



The Social and Solidarity Economy: From the Margins to the Mainstream

Case study

Social Impact Evaluation of organisations working to prevent school dropout: Cometa T.E.A.C.H case

Debora Caloni
Politecnico di Milano

Gabriele Guzzetti
Politecnico di Milano



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*Debora Caloni, Gabriele Guzzetti
Politecnico di Milano*

The ELET and NEET Phenomenon

Educational poverty is one of the main issues that affect the current and future quality of life and is a condition that deprives young people of the right to learn and enjoy cultural and educational activities. The definition of the concept of early school leaving has never been univocal since it is a phenomenon closely linked to the conception of schooling that varies in space and time (Sempio Liverta et al, 1999). However, on the issue of early school leavers, the indicator used for the analysis of the phenomenon in Europe is that of ELET (Early Leaving from Education and Training), defined as the share of young people from 18 to 24 years old in possession only of a middle school certificate and not engaged in the national education system and the regional and vocational training system.

Strictly related to the ELET, is the phenomenon of NEET. The acronym NEET includes “those young people who are ‘not in employment, education or training’, who – regardless of their educational level – are disengaged from both work and education” (Eurofound, 2016). Due to this disengagement, NEETs do not accumulate human capital through formal channels thus being at higher risk of future poor employment outcomes and social exclusion (Eurofound, 2016).

In Italy, in 2020, NEET are more than 2 million (ISTAT). The data of 2020 is also linked to the global pandemic. However, the share of young people aged 15-29 years within the NEET condition in Italy has been one of the highest among Member States also before the Covid-19 crisis: in 2018, Eurostat data showed an Italian NEETs rate of 23.4% compared to the European average of 12.9%. NEET phenomenon’s incidence increased the most in the country during the 2008 recession but, in the years after the crisis, the descent was slower. The variability is very high even within the Italian territory. It should be noted, however, that the rate of NEETs in Northern Italy before the economic recession was below the European average, while it rose after it. For example, regarding the NEETs population aged 15-29, Lombardy rose from 10.9% in 2007 to over 18% in the peak years of the recession, then falling to 15.1% in 2018 (still 4 percentage points above the initial figure). Factors explaining the accentuation of the phenomenon in Italy, compared to other countries, are essentially three. Firstly, many young people, after leaving the educational system, find themselves lacking adequate skills and work experience required by companies. Secondly, many others, despite having high training and potentialities, do not find positions up to their abilities and expectations. Finally, inefficiency of the useful tools to guide and support young people in their job search also weighs heavily, in particular the matching between supply and demand.

In this context, Cometa implemented the “T.E.A.C.H.” project to offer a solution to tackle this social issue.

Cometa T.E.A.C.H. case

Located in Como, Cometa is an organization that was founded in 2000 as a network of foster families, and has now developed into a broad organisation offering support and a wide range of social, health and education services to children, their natural families and foster families. Moreover, for many years Cometa has been involved in preventing the ELET and NEET phenomenon. One of the main projects carried out by Cometa involving several schools and institutions in Como Area is the T.E.A.C.H. project. The project aimed at preventing early school leaving by implementing educational support and developing a specific educational and training path for lower secondary school students affected by risk of school dropout. The project also implements activities aimed at supporting and developing parenting skills of students' families.

The project involved several subjects - three local schools, teachers, students' families and Cometa's educators among the others - that cooperated to promptly address the form of juvenile distress that leads to early school dropout.

The project also aims at summarizing a model of actions with the related indicators for monitoring and assessing the social impact, on the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project. For this reason, Politecnico di Milano has been involved to define and develop a social impact evaluation methodology.

Social impact evaluation methodology

The international literature (Nicholls et al., 2015) highlights the importance of developing and adopting methodologies that are able to enhance the social impact of organizations by integrating existing indicators developed by international standards and ad-hoc indicators developed for the specific project, economic indicators. Furthermore, several authors are converging on the definition of methodologies to combine both synthetic and process-based models, together with indicators provided by standard frameworks (Hornsby, 2012; Arena et al, 2015). Indeed, the synthetic indicators allow rapid comparisons between organizations impacts and are preferred by investors. Nevertheless, they have an inherent risk of loss of information (Beckerman & Pasek, 2001): the final value is in fact closely linked to the indicators chosen, but no longer visible (Ebrahim, et al., 2014). Process based methodologies instead, allow to determine impact indicators having a holistic view of the social value generated in the different phases and are therefore favoured by policy makers and social entrepreneurs.

