approved July 2025) places strong emphasis on improving guidance and personalised support for vulnerable groups, including young people, the long-term unemployed, persons with disabilities, migrants and Roma communities (CES, 2025). While the emphasis on employability could suggest a work-first logic, these measures also contain elements consistent with long-term human-capital development and social-inclusion objectives. Their real orientation will depend on implementation, which opens the scope for future research.

A central insight from the Spanish case is that recent reforms have not eliminated conditionality, nor have they replaced it with unconditional access to benefits or services. Instead, conditionality has been reconfigured in its content and orientation. Unemployment benefit recipients are still required to engage with public employment services and to participate in activation measures. However, the activities that fulfil these obligations increasingly include training, skills assessment, counselling, and participation in learning pathways, rather than immediate acceptance of any available job. From an analytical perspective, this shift corresponds to a movement from work-first conditionality toward enabling conditionality, in which obligations are linked to human capital development rather than rapid labour market exit.

This reconfiguration is particularly visible in the expansion of personalised employment itineraries, which are intended to combine guidance, training, and job-search support in a coherent sequence, tailored to individual profiles and labour market prospects.

At the same time, sanctions and compliance requirements remain part of the system, and the discretionary power of public employment services raises concerns about unequal treatment across regions and social groups. From the perspective of sustainable welfare, this underscores the importance of assessing not only the formal redefinition of conditionality, but also its implementation and distributive consequences.

5.1.1 Two Innovative Cases of targeted ALMP Programmes

As discussed above, one of the most significant recent developments in Spanish active labour market policies concerns the growing emphasis on training, skills development and personalised employment pathways, particularly in relation to the digital and green transitions. Conditionality is mostly designed around participation requirements linked to training and capability-building activities. In many of these programmes, sustainability objectives are being incorporated into activation policy design. The two cases that will be presented below show how programme design can widen effective access for groups that have traditionally been less well served by ALMPs, including young people, women in rural and agricultural contexts, and people with a migratory background with low or medium levels of formal education.

A recent OECD (2025b) assessment of 38 Spanish ALMPs financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan identifies a number of promising practices in this regard. These programmes are mainly linked to two components of the Spanish Recovery Plan: Component 23, which focuses on sustainable, inclusive and quality employment, with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as young people, women and the long-term unemployed; and Component 19, the National Digital Skills Plan, which aims to strengthen digital skills across the adult population. Among the initiatives highlighted by the OECD, two are particularly useful for the purposes of this report because they show how the goals of the Just Transition and the European Pillar of Social Rights can be translated into concrete activation and training measures.

The first programme, Digital Literacy for Women in Agriculture, addresses the intersection of gender, territorial inequality, low educational attainment and digital exclusion. The second, TándEM, combines training and paid work experience for young unemployed people, with a strong emphasis on green and digital skills. Although we identify significant innovation at the level of policy design, the available evidence remains mostly limited to participation and levels of satisfaction. Their longer-term effects on skill acquisition, job quality and stable employment therefore remain to be assessed.

5.1.1.a Digital Literacy for Women in Agriculture

This national programme, implemented by SEPE since 2023, promotes sustainable employment and reduces gender and territorial inequalities by offering digital-skills training to women with low or medium education levels working in seasonal agriculture.

The digital literacy program for women employed or having been employed under the Agricultural Employment Promotion Program (PROFEA) is an initiative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy carried out through the State Public Employment Service. It is framed within Investment 3: Digital Skills for Employment, of Component 19: National Digital Skills Plan - Digital Skills, of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan. Participants are over 40 and a large proportion are migrant women. The programme includes five in-person modules of 26 hours each. Participation is free, voluntary, and the flexibility of the curriculum considers participants' different levels of competence. This initiative has been praised for the wide range of personalized support provided to participants, who otherwise may have found very difficult to attend the courses (OECD, 2025b; Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia, 2023)

The support services tailored on a case-by-case basis include childcare support, provision of equipment (laptops, ipads, mobile phones), translation services, and sustainable transport solutions. Regarding impact, both the OECD (2025b) and Spain's Public Employment Service (SEPE) (Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia, 2023) note that the program has empowered participating women, enhancing their autonomy and confidence. However, beyond participation rates and self-reported satisfaction, data on measurable skill improvements or access to quality employment remain unavailable.

5.1.1.b TándEM: Training in alternation with employment for young people

Launched in 2021 within the Youth Guarantee Plus Plan (2021-2027), TándEM targets unemployed youth aged 16-29, and provides training in digital and green skills, without requiring any prior qualification. Managed nationally by SEPE, it combines training, work experience and access to employment in public and non-profit entities. At least 25% of content focuses on green skills, 25% on digital skills, and the remainder on technical, transversal and employability-oriented training. Programmes run for 12-18 months and include an initial guidance, counselling and training phase (between 3 and 6 months, with a study grant); followed by a dual employment-training phase (with wages), where part of the working day is dedicated to on-the-job training. During this period, participants simultaneously earn an income and keep learning skills. Activities include natural-area maintenance, building repair, photovoltaic installation and green-area landscaping. Some projects within this programme target young people from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds (young migrants, ethnic minorities, NEETS) (OECD, 2025 b; MITES-SEPE, 2024b; Cruz Roja, 2025). As in the former case, early evidence shows high participants' satisfaction and completion rates, besides, OECD (2025c) notes that vulnerable young people participating in dual training-employment programs have a higher probability of entering the labour market. But there are no clear indicators yet on job quality and long-term employment stability.

5.2 Assessment of recent trends

Many present Spanish ALMP programmes now operationalise key principles of recent reforms (more focus on training and vulnerable groups). Nonetheless, it remains too early to assess their full impact quantitatively, and the necessary evaluation mechanisms - targets, milestones, indicators - remain underdeveloped (European Parliament, 2023).

So far, there seems to be no clear deviations from major historical trends. Although Spain has long ranked among the EU countries with the highest ALMP expenditure as a share of GDP, this has reflected and still reflects its high levels of structural unemployment. When expenditure is considered relative to the number of unemployed persons, Spain ranks in the mid/low range of EU countries. Declining unemployment has not resulted in increased ALMP coverage, mirroring trends in much of the EU. Therefore, expenditure per jobseeker remains well below leading performers (Denmark, Belgium, Austria, France). This is reflected, for instance, in the high caseloads per PES professional, which limit the scope for personalised support despite recent hiring increases in PES personnel and regulatory changes (OECD, 2024b; CES, 2025).

In the European context, the Bank of Spain (BDE, 2023, 2024) identifies three structural gaps in Spanish ALMPs: limited coverage of unemployed persons, both in terms of program participants and spending; weak PES involvement in job placements and training; poor evaluation of ALMP effectiveness.

Recent political initiatives - including reskilling programs and activation measures financed through Next Generation/EU-fund-backed programmes - have expanded participation in training and subsidized employment schemes. But, despite raises in training participation (with particularly strong gains among women), fewer than 10% of the intended target population is reached. Moreover, substantial disparities persist for migrants and workers aged 55 and over, who remain consistently underrepresented (CES, 2025). As a result, Spain's participation in active labor market policies (ALMPs), measured as a share of either the unemployed or the labor force, continues to lag behind the EU average (OECD, 2024b; CES, 2025; LMP database of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion).

In 2024, Spain allocated €7 billion to Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs), equivalent to 0.4% of its GDP. This figure represents less than one-third of the national expenditure on unemployment

benefits, and half of ALMP spending (50%) went into employment-insertion measures, including subsidies, while 27% is dedicated to training. Then, 74% of this training expenditure support employed workers, and 26% goes to unemployed workers (CES, 2025). While the total ALMP budget saw its first decline in a decade, expenditure per unemployed person rose, reflecting a decrease in unemployment.

Recent reforms may not be sufficient to overcome longstanding limitations. The 2021 Activation Strategy and the 2023 Employment Act remain ambitious but insufficiently operationalised, with few concrete, evaluable actions (European Parliament, 2023); Im et al., 2024; BDE, 2024, 2025; CES, 2024, 2025). Similarly, the NRRP addresses major weaknesses - low spending, too much focus on incentives for hiring, limited PES effectiveness, low digitalisation, insufficient coordination, weak outreach to disadvantaged groups -but lacks clear milestones, what hinders monitoring and assessment. The Economic and Social Council (CES) 2025 annual report, missed clear evidence of the results of recent ALMPs in Spain, with no systematic evaluation available of the Spanish Active Employment Support Strategy 2021-2024.

Experts from both liberal and social-investment perspectives (Fedea, 2025) highlight persistent shortcomings such as weak PES intermediation and inadequate jobseeker profiling; fragmented governance between the occupational services (SEPE) and the Autonomous Communities; the rigidity of training programmes for evolving labour-market needs; and a limited systematic evaluation of these programmes.

However, these critiques often overlook job-quality considerations and tend to favour work-first approaches over long-term human-capital development. In a different direction, some recent assessments (MITES-SEPE, 2024a, 2024b) have highlighted the success of some measures, such as those that combine a mix of services involving individualized mentoring, the design of employment pathways and training itineraries.

Still, in the current expansionary phase (2022-2025), with employment and wages rising in several sectors, the persistent exclusion of long-term unemployed persons and the large proportion of low-paid workers, underscore both the limitations of existing ALMPs and the broader debate on whether employment is always the most effective route to social inclusion. We have found qualitative evidence of two key trends. At the policy level, there is a growing interest in expanding training-oriented ALMPs to support pathways into higher-quality green jobs (in key sectors such as agriculture, environmental activities, building, renovation and refurbishment, care, education, logistics). At the user level, many jobseekers are beginning trajectories of occupational improvement through guidance and initial training. Yet the absence of clear targets and milestones prevents quantitative validation of these trends.

There have been notable advances in efforts to reach vulnerable groups and in reshaping ALMPs to move beyond a purely work-first orientation. In particular, the emphasis on individualised guidance and the development of transversal skills reflects a shift toward promoting long-term pathways of occupational improvement. However, as just said, the evaluation of these broader goals remains very limited. Assessments continue to focus primarily on job entry and employment duration, with much less attention to job quality. As a result, there is little evidence on the extent to which ALMPs actually help individuals to access better jobs or embark on substantial reskilling and upskilling trajectories. FUNDAE (2025) found that participants in training programs were satisfied with what they learnt, but the impact on better working conditions or occupational improvements are unclear. In any case, the assessment of the impacts of training measures in the employability and wellbeing of participants is repeatedly considered as one of the Spanish ALMPs areas in need of major improvements (BDE, 2023; CES, 2025; Fedea, 2025).

5.3 ALMPs, Lifelong Learning, and the Decoupling from Work-First Logics

From the perspective of this report's broader analytical framework, the Spanish case is particularly instructive in illustrating the partial and contested nature of decoupling from work-first strategies. While training-oriented activation represents a clear move away from immediate job placement as the sole objective, access to learning opportunities remains closely tied to labour market status and benefit receipt (Ingold, 2024; BDE, 2024, 2025; CES 2024, 2025).

In comparison with other learning and training alternatives, the training within ALMPs is also generally short to medium in terms of duration - often below 50 hours, with some courses of around 400 hours for vocational certificates, and only a minority of courses reaching 600-800 hours. This raises questions about their capacity to support substantial reskilling or upskilling. Besides, in the Spanish case, the longest training courses are often tied to professional certificates, which reflects well-documented "Matthew effects" in social investment policies; while some of these courses have been criticized as too rigid to adapt to the changing nature of labour market needs (Fedea, 2025). Consequently, when it comes to supporting higher-quality employment trajectories, ALMPs' main contribution may lie in guidance, counselling, and offering the initial steps of training rather than in comprehensive skill development. At the same time, the growing emphasis on personalised guidance and skills development opens analytical space for considering how activation policies could support broader wellbeing goals. For individuals facing low employability or structural barriers to stable employment, participation in learning may enhance autonomy, social participation, and quality of life, even if it does not lead immediately to employment.

From a capabilities and a sustainable welfare perspective, recognising these outcomes requires moving beyond narrow employment metrics and incorporating capability-oriented evaluation criteria. Training routes with potential to improve access to better jobs and/or more wellbeing may require durations and designs that defy work-first approaches. The broader landscape of adult learning in Spain - encompassing post-compulsory formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning - presents a mixed picture. Participation in formal education among adults (25-64) has stagnated at around 9% - above the EU-27 average but well below leading countries such as Sweden (20.9%) and Finland (13.8%) (Eurostat, 2025). Besides, trends within different ways of formal education also merit closer examination: for example, adult participation in university courses declined between 2015 and 2024, particularly in in-person programmes (Universidad de Zaragoza, 2021; MICIU, 2025).

Data for non-formal and informal learning are more contested, but some patterns stand out. While informal learning has remained stagnant at below 60% (EU-27: 64.2%; Germany: 70.2%), adult participation (ages 25-64) in non-formal education and training in Spain increased from 39.1% in 2016 to 45.1% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2025).

Expanding access to university and other formal post-secondary pathways for adults over 25 is crucial for reskilling and upskilling Spain's workforce and ensuring a Just Transition. However, in line with trends across Europe, adult participation in these formal routes shows signs of stagnation or decline. Since informal and non-formal learning are the dominant modes for this age group, there is a compelling need to bolster measures that validate these experiences. A key strategy for revitalizing lifelong learning is to enhance the flexibility and stackability of educational offerings. Specifically, improving the recognition of prior informal learning and promoting modular pathways - which blend online and in-person short courses and are validated by micro-credentials - can increase the number of more coherent, relevant, and continuous learning journeys that develop meaningful and lasting skills.

Yet when assessing the relationship between broader access to ALMPs and LLLs, on the one hand, and the prospect of securing better jobs, on the other, Spain's core challenge remains the quality of

available employment - its working conditions and task content. Recent estimates suggest that around 50% of jobs in Spain can be classified as precarious or low quality (Flores Martos, 2025). The scale and intersectional nature of this structural precariousness - predating the 2008 crisis - also complicates any attempt to draw clear causal links between specific activation, training or adult-learning policies and subsequent labour-market improvements. The positive effects of human-capital measures risk being diluted amid the labour market's pervasive inequalities. In Spain, over the past decade, it is difficult to identify any human-capital policy that has improved the disposable income or wellbeing of low-paid workers to a degree comparable to the substantial increases in the minimum wage. In this context, the capacity of human-capital-oriented measures to advance sustainable development and equality depends heavily on the evolution of broader structural policies related to productivity, wage-setting mechanisms and the nature of the jobs available.

This country-specific case yields several analytical insights that are relevant beyond the national context. First, European-level policy frameworks can act as catalysts for reorienting activation policies, even in welfare regimes with limited historical investment in human capital. Second, conditionality can indeed be transformed in its content without disappearing, shifting from work-first obligations toward participation in training and learning. Third, policy design innovations need to be assessed together with outcomes when analysing sustainability-oriented reforms. Finally, the Spanish case underscores the structural constraints that limit the transformative potential of ALMPs and LLL. Without parallel changes in labour market institutions towards job quality training-oriented activation risks being absorbed into existing patterns of precarious employment. This reinforces the argument that sustainable welfare requires policy complementarities across activation, education, labour market regulation, and social protection..

6. The showcase of active labour market policies in Italy: activation, conditionality and the Just Transition

This section examines the Italian case in order to assess how recent reforms of active labour market policies (ALMPs), adult learning and minimum-income protection reflect the analytical debates developed in the report. Italy is especially useful because it combines three features central to the argument: a historically fragmented and occupational welfare state, deep territorial and gender inequalities, and a recent attempt to reorient activation and skills policy through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The Italian case therefore clarifies both the potential and the limits of Social Investment under structural constraint.

The post-pandemic reform cycle has increased the prominence of activation, employability and skills formation. Through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, PNRR), Italy has channelled unprecedented resources into ALMPs, especially through the Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori (GOL), the Fondo Nuove Competenze (FNC) and the Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni (PNCT). These measures introduce a vocabulary of personalisation, upskilling, reskilling and adaptation to the green and digital transitions, suggesting a partial movement beyond a narrow work-first approach.

However, the Italian trajectory is internally contradictory. GOL and related skills policies embody a recognisable Social Investment logic: unemployed people are assessed, profiled and directed towards differentiated pathways of support. Yet this has occurred alongside the abolition of the Reddito di Cittadinanza (RdC) and its replacement by the Assegno di Inclusione (ADI) and the Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro (SFL). This reform narrowed access to minimum-income protection, reintroduced sharper distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor, and attached support more strongly to categorical eligibility and activation requirements. Italy therefore combines enabling activation in one institutional arena with a more restrictive and sanction-oriented logic in another. Nevertheless, GOL is not unambiguously enabling, as, like argued by Tassinari (2022), it is also the first Italian measure in which conditionality became operative rather than nominal for recipients of unemployment benefits, since failure to take part in the assigned measures entails the loss of the benefit. Moreover, the labour chapter of the PNRR reads, in her account, as continuity with the liberalising trajectory completed by the Jobs Act of 2015 rather than as a break with it, a reading reinforced by the exclusion of CGIL and UIL from concertation during the drafting of the plan and by the reduction of social dialogue to ex-post legitimation. The contrast is therefore better described as one between an arena that is declaratively enabling and operationally work-first and an arena that is openly restrictive, and the implementation evidence discussed in 6.2 supports precisely this reading.

Conditionality has not disappeared, but it has been reconfigured in two different directions: in ALMPs, it is increasingly attached to guidance, training and employability; in minimum-income protection, it has become more categorical, digitalised and potentially exclusionary. This dual movement may make Italian recent policy changes more contradictory than Spanish ones.