Based on these considerations, the methodology developed for the T.E.A.C.H. project is a hybrid between the Theory of Change (Taplin and Clark, 2012), a longitudinal counterfactual analysis and synthetic monetary indicators. In particular, the theory of change, through the development of the social value chain, allows the mapping of the change process, identification of the effects and impacts for the various stakeholders, and the definition of suitable indicators for their assessment. The longitudinal counterfactual analysis allows us to determine the effect of an intervention on an individual as the difference between the result observed in the presence of the treatment and the result that would be observed, for the same individual, in its absence. Therefore, counterfactual analysis is based on the definition of a control sample formed by a group of untreated individuals who must present characteristics comparable to the persons participating in the project. Synthetic monetary indicators, in this case, correspond to the monetization of the impacts linked to the risk reduction of school dropout and NEET phenomenon.

Results of the application of the social impact evaluation methodology

The results obtained highlight the importance and success of the T.E.A.C.H. project, both in preventing early school leaving and in improving the well-being and sense of community of the families involved. Early school leaving is the expression of an increasingly widespread youth discomfort. Because of school dropout, young people do not acquire the specific skills required to successfully enter the labour market, with consequent problems such as social exclusion and youth unemployment resulting in high social costs. According to Eurofound, the unitary costs of a NEET in Italy is € 14,845 and includes subsidies, welfare expenses and forgone government revenues (Eurofound, 2014). Furthermore, belated interventions, during the first two years of upper secondary school, are not always sufficient and effective and it is therefore important to intervene as soon as possible, as early as the years of lower secondary school. The causes of early school leaving are multiple and complex and thus cannot be tackled with single specific measures, but they require a territorial strategic planning with coordinated and multiagency interventions. The results of the project show the effectiveness of the collaboration between public schools and other private organization (e.g. cooperatives or social enterprises) in tackling and preventing school dropout. Indeed, the joint activities carried out by Cometa with the lower secondary schools of Como contributed to reduce and contain the risk of dropout for 60% of the students participating the project, generating a potential savings for the community of over € 200,000. Additionally, it should be noted that the project reduced the risk of dropout 32% of students more than what would have happened in the absence of the intervention.

The results also show improvements in the short term for those factors that can contribute not only to the school dropout reduction, but also to the improvement of students' well-being and to their growth. For example, among the factors contributing to the reduction and containment of the risk of dropout that have been improved at the end of the project we can find: behavioural performances (72% of students and families who consider that minors have improved their behaviour at home in the analysed period); level of self-esteem (with a perceived increase in personal qualities and the level of usefulness for 40% of students, 8% more than the control sample); students' active participation and involvement in voluntary activities (36% of the participants involved in volunteering, 24% more than the control group); emotional intelligence (teachers affirm that 48% of the children that participated in the project improved the awareness of their emotions during the school year, 12% more than the children belonging to the control group).

Additionally, there have been positive effects in strengthening families' well-being and the sense of communities of students and families. In fact, the intervention contributed to the increase of family well-being for 60% of the families (20% more than the control sample) and to strengthen the sense of community for 54% of them (18% more than the control group).

Conclusion

The article showed a case of social impact evaluation of a third sector organisation that works against the early school-leaving phenomenon. In particular, the research aimed to assess the social impact generated by T.E.A.C.H. project through the development of a social impact measurement methodology and its application. The objective has been achieved thanks to the hybridization of different methodologies existing in scientific literature, and the definition of results and impact indicators coherent with the context peculiarity. It is important to underline the involvement of stakeholders through the different phases of the

evaluation process. Thanks to the application of a counterfactual analysis, it has been possible to increase the reliability of impact attribution to the project. Indeed, social impact and outcomes have been calculated taking into consideration what would have happened in the absence of the intervention.

Focusing on the social value generated by the T.E.A.C.H. project, the results obtained from the social impact evaluation process demonstrate the effectiveness of the collaboration between the public and private sector in the education field, strengthening the relationship and the collaboration between Cometa and the schools of Como involved in the project, laying the foundations for further future collaborations and partnerships.

The social impact evaluation process contributed also to spreading awareness about the so-called data culture and the importance of going beyond outputs, measuring and managing the effects and the impacts of the activities.

The collaboration with the Politecnico di Milano contributed to the capacity building of Cometa's staff, leaving them with an impact assessment methodology that could also be used and adapted to the other projects and activities.

Finally, the whole project contributed to the debate on possible actions to contrast and prevent school dropout and the NEET phenomenon, adding useful information for the political decision-maker.

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