This trajectory must be understood against Italy's institutional background. Italian social protection has historically been organised around an occupational-conservative model, with rights attached to stable dependent employment and continuous work careers. Insiders, especially older male workers in standard employment, received stronger protection, while young people, women, migrants, atypical workers and the long-term unemployed faced more fragile and discontinuous support. Italy's late development of national minimum-income protection reflected this legacy. The Reddito di Inclusione (ReI), introduced in 2017, was the first structural step, but remained limited; the later RdC was therefore politically significant and highly contested.

Labour-market reform followed a similar path. Successive waves of liberalisation, culminating in the 2015 Jobs Act, expanded flexibility while promising stronger unemployment protection and ALMPs. In practice, however, the active side remained weak. Public employment services were underfunded, ANPAL lacked effective steering capacity, and the failed 2016 constitutional referendum blocked the recentralisation of ALMP competences. As a result, passive instruments remained stronger than personalised activation, training and placement.

The post-2021 reforms were therefore launched on weak foundations. Italy had formal obligations and benefit conditionality, but often lacked the administrative capacity to turn them into meaningful support. This weakness is reinforced by structural labour-market divides. The employment rate for those aged 20-64 stood at 67.1% in 2024 against an EU average of 75.8, long-term unemployment at 3.% against 1.9, and the share of young people not in employment, education or training at 18%, among the highest in Europe (European Commission, 2025a; INAPP, 2024a). Territorial inequality is especially severe: the employment-rate gap between the North-East and the South reaches 22.5 percentage points, while absolute poverty, which affected 8.% of households and some 5.7 million individuals in 2023, exceeds 10% in the southern regions (Istat, 2024; European Commission, 2025a). Activation policies may improve employability, but they cannot create equivalent opportunities where labour demand is weak. Gender inequality is equally important. At 57.4% for women aged 20-64 against an EU average of 70.8, Italy has one of the lowest female employment rates in the Union, and its gender employment gap of 19.4 percentage points is almost double the European figure of ten. The tax and benefit system contributes directly, since the effective rate on labour income at the transition into employment reaches 78.4% for second earners, who are overwhelmingly women (European Commission, 2025a). These outcomes are shaped as well by care responsibilities, uneven childcare provision, occupational segregation and precarious or part-time work. Women may participate in activation programmes, but participation alone does not guarantee stable, full-time and well-paid employment. This distinction is crucial for assessing the real inclusiveness of Social Investment reforms.

6.1. The PNRR as catalyst for activation and skills, while the Minimum-income reforms re-categorised conditionality.

Italy's PNRR, approved in 2021 under the Draghi government, represented a major change of scale in ALMP investment. Mission 5, Component 1 allocated some 6.7 billion euros to active labour market policies, of which 4.4 billion to GOL, raised by a further billion with the ECOFIN revision of December 2023, alongside 500 million from REACT-EU and roughly 1.1 billion for the capacity of the employment centres. The last item deserves to be kept in view, because the recruitment of 11,600 staff for the Centri per l'Impiego has been financed from permanent national resources since 2021, unlike the programme itself. This was unprecedented in the Italian context and illustrates the role of the RRF as an external catalyst for reform. European funding and monitoring requirements pushed the Italian state to place activation, skills, digitalisation and social inclusion closer to the

centre of the policy agenda (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali and Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2021; Tassinari, 2022; INAPP, 2024a).

GOL is the central measure in this new architecture. Adopted in November 2021, it aimed to reach three million beneficiaries between 2021 and 2025 and to establish a more unified system of intake, assessment and support. Its target groups include recipients of unemployment benefits, former beneficiaries of the RdC, workers receiving wage supplementation, young NEETs, vulnerable workers and, after the reform of minimum-income protection, beneficiaries of Assegno di Inclusione (ADI) and the Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro (SFL). GOL therefore represents an attempt to bring together groups that had previously been treated through separate instruments and fragmented institutional channels (INAPP, 2024a, 2024b).

The programme is organised around five pathways: labour-market reintegration, upskilling, reskilling, work and inclusion for people with complex vulnerabilities, and collective redeployment for workers affected by company crises. This architecture formally moves away from a uniform catalogue of measures: in principle, intervention should depend on the participant's profile and distance from the labour market.

In analytical terms, GOL can be interpreted as an attempt to move towards enabling conditionality. The unemployed person is still expected to participate in activation, sign agreements and accept designated measures. However, the content of the obligation is no longer limited to immediate job search or acceptance of any work. It is increasingly framed as participation in a pathway of guidance, training and employability. This is closer to the Social Investment idea that welfare states should support people's capabilities to participate in changing labour markets. At the same time, and this is easily overlooked, GOL is the first Italian programme in which the obligation became enforceable: before it, activation duties existed on paper and were rarely applied for want of administrative capacity, so that the reform widened the content of conditionality and tightened its bite in one and the same move (Tassinari, 2022). Yet the enabling character of conditionality depends on the quality of the services and opportunities attached to it. If guidance is superficial, training is weak, or local labour demand is poor, the same obligation may revert to work-first conditionality by default (Tassinari, 2022).

The governance of GOL also reproduces Italy's decentralised institutional architecture. Regions and autonomous provinces are responsible for implementation through Regional Implementation Plans, while national authorities provide steering, monitoring and general standards. This arrangement is constitutionally coherent, but it creates a familiar problem: the capacity of public employment services varies across territories. A formally national programme can therefore produce unequal real access. The PNRR tried to address this through an extraordinary plan to reinforce the Centri per l'Impiego (CPI), including recruitment, digitalisation and organisational modernisation. However, the distance between formal standards and operational capacity remains one of the main limits of implementation (Tassinari, 2022; INAPP, 2024c).

GOL is complemented by the FNC, which targets employed workers rather than the unemployed. The FNC finances reductions in working time so that employees can participate in training, with public support covering training-related costs. In March 2024, GOL and the FNC were brought together within the PNCT (Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni), which aims to coordinate skills policy more strategically and to link training with the twin green and digital transitions. The PNCT emphasises private-sector involvement, work-based learning, micro-credentials and labour-market intelligence systems to anticipate skill needs.

The Just Transition agenda is therefore present in Italian policy language, but its operationalisation remains uncertain. The Excelsior survey by Unioncamere and the Ministry of Labour (2024) records that Italian firms planned some 1.89 million hirings with green content in 2024, that is 34.3% of all planned entries, with the highest incidence among skilled craft and manual workers (76.6%) and plant operators (64.1%), and 52.3% in industry. Indeed the figure that deserves most attention is a negative one: in absolute terms planned green hirings fell by 1.4% on 2023 in a year of employment

growth, which suggests that demand for green skills may be stabilising rather than expanding. This matters because Italy's productive structure, with a larger manufacturing and export-oriented base than Spain's, can potentially generate demand for technical and relatively stable jobs connected to green industrial transformation. However, available monitoring does not yet show clearly whether GOL training is being redirected towards green and digital employment or whether existing training provision is being relabelled through a new vocabulary. The reform therefore remains more convincing as a supply-side skills strategy than as a fully developed Just Transition policy.

This connects directly with the report's broader argument: Social Investment becomes limited if it focuses mainly on individual skills while neglecting wages, working conditions, sectoral specialisation, firm strategies and other demand-side factors.

The most distinctive feature of the Italian case is that ALMP reform took place alongside a major retrenchment and re-categorisation of minimum-income protection. The RdC, introduced in 2019 under the Conte I government, was historically significant because it was the first Italian minimum-income scheme based on selective universalism. In principle, poor households could receive support if they met income, asset and residence requirements, regardless of household composition. However, the RdC had design problems: a ten-year residence requirement excluded many migrants, the equivalence scale penalised some large households, and the withdrawal of benefits as earnings increased could generate disincentives to accept work. Public employment services also struggled to activate many beneficiaries (Winters and Högner, 2024).

Despite these weaknesses, the RdC had measurable anti-poverty effects. At its peak it reached some 2.1 million households, and it reduced the incidence of poverty by around two percentage points, its intensity by three, and the Gini coefficient by half a point (Barbieri, in Winters and Högner, 2024). Its abolition in 2023 therefore represents more than a technical redesign. It marks a political shift away from selective universalism and towards a more categorical understanding of need and deservingness. The Meloni government replaced the RdC with two instruments: the ADI, which targets poor households containing specific categories of vulnerability, and the SFL, which offers a temporary allowance to working-age individuals considered employable if they participate in activation-related activities. This shift reintroduced a sharper distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, separating households with recognised vulnerable members from working-age individuals deemed employable (Winters and Högner, 2024; Jessoula and Natili, 2024).

The fiscal and distributive change was substantial. Annual expenditure fell from around EUR 8.8 billion under the RdC to approximately EUR 5.8 billion for ADI and EUR 1 billion for SFL. The potential beneficiary population contracted from around 2.1 million households to roughly 1.2 million. Estimates cited in the IAB Forum suggest that households in the first decile of disposable income lost around EUR 1,300 per year. Jessoula and Natili (2024) interpret this trajectory as the product of the hyper-politicisation of anti-poverty policy in Italy, where competitive credit-claiming between parties repeatedly overrides institutional learning.

The ADI became operational in January 2024. It is restricted to households with at least one member who is a minor, disabled, aged 60 or over, or in a certified condition of disadvantage recognised by socio-health services. Access is further conditioned on an ISEE below 10,140 euros, raised from the initial 9,360 by the 2025 Budget Law, on household income below 6,500 euros a year, and on five years of residence in Italy with the last two continuous, down from the ten years required under the RdC (INPS, 2024; Alleanza contro la Povertà, 2026). The benefit runs for eighteen months and is renewed for twelve; the one-month suspension originally required between cycles was abolished by the 2026 Budget Law, so that renewal is now continuous, with the first month of each renewal paid at half the previous amount (Law 199 of 30 December 2025; INPS, 2026). Access also depends on income, assets, residence requirements and the signing of digital and personalised activation agreements through the SIISL platform. Employable members within the household must report to public employment services and may lose access if they refuse a suitable job offer. The measure therefore combines anti-poverty support with strong activation and compliance requirements (INPS, 2024; Alleanza contro la Poverta, 2026).

The key problem is categorical eligibility. Poverty alone is not sufficient for access to ADI. Poor working-age single adults, couples without children, and long-term unemployed people without a recognised vulnerable household member may be excluded. Employability is thus partly inferred from household composition rather than assessed through individual work histories, skills, care responsibilities, health conditions, cumulative disadvantage or local labour-market opportunities. This design is difficult to reconcile with an enabling Social Investment perspective, because it narrows support before assessing whether people actually have realistic pathways to employment.

Two further features of the design belong to the scope of access, and both narrow it in ways that the categorical criterion alone does not capture. The first is the ISEE, which serves as the main gateway to both instruments: it records income with a two-year lag and therefore misses recent impoverishment, it counts property and financial assets irrespective of whether these can actually be liquidated, and it makes the household dependent in practice on the intermediation of CAF and patronati, since only a minority of applicants manage to file complete documentation at the first attempt (Alleanza contro la Povertà, 2026). The second is the position of foreign nationals, among whom the incidence of poverty reaches 35.6% against 7.4% among Italians (Istat, cited in Alleanza contro la Povertà, 2026): the five-year residence requirement, although shorter than the ten years of the RdC, remains long by European standards and continues to exclude a population that is disproportionately poor, as well as Italian citizens who have spent recent years abroad. Universality is restricted here, in other words, not only by who is deemed deserving but by how need is measured and by how long one must have been present in order to be counted at all.

The SFL is even more clearly an activation instrument rather than a minimum-income scheme. It targets individuals aged 18-59 who do not meet ADI requirements and provides a monthly allowance only while they participate in training, guidance or employment-related activities. The allowance, initially 350 euros a month and raised to 500 by the 2025 Budget Law, runs for a maximum of twelve months and may be extended by a further twelve if the person is still in training (Alleanza contro la Povertà, 2026). It also assumes that potential beneficiaries can navigate digital platforms and bureaucratic deadlines, meaning that digital conditionality can become an additional barrier for the most vulnerable (Alleanza contro la Poverta, 2026).

Early take-up patterns suggest that these risks are significant. ADI reaches many households, especially in the South and Islands, but SFL take-up has been much lower relative to the scale of working-age poverty and exclusion. SFL take-up has fallen well short of its own targets: against an initial objective of 322,000 people and estimates of a potential population of 436,000, 96,161 applications were accepted in the first year, roughly 30% of the target. Over the longer period 182,000 people received at least one payment between September 2023 and June 2025, and 72,469 were active recipients in June 2025, 61% of them women and 40% aged between fifty and fifty-nine (INPS, Osservatorio, 2024, 2025). The new system may therefore leave a protection gap for employable poor people who are in practice far from employment (Alleanza contro la Poverta, 2026).

The reform of minimum-income protection therefore changes the meaning of conditionality. Under GOL, conditionality can be interpreted as potentially enabling if it gives access to meaningful support. Under ADI and SFL, conditionality is more restrictive because it is tied to categorical deservingness, digital access, benefit loss and the assumption of employability. The coexistence of these two logics is what makes the Italian case particularly revealing. It shows that a country can adopt the language of Social Investment in ALMPs while simultaneously narrowing the social protection base required to make activation fair and effective.

6.2. Assessment of recent trends: scale, capacity and unequal outcomes

By mid-2024, GOL had achieved impressive formal scale. More than 2.6 million intakes had been registered, placing the programme broadly on track to reach its 2025 target (INAPP, 2024c). This represents a real administrative achievement in a system historically characterised by weak activation capacity. Yet the key question is what happens after intake, and the answer has changed as the programme matured. At the end of June 2024 only 51.7% of those taken in charge had started or completed an active measure or an extracurricular traineeship; by 31 December 2025 the same indicator had risen to 70.7%, with 3,127,646 individuals out of the 4,426,443 reached having begun or concluded at least one measure (INAPP, 2024a, 2026). The gap between administrative intake and real activation, which was the most visible weakness of the early phase, has therefore largely closed, and the programme ended the PNRR cycle on 30 June 2026 with 4,306,879 people taken in charge, 119.6% of its target (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2026). What has not closed is the depth of what is delivered. Of all the intakes recorded by December 2025, only 1,207,049, that is 24%, had been directed towards a training course, and 73.8% of the courses activated concerned digital competences (INAPP, 2026). The evaluative question therefore shifts from administrative delay to substance: a system that takes four and a half million people in charge and sends fewer than one in four into training is enabling in its architecture and thin in its content, which is precisely the configuration our framework leads us to expect when obligations expand faster than the services attached to them.

The distribution across pathways also raises questions. At 31 December 2025, 51.2% of intakes fell in the reintegration pathway, 23.8% in upskilling and 20.9% in reskilling, while only 3.8% entered the pathway combining work and inclusion for complex vulnerabilities and 0.3% the pathway of collective redeployment (INAPP, 2026). This pattern may partly reflect the composition of the participant population, but it also suggests that GOL risks serving most effectively those already closer to employment. From a Social Investment perspective, this is a classic Matthew effect: resources and support may accrue disproportionately to people and firms that are already in a better position to benefit.

Similar concerns apply to the FNC. Early evaluation evidence suggests that participating firms were often larger and more productive, while women represented a minority of the workers involved (INAPP, 2024b). Workers who completed FNC pathways showed high employment retention, but this does not fully answer the distributional question. Continuous training can reinforce the competitiveness of stronger firms and more secure workers while doing less for low-skilled workers, small firms, precarious employees or sectors with weak training cultures. This does not mean that the FNC is ineffective, but it suggests that skills policies need explicit equality and inclusion objectives if they are to avoid reinforcing existing advantages.

Territorial inequality is perhaps the strongest limit. New employment rates among GOL participants are much higher in many Centre-North regions than in Calabria or Sicily (INPS, 2024b; INAPP, 2024c). This does not simply reflect different administrative effort. It reflects local labour-market conditions, firm structures and the availability of decent jobs. In southern regions, activation operates in contexts where opportunities are fewer and often poorer in quality. The same formal obligation to participate in activation can therefore generate very different real opportunities depending on where a person lives. This is a form of structural conditionality: obligations are national, but opportunities are territorially unequal.

Gender inequality provides a second major test of the reform (INAPP 2024b). Women account for a majority of GOL participants, but they remain under-represented in stable and full-time employment. Among new hires in the first half of 2024, open-ended contracts accounted for 18.3% of male hirings and only 13.5% of female ones, a share lower than that of seasonal contracts, while 49.2% of

women's contracts were part-time against 27.3% of men's, and 64.5% of women on fixed-term contracts were also on part-time hours; in-work poverty affects women at 18.5% against 6.4% for men (INAPP, 2024b, cited in Imperatore and Mancini, 2025). Motherhood continues to be the decisive exit point, since 16% of women leave employment after the birth of a first child against 2.8% of men, women take 80% of parental leave, and paternity leave remains ten days (Imperatore and Mancini, 2025; European Commission, 2025a). These patterns show that activation cannot substitute for care policy, equal-pay policy, working-time regulation and changes in employer practices. Including women in training programmes is necessary but insufficient if the jobs available to them remain low paid, unstable or incompatible with care responsibilities (INAPP, 2024b; Imperatore and Mancini, 2025; Tasselli and Addabbo, 2026).

Young people and skills mismatch further illustrate the structural limits of activation. Italy's NEET rate remains high, the transition from education to employment is weak, and employers report shortages in technical and green occupations (INAPP, 2024d; EC Country Report 2025a). These problems require stronger vocational education, better links between education and firms, innovation-oriented industrial policy and higher demand for skilled labour.

The operational capacity of public employment services remains a transversal constraint. The European Commission Country Report (2025a) notes that GOL has introduced uniform standards for public employment services across the country. Yet the gap between formal standards and real capacity is still visible in the share of participants who have not yet begun an active measure. The model presupposes an integrated network of public employment services, private providers and training bodies. In several regions, especially in the South, this network is still incomplete. As Leonardi (2024) puts it (Leonardi, interviewed by Winters and Högner, 2024), measures such as guidance and vocational training may exist in principle, but in practice they often do not work as intended.

In comparative perspective, Italian ALMP expenditure remains structurally lower than in countries such as Germany, France and Spain, especially when considered in relation to the scale of labour-market need. The PNRR has produced a temporary expansion of investment and administrative effort, but much of the additional funding is time-limited. The risk after 2026 is that the system may regress if extraordinary European funding is not converted into a stable national capacity for guidance, training, evaluation and employment intermediation.

The question of what follows the PNRR can now be answered with documents rather than with conjecture. The GOL action formally closed on 30 June 2026 with its targets exceeded - 4,306,879 people taken in charge, that is 119% of the target, and 1,056,403 people trained against a target of 800,000 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 23 July 2026) - and the Minister of Labour has claimed that the effects of the reform are not reversible. Yet no national continuation has been legislated: the 2026 Budget Law (Law 199 of 30 December 2025) contains no provision for the refinancing of active labour market policies, and by July 2026 the regions were still awaiting a signal from the Ministry. What is structural is the reinforcement of the public employment services, financed from permanent national resources since 2021 for the recruitment of 11,600 staff; what is not structural is the programme itself. Continuity is instead being assembled regionally, through the ESF+ regional programmes for 2021-2027 as well as through regional budgets: Piedmont, in the reprogramming approved in December 2025, allocated 219 million euros to post-GOL measures for 2026-2028 with the explicit purpose of sustaining activation in the post-PNRR phase, while Lombardy and Campania have adopted their own continuation acts. In fact the risk is not that activation disappears after 2026, but that a national programme is succeeded by regional successors of unequal capacity, along precisely the territorial fault line that this report describes as structural conditionality.

6.3. ALMPs, Lifelong Learning and the Limits of Decoupling from Work-First Logics.

The Italian case shows a partial but incomplete decoupling from work-first activation. GOL includes elements that fit an enabling Social Investment approach: personalised assessment, differentiated pathways, upskilling and reskilling, links with continuous training, and a policy vocabulary oriented towards the green and digital transitions. It is not simply a punitive activation programme. It seeks to increase human capital and support occupational transitions.

However, this enabling potential is weakened by four constraints. First, implementation capacity remains uneven, as shown by the gap between intake and active measures. Second, territorial inequalities mean that services and labour-market opportunities differ sharply across regions. Third, Matthew effects appear likely, because those closer to employment and stronger firms may benefit most. Fourth, the reform remains strongly supply-side: it aims to improve employability without sufficiently changing job quality, wages, firm strategies or the sectoral composition of labour demand. Besides, the integration of green and digital skills is still insufficiently measurable. There is an emerging policy discourse around the twin transition, but not yet enough evidence that training content is being systematically redirected towards sustainable employment trajectories.

Although this section is framed around lifelong learning as well as activation, adult learning in Italy deserves separate consideration because it provides an important test of how far GOL's enabling architecture is supported by a broader learning infrastructure. On the widest AES measure, 35.7% of Italians aged 25–64 participated in formal or non-formal education and training during the previous twelve months in 2022, almost eleven percentage points below the EU-27 average of 46.6%. Participation was lower in both formal education (4.0% compared with 6.3% in the EU-27) and non-formal learning (34.1% compared with 44.0%) (Istat, 2024). Using the narrower indicator adopted for the EU adult-learning target, which excludes guided on-the-job training, participation was 29.0% in Italy compared with 39.5% in the EU and 34.1% in Spain. The Italian disadvantage vis-à-vis Spain therefore remains significant, although it is better understood as a broader participation gap than as a difference in formal education alone. The temporal picture is more nuanced. The four-week lifelong-learning indicator increased from 8.1% in 2018–2019 to 11.6% in 2023, before falling to 10.4% in 2024. Italy has therefore improved relative to the pre-pandemic period, but the most recent year shows a reversal (Istat, 2025). More important for the argument of this report are the pronounced inequalities beneath the aggregate figure. The 2025 Education and Training Monitor reports a participation rate of only 10.3% among low-skilled adults compared with 60.2% among the highly skilled, giving Italy, together with Malta, the widest participation gap in the EU (European Commission, 2025). Labour-market status produces an equally revealing divide. On the four-week LFS measure for 2023, participation among employed adults was 13.0%, close to the EU-27 average of 13.6%, whereas among unemployed adults it was only 6.9%, less than half the EU average of 14.1% (INAPP, 2025).

These figures qualify a interpretation of GOL as a transition towards enabling conditionality. They do not imply that GOL has failed to widen access: by the end of the PNRR phase in June 2026, more than 4.3 million people had been taken in charge and 1.06 million had received training, exceeding the programme's absolute training target of 800,000. Yet those trained represented only around one quarter of all participants. This is not necessarily evidence of programme failure, since training is neither necessary nor appropriate for every participant, but it does show that training has remained one pathway within a much larger activation architecture rather than becoming its dominant component. Moreover, INAPP's assessment of continuing training concludes that, as of 2024, Italy still lacked a cohesive, structured and coordinated training system capable of supporting workers and firms across the country (INAPP, 2025). Italy has expanded the institutional reach of activation without yet overcoming the segmentation of access to lifelong learning. Employed and highly educated adults remain much more strongly connected to learning opportunities, whereas

unemployed and low-skilled adults—the groups for whom reskilling could have the greatest enabling effect—participate much less. GOL partially challenges this pattern, but has not yet demonstrated that it can reverse it. From the perspective developed in this report, this is a particularly clear example of the distinction between formal access and effective universality: an activation system may become broader and more personalised while the substantive learning opportunities attached to it remain unevenly distributed.

The reform of minimum-income protection points in a more restrictive direction. ADI and SFL replace a broader selective-universalist scheme with categorical support and digitalised activation. This creates a sharper moral distinction between protected vulnerable households and employable poor individuals. The risk is that people who are formally considered employable but in practice face multiple barriers are left with weaker and more conditional support. This is especially problematic in regions with high poverty, weak services and limited labour demand.

Italy therefore illustrates the central claim of this report: activation can only be enabling when it is embedded in a broader architecture of income security, adult learning, care policy, labour-market regulation and demand-side job creation. Training and guidance matter, but they cannot compensate for weak employment services, gendered care constraints, territorial dualism or poor-quality jobs. Social Investment becomes too narrow when it treats unemployment and poverty primarily as problems of individual employability. For Italy, the overall configuration of activation is heterogeneous: enabling conditionality and work-first conditionality coexist within the same reform cycle. This coexistence is not accidental. It reflects the tension between Europeanly supported social investment reforms, domestic political competition over poverty and deservingness, and long-standing institutional weakness in public employment services and social services. This could be understood as contradictory layering. The PNRR and GOL have pushed Italy towards a more ambitious activation and skills agenda, but this agenda rests on fragile administrative and territorial foundations. ADI and SFL, by contrast, show how conditionality becomes restrictive when protection is narrowed and access depends on categorical vulnerability, digital compliance and assumptions about employability.

This country-specific case yields several analytical insights. First, it demonstrates that European-level frameworks can act as powerful catalysts for the expansion and reframing of ALMPs even in welfare regimes with historically weak activation capacity. Second, it shows that formal universality is not the same as effective universality. A national programme such as GOL may be formally available across the country, but its outcomes are mediated by territorial labour markets and uneven service capacity. Third, it highlights the need to evaluate activation not only through job entry, but also through job quality, occupational mobility, gender equality and wellbeing. Fourth, it reveals the importance of integrating activation policy with care policy, tax policy and demand-side industrial and labour-market policies.

The broader lesson is that sustainable welfare needs much more than activation, and that for supporting activation, Italy needs stronger public employment services, stable funding beyond the PNRR cycle, better integration between social and employment services, and a more explicit demand-side strategy for good jobs. It also needs care infrastructures and tax-benefit reforms that make women's employment possible, and territorial policies that address the productive weakness of the South. Without these complementarities, Social Investment may expand participation in programmes while leaving class, gender, territorial and job-quality inequalities largely intact.

In sum, Italy is a particularly valuable showcase for the report's analytical framework because it makes visible the unstable coexistence of enabling and punitive logics within the same reform cycle. The country has moved towards more personalised activation and a stronger skills agenda, but it has also re-categorised poverty and tightened access to income protection. The Italian experience confirms that the decisive issue is not the presence or absence of conditionality, but the institutional and economic conditions under which conditionality operates. Where obligations are attached to income security, meaningful training, capable services and realistic labour-market opportunities, they can support enabling transitions. Where services are weak, opportunities scarce and protection

narrowed, conditionality becomes work-first by default. This is a key lesson of the Italian case for understanding the limits of Social Investment under structural constraint..

7. Comparing Spain and Italy: activation, conditionality and the limits of social investment under structural constraint.

The comparison between Spain and Italy is analytically useful because the two countries share several features normally associated with the Southern European welfare model: segmented labour markets, uneven activation capacity, relatively weak adult learning systems, territorial variation in public employment services and a long-standing reliance on compensatory or occupational social protection. In both cases, the Recovery and Resilience Facility has acted as an external catalyst for reform, giving greater centrality to active labour market policies, upskilling, reskilling and the modernisation of employment services. Yet the two trajectories also show that European funding and social-investment vocabulary do not automatically generate equivalent policy change. Reform is filtered through national legacies, policy choices, and the structure of labour demand.

A first commonality is that both countries have used the post-pandemic recovery agenda to redefine activation as more than pressure to accept work. In Spain, recovery funds have supported training, personalised employment pathways, competency recognition and the digitalisation of employment services. The 2023 Employment Act, Royal Decree-Law 2/2024 and subsequent activation strategies seek to move beyond a model dominated by hiring subsidies and uneven job-search requirements. In Italy, the PNRR has produced an even more visible change of scale through the Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori (GOL), complemented by the Fondo Nuove Competenze and the Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni. Across both cases, activation is increasingly framed around guidance, profiling, training and participation in learning pathways, rather than simply rapid labour-market entry.

This points to a partial shift from work-first conditionality towards what this report conceptualises as enabling conditionality. Conditionality has not disappeared: unemployed persons and benefit recipients are still expected to engage with public employment services, accept personalised plans and participate in designated activities. The novelty is that the content of these obligations is more clearly linked to human-capital development. Both cases therefore suggest that conditionality is being reconfigured rather than simply intensified or dismantled.

The main divergence lies in the relationship between activation and income protection. Spain appears to be moving, unevenly but recognisably, towards a more integrated reform narrative in which unemployment protection, activation and adult learning are adjusted in the same general direction. The reforms remain incomplete and contested, but they do not involve a categorical retreat from minimum-income protection comparable to the Italian case. Italy presents a more contradictory pattern. GOL embodies a social-investment logic based on personalised support and skills formation, but the abolition of the Reddito di Cittadinanza and its replacement by the Assegno di Inclusione (ADI) and the Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro (SFL) have reintroduced a sharper distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. The Italian trajectory therefore combines enabling activation in the ALMP field with a more categorical and sanction-oriented turn in minimum-income protection.

This divergence is important because enabling conditionality cannot be assessed by looking at ALMP design alone. It must also be evaluated in relation to income security and access conditions. In Spain, recent reforms have increased some benefit amounts, expanded subsidy access for specific groups and attempted to improve compatibility between benefits and employment through the employment support supplement. The Spanish model still contains sanctions, discretion and unequal implementation, but its recent direction is not one of categorical retrenchment. In Italy, by contrast, ADI restricts minimum-income protection to poor households containing specific categories of vulnerability, while SFL offers a time-limited activation allowance to individuals classified as employable. Employability is therefore partly inferred from household composition rather than from a detailed assessment of individual barriers, local labour demand or cumulative disadvantage. Italy shows how activation can become more personalised in one institutional arena while social assistance becomes more restrictive in another.

A second shared feature is the persistence of implementation constraints. Both countries have formally strengthened profiling, guidance and personalised support, but public employment services still face high caseloads, fragmented governance and limited capacity to connect jobseekers, training providers and employers. In Spain, this is reflected in weak public employment service involvement in placements, insufficient evaluation and the limited operationalisation of otherwise ambitious reforms. In Italy the constraint has changed shape over the reform cycle rather than disappearing: formal intake under GOL advanced rapidly while substantive activation lagged behind, with only 51.7% of those taken in charge having started or completed a measure by June 2024, but by 31 December 2025 that share had risen to 70.7%, even if only 24% of intakes had been directed towards a training course (INAPP, 2024a, 2026). The comparison shows, in the first place, that rights, obligations and programme labels can expand faster than the administrative infrastructure needed to make them meaningful. At the same time it shows that once that infrastructure begins to catch up, the binding constraint shifts to the content of what is delivered - training that is short, thinly spread and rarely evaluated for what it leads to - which is where both systems remain weak. Territorial inequality is the clearest expression of this capacity problem. Spain and Italy both have decentralised or regionally differentiated systems in which implementation depends heavily on subnational administrative capacity and local labour-market conditions. In Spain, coordination between SEPE and the autonomous communities remains a recurrent weakness, and the promise of personalised activation is constrained by uneven employment services. In Italy, the North-South divide is sharper. GOL is formally national and broad in scope, but outcomes vary strongly across regions because southern areas combine weaker public employment services with weaker demand for stable, good-quality jobs. This produces a form of structural conditionality: the same activation obligation generates very different real opportunities depending on where a person lives.

The gender dimension further exposes the limits of activation-centred reform. In both countries, women are important targets and participants in training and activation measures, but programme access does not automatically translate into stable, full-time and well-paid employment. Spain has introduced initiatives linking digital skills, rural women and territorial or green objectives, while Italian GOL data show that women constitute a majority of participants. However, the main barriers to women's employment lie beyond the activation system narrowly understood: care responsibilities, tax and benefit disincentives, involuntary part-time work, sectoral segregation, low wages and organisational cultures. Italy makes this particularly clear because female employment remains comparatively low even as women are strongly represented in activation programmes. The comparative lesson is that activation can improve access to services without necessarily transforming the social and economic conditions that structure gender inequality.

The incorporation of green and digital transition objectives is also partial. Spain appears somewhat more advanced in connecting specific training and employment programmes to renewable energy, environmental maintenance, building renovation, digital services and rural digital inclusion. Even there, however, green skills remain less central politically than employment levels and working conditions, and evaluation is still limited. Italy has incorporated the vocabulary of the twin transition

through GOL, the Fondo Nuove Competenze and the Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni, but available monitoring does not yet show clearly whether training content is being substantively redirected towards green and digital jobs or whether traditional provision is being relabelled. In both cases, the Just Transition agenda is present as a policy frame, but its translation into measurable training pathways and better employment outcomes remain uncertain.

The most important common limitation is the supply-side bias of reform. Spain and Italy concentrate on employability, skills, guidance and activation. These policies can matter, especially for people who need orientation, initial training, reskilling or recognition of prior learning. However, they cannot by themselves transform the structure of labour demand. Spain shows that training reforms have limited effects if a large share of available jobs remains precarious, low paid or weakly connected to productivity growth. Italy shows the same problem through the weakness of southern labour demand and the limited capacity of ALMPs to compensate for small-firm structures, low innovation and territorial poverty. In both countries, social investment risks becoming an individualising response to problems partly produced by the productive model itself.

Wage-setting institutions mark a further and largely unexamined divergence between the two cases. As noted in section 5.3, no human-capital policy of the past decade in Spain may have improved the disposable income of low-paid workers to a degree comparable with the successive increases of the statutory minimum wage. Italy has no statutory minimum wage, and the attempt to introduce one has failed in a way that is analytically revealing. The bill tabled jointly by all opposition parties in July 2023, which proposed a floor of nine euros an hour, was turned by a majority amendment into an enabling bill and stripped of its object; the text finally approved as Law 144 of 26 September 2025 contains no reference to a minimum wage and anchors pay instead to the economic minima of the most widely applied national collective agreements for each category. At the same time the European constraint has weakened, since in November 2025 the Court of Justice annulled Article 5(2) of Directive 2022/2041 together with the non-regression clause of Article 5(3), so that member states without a statutory minimum acquire no new obligations (Case C-19/23). What has moved in the Italian case is the judicial rather than the legislative route, as three rulings of the Court of Cassation of 2 October 2023 established that collectively agreed minima may be set aside where they fall below the threshold of Article 36 of the Constitution. The comparison is therefore not between a strong and a weak wage floor, but between a country that has used the minimum wage as a main instrument against in-work poverty and a country in which that instrument is unavailable and its function is performed, unevenly, by collective bargaining and by the courts.

From this demand-side perspective, Italy has a more favourable productive structure for the generation of good jobs insofar as it retains a larger manufacturing and export-oriented industrial base. This creates stronger demand for technical, skilled and relatively stable occupations than Spain's more tourism- and low-productivity service-intensive model. Yet this advantage is uneven and constrained by regional dualism, low employment rates and wage stagnation. Spain, by contrast, has shown a stronger recent capacity to create employment, even if much of this expansion remains exposed to risks of low pay, seasonality and weaker job quality. The contrast is therefore between Italy's stronger structural potential for good jobs and Spain's stronger recent employment dynamism.

Overall, the comparison supports a cautious interpretation of recent reforms. Spain and Italy both show movement away from a narrow work-first model towards more enabling activation, but this movement is incomplete, uneven and reversible. Spain represents a partial reorientation: conditionality is increasingly linked to guidance, learning and employability, while implementation capacity, evaluation and job-quality outcomes remain weak. Italy represents contradictory layering: GOL introduces a more enabling and personalised ALMP architecture, but ADI and SFL narrow minimum-income protection and strengthen categorical distinctions among the poor. In both countries, the transformative potential of social-investment-oriented ALMPs depends on complementarities that remain underdeveloped: adequate income protection, strong public employment services, adult learning systems with real reskilling capacity, care policies that enable

women's employment, and demand-side policies capable of generating better and ecologically sustainable jobs.

The key analytical puzzle is therefore not whether conditionality exists, but what it requires, what it enables and under what institutional conditions it is implemented. Conditionality can be enabling when obligations are attached to meaningful training, counselling, income security and realistic labour-market opportunities. It becomes punitive or work-first by default when services are weak, training is shallow, jobs are poor or access to income protection is narrowed. Spain and Italy confirm that sustainable welfare cannot be built through activation alone. It requires aligning ALMPs, lifelong learning, social protection, care infrastructures and labour-market regulation around better employment trajectories. Without these complementarities, social investment may expand participation in programmes while leaving deeper inequalities of class, gender, territory and job quality largely intact.

Table 7.1. Summary comparison of the Spanish and Italian cases

	SPAIN	ITALY	COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION
A. Starting conditions			
Welfare and activation legacy	Weak activation capacity, strong labour-market segmentation, historically limited adult learning, and a protection system built on income compensation rather than on services.	Occupational-conservative model centred on stable dependent employment, with weak protection for outsiders and national minimum-income protection introduced only in 2017-2019.	*Both are Southern European cases with weak activation legacies, but the Italian occupational and categorical inheritance is the more pronounced.*
Role of the RRF	€4.61 bn for ALMPs, of which €2.91 bn for upskilling and reskilling, supporting training, personalised itineraries, digitalisation and green-transition objectives.	A larger change of scale: some €6.7 bn under Mission 5 Component 1, of which €4.4 bn for GOL, raised by a further €1 bn in December 2023, alongside roughly €1.1 bn for the employment centres.	*EU funding acts as a catalyst in both cases, but its effects are mediated by national capacity; in Italy the programme money ends with the PNRR while the staffing of the employment centres does not.*
B. Four analytical dimensions			
1. Access	Formally broad. Benefit coverage rose to 72.4 per cent in 2024 and subsidy access was extended to new groups, yet training reaches fewer than ten per cent of the intended target population, and migrants and workers over 55 remain consistently underrepresented.	Broad in activation, narrowed in income protection. GOL is open to all registered unemployed, but ADI is restricted to households containing a minor, a disabled member, a person aged 60 or over or a certified condition of disadvantage; the ISEE records income with a two-year lag, and the five-year residence requirement continues to exclude foreign nationals, among whom poverty incidence is 35.6 against 7.4 per cent.	*Access is uneven in both, but only in Italy is entitlement to income support itself made categorical: this is the clearest divergence in the universality dimension.*

	SPAIN	ITALY	COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION
2. Adequacy	Improving, though still modest. Raises in level and duration of unemployment assistance, but inflation erodes purchasing power. The new *Complemento de Apoyo al Empleo* (Employment Support Allowance) also permits compatibility between the subsidy and employment for up to 180 days. Adequacy has therefore increased during the first year of unemployment, although support declines with duration.	More dualized. The replacement of RdC shifted working-age people classified as employable towards SFL, initially set at €350 per month for a maximum of 12 months. From 2025 it increased to €500 and may continue for up to a further 12 months when the recipient is still undertaking training. ADI provides more substantial and durable protection to categorically vulnerable households: its income thresholds were increased in 2025 and it is paid for 18 months, renewable in 12-month periods.	*The trajectories diverge. Spain has modestly strengthened the adequacy and continuity of broadly based unemployment assistance while maintaining relatively long potential durations. Italy partially improved benefit levels and duration after 2025, but the RdC–ADI/SFL reform created a more sharply stratified system: relatively durable protection for households classified as vulnerable and a lower, shorter and more tightly activation-linked allowance for those classified as employable. Adequacy is therefore more strongly structured by categorical deservingness in Italy.*
3. Content intensity, and flexibility of conditionality	The 2023 Employment Act requires benefit recipients to sign an activity agreement and to take part in employability measures, with suspension or withdrawal for non-compliance, while the activities that discharge the obligation increasingly include training, profiling and counselling. Personalised itineraries combine guidance, training and job search, and the targeted programmes remove practical barriers through childcare, equipment, translation and transport as well as adapting the curriculum to different levels of competence. Profiling, however, remains optional, so flexibility depends on the discretion of each employment service.	Dual. GOL makes conditionality operative for the first time and attaches it to guidance and training, while ADI and SFL attach protection to a digital activation pact on the SIISL platform, to reporting at the employment centres within 120 days and to acceptance of a suitable job offer. GOL formally differentiates five pathways according to distance from the labour market, but 51.2 per cent of intakes fall in the reintegration pathway and only 3.8 per cent in the pathway for complex vulnerability. In ADI and SFL the pathway is digital by default, so that limited digital literacy or the lack of SPID credentials becomes an obstacle rather than a route	*Conditionality is reconfigured rather than abolished in both, but in Italy the same reform cycle moves it in two directions at once, towards training in one arena and towards compliance in the other.* *Differentiation exists on paper in both systems; what differs is whether it is accompanied by the practical support that makes an alternative pathway usable.*

	SPAIN	ITALY	COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION
4. Decoupling from work-first logics	Partial. Training is generally short, often below fifty hours, with vocational certificates of around four hundred and only a minority reaching six to eight hundred; evaluation still turns on job entry and duration rather than on job quality or occupational progression.	Weaker. Only 24 per cent of GOL intakes had been directed to training by December 2025, adult participation in formal education stands at 4.0 per cent against 6.3 in the EU-27, and the unemployed take part in training at 6.9 per cent against a European average of 14.1.	*Neither system recognises outcomes beyond employment; Italy is further from decoupling because its adult-learning infrastructure is weaker to begin with.*
C. Intervening realities between design and outcomes			
Implementation capacity	High caseloads per employment-service professional, weak involvement of the public service in placements, fragmented governance between SEPE and the autonomous communities, and little systematic evaluation.	Intake advanced rapidly and the activation gap has largely closed — 70.7 per cent of those taken in charge had started or completed a measure by December 2025, against 51.7 per cent in mid-2024 — but the depth of what is delivered remains the binding constraint.	*In both cases programme labels expanded faster than the administrative infrastructure; the Italian problem has shifted from delay to thinness.*
Territorial inequality	Implementation differs across the autonomous communities, which govern ALMPs and their coordination with the state employment service.	The North-South divide conditions services, labour demand and poverty risk together: new employment rates among GOL participants ranged from around 28 per cent in Calabria and Sicily to over 47 per cent in Bolzano, and the successor arrangements after the PNRR are themselves regional.	*Territorial inequality turns formally identical obligations into unequal real opportunities, a structural conditionality that neither system corrects.*
Gender	Programmes such as digital training for women in agricultural contexts target women explicitly, but job quality, care responsibilities and precariousness remain the binding constraints.	Women are 55.5 per cent of GOL participants and remain structurally underrepresented in stable, full-time and well-paid work: open-ended contracts account for 13.5 per cent of female new hires against 18.3 of male ones, 49.2 per cent of women's contracts are part-time against 27.3, and in-work poverty affects women at 18.5 against 6.4 per cent.	*Access to programmes does not amount to substantive equality unless care infrastructure, taxation, wages and job quality are addressed at the same time.*

	SPAIN	ITALY	COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION
Demand side and job quality	A tourism- and service-intensive model with weak productivity growth limits the supply of better jobs, and around half of employment is estimated to be precarious or low quality; the statutory minimum wage, rather than any human-capital policy, may have been the main instrument against low pay.	A larger manufacturing and export base could in principle generate demand for technical and stable occupations, but regional dualism, low employment rates and wage stagnation constrain it. There is no statutory minimum wage: Law 144/2025 anchors pay to the most widely applied collective agreements instead.	*Neither reform cycle addresses the structure of labour demand, and the two countries diverge sharply in the instrument available to raise the wage floor.*
Green and digital transition	Programme-level links to green jobs, digital skills, rural digital inclusion and environmental sectors are visible, with some programmes guiding up to 35 per cent of participants through individualised green-skill pathways, although evaluation remains limited.	Twin-transition language runs through GOL, the Fondo Nuove Competenze and the Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni, and firms planned 1.89 million hirings with green content in 2024, that is 34.3 per cent of the total; monitoring does not yet show whether training content has changed accordingly.	*The Just Transition agenda is present as a policy frame in both cases and weakly evidenced in both.*
Political and institutional dynamics	Lower polarisation on social and labour-market reform, which has advanced through gradual incrementalism, while political conflict concentrates on territorial, historical-memory and migration issues.	High polarisation on anti-poverty policy, party-system instability and a demonstrated reversibility of reform, as the abolition of the Reddito di Cittadinanza shows.	*Reform durability, and not only reform design, distinguishes the two trajectories.*
Main analytical point			
	There are practices of enabling conditionality, but it remains constrained by weak evaluation, employment-service capacity and the quality of the jobs available.	Social investment is incomplete and internally contradicted by categorical retrenchment in minimum-income protection, and its programme base ends with the PNRR.	*Activation can support sustainable welfare only in combination with income security, care policy, adult learning and demand-side measures on job quality.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Spanish and Italian country sections prepared for D3.2.

8. Conclusions

This deliverable has examined how Sustainable Welfare goals reshape the relationship between universality and conditionality in contemporary welfare states, with particular attention to active labour market policies and lifelong learning. Rather than treating sustainability as an additional objective to be appended to existing policy frameworks, the report has argued that ecological constraints, persistent inequalities and the requirements of long-term human wellbeing challenge the work-first and productivist assumptions that continue to structure much social policy. The central issue is therefore not simply how to increase labour-market participation, but how welfare institutions can support secure, fulfilling and ecologically sustainable life trajectories.

Social Investment has played an important role in European welfare-state reform over the past two decades. By emphasising human-capital development, activation and the management of life-course transitions, it has helped legitimise the expansion of childcare, active labour market policies and lifelong learning. Yet its dominant evaluative criteria - employment growth, productivity and fiscal returns - have also encouraged a narrow understanding of welfare as an instrument of economic participation. This orientation is increasingly misaligned with three structural realities highlighted throughout the report: the persistence of labour-market segmentation and low-quality employment; the centrality of care and social reproduction; and the ecological limits of growth-dependent welfare systems. Sustainable Welfare and capabilities approaches broaden the normative horizon of Social Investment by asking not only whether individuals enter employment, but whether policies expand their effective opportunities to secure adequate income, undertake meaningful learning, exercise autonomy, provide and receive care, participate in society and contribute to an ecologically sustainable transition.

The universality-conditionality debate provides a particularly useful lens through which to analyse this reorientation. The report has moved beyond treating universalism and conditionality as mutually exclusive principles. Universality cannot be reduced to identical provision or formal entitlement; it must also be assessed in terms of effective access across different social, territorial and life-course circumstances. Conditionality, in turn, is not inherently enabling or punitive. Its consequences depend on what is required of recipients, the intensity of those requirements, the quality of the support attached to them and the availability of realistic pathways through which obligations can be fulfilled. Work-first conditionality prioritises rapid labour-market entry, often irrespective of job quality, care responsibilities or long-term prospects. Enabling conditionality instead links participation requirements to meaningful training, personalised guidance, income security and capability development. It may therefore retain obligations while altering their content and purpose.

Building on this distinction, the report proposes an analytical framework centred on four dimensions: access; adequacy; the content, intensity and flexibility of participation pathways; and the degree of decoupling from immediate work-first objectives. Together, these dimensions make it possible to examine whether reforms broaden access, attach obligations to substantive support, accommodate diverse circumstances and recognise outcomes beyond rapid job entry, including occupational progression, autonomy, social participation and wellbeing. The framework is designed to travel across countries and policy fields. Its primary focus is policy design, although the Spanish and Italian cases also demonstrate why design must be considered alongside implementation capacity, territorial conditions and the quality of available employment.

Spain's recent reforms under the Recovery and Resilience Facility represent a significant attempt to reorient activation and lifelong learning towards training, personalised guidance and skills development connected to the green and digital transitions. Conditionality has not disappeared, but its content has increasingly shifted towards participation in learning, counselling and capability-building activities. Personalised itineraries, expanded attention to vulnerable groups and targeted programmes such as digital training for women in agricultural contexts and training in alternation with

employment for unemployed young people illustrate this movement towards more enabling activation. At the same time, the Spanish case reveals important limits: incomplete coverage, short or fragmented training pathways, high caseloads in public employment services, uneven implementation across autonomous communities and weak evaluation of job quality and long-term occupational progression. These constraints are compounded by a productive structure that continues to generate a substantial proportion of low-paid, precarious and low-productivity employment. Training-oriented ALMPs may therefore improve employability without necessarily enabling access to better jobs.

The Italian case reveals a more contradictory reform trajectory. The PNRR, GOL, the Fondo Nuove Competenze and the Piano Nuove Competenze-Transizioni have produced an unprecedented expansion of activation and skills policy and introduced a stronger vocabulary of personalisation, upskilling and reskilling. GOL can be understood as a move towards enabling conditionality because it differentiates pathways according to participants' distance from employment and links obligations to guidance and training. However, its enabling potential is limited by uneven public employment-service capacity, by territorial disparities and by the likelihood of Matthew effects favouring individuals and firms already better positioned to benefit. The administrative gap between intake and activation, which dominated the early assessments of the programme, had largely closed by the end of 2025, while fewer than one intake in four had been directed towards a training course.

At the same time, Italy's reform of minimum-income protection has moved in a more restrictive direction. The replacement of the Reddito di Cittadinanza by the Assegno di Inclusione and the Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro narrowed access and reintroduced a sharper categorical distinction between households recognised as vulnerable and working-age individuals classified as employable. This produces what the report identifies as contradictory layering: a more personalised and investment-oriented activation architecture coexists with a more restrictive, digitalised and sanction-oriented system of income support. The Italian case therefore demonstrates that enabling activation cannot be assessed in isolation from the income-security architecture within which it operates. Obligations attached to training may be enabling when accompanied by adequate protection and meaningful services, but become punitive when support is narrowed, services are weak or employment opportunities are scarce.

The comparison between Spain and Italy reinforces three broader conclusions. First, European funding and policy coordination can catalyse significant reforms even in welfare systems with historically weak activation and adult-learning capacity. However, European resources do not erase national institutional legacies, administrative weaknesses or territorial inequalities. Second, conditionality can be reconfigured without being abolished, but its real character depends on the combination of obligations, support and opportunity structures. Third, Social Investment remains limited when it concentrates on the supply side of employability while neglecting labour demand, wages, working conditions, care infrastructures and productive transformation.

Spain shows a more integrated, although incomplete, movement towards enabling activation and incremental policy consolidation. Italy shows a more internally divided trajectory in which enabling ALMP reform coexists with categorical retrenchment in minimum-income protection. Yet both cases confirm that activation and skills policy alone cannot overcome low-quality employment, gendered care constraints, fragmented governance or territorial disparities. Sustainable Welfare therefore requires stronger complementarities between income protection, public employment services, lifelong learning, care policy, labour-market regulation and demand-side strategies capable of creating better and environmentally sustainable jobs.

The decisive question is consequently not whether conditionality exists, but what it requires, what it enables and under what institutional and economic conditions it operates. Where participation requirements are attached to adequate income security, meaningful training, personalised support and realistic opportunities, conditionality can support capability-enhancing transitions. Where services are weak, training is shallow, jobs are poor and access to protection is restricted, it becomes work-first by default. Reorienting Social Investment towards Sustainable Welfare thus requires more

than adding green skills or personalised activation to existing programmes. It requires a broader transformation of the institutional conditions through which people gain access to income, learning, care, autonomy and decent work..

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List of acronyms

ADI	Assegno di Inclusione
AES	Adult Education Survey
ALMP / ALMPs	Active Labour Market Policy / Active Labour Market Policies
ANPAL	Agenzia Nazionale per le Politiche Attive del Lavoro
BDE	Banco de España
CAE	Complemento de Apoyo al Empleo
CAF	Centro di Assistenza Fiscale / Centri di Assistenza Fiscale
CES	Consejo Económico y Social de España
CGIL	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro
CPI	Centri per l'Impiego
CSRs	Country-Specific Recommendations
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECOFIN	Economic and Financial Affairs Council
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
EU	European Union
EU-27	European Union, 27 Member States
EUROSHIP	Closing Gaps in Social Citizenship: New Tools to Foster Social Resilience in Europe
FNC	Fondo Nuove Competenze
FUNDAE	Fundación Estatal para la Formación en el Empleo
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOL	Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori
IAB	Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (Institute for Employment Research)
ILO	International Labour Organization

INAPP	Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche
INAPP–MLPS	Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche – Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali
INPS	Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale
IPREM	Indicador Público de Renta de Efectos Múltiples
ISEE	Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LLL	Lifelong Learning
LM	Labour Market
LMP	Labour Market Policy
MICIU	Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades
MIS	Minimum Income Support
MITES–SEPE	Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social – Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal
NEET / NEETs	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAFED	Plan Anual para el Fomento del Empleo Digno
PES	Public Employment Service / Public Employment Services
PNCT	Piano Nuove Competenze – Transizioni
PNRR	Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza
PROFEA	Programa de Fomento del Empleo Agrario
RdC	Reddito di Cittadinanza
REACT-EU	Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe
ReI	Reddito di Inclusione
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SEPE	Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal
SFL	Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro

SI	Social Investment
SIISL	Sistema Informativo per l'Inclusione Sociale e Lavorativa
SW	Sustainable Welfare
SWINS	Sustainable Welfare through Investment in Social Services
UBI	Universal Basic Income
UIL	Unione Italiana del Lavoro
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WLB	Work–Life Balance

SWINS Sustainable Well-being through INvestment in Social Services

SWINS
Sustainable Well-Being through Investments in Social Services

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