



Edited by Luigi Ulgiati, UGL Deputy Secretary, member of the EESC

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THE EESC AND THE CHALLENGES OF ACCESSING HEALTHCARE

High inflation and the cost-of-living crisis have eroded the purchasing power of households in the European Union, increasing the cost of living by 10% and making it difficult to cover essential expenses, including healthcare. Eurostat 2023 data show that 3.8% of the EU population has unmet healthcare needs, with cost being the main reason for 2.4%, particularly in Countries where treatment must first be paid for by the patient and then reimbursed by social security. In the Opinion SOC/825 on inequalities in access to healthcare, adopted during the July Plenary Session, the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) highlights how economic difficulties translate into limited access to healthcare, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable sections of the population, including people with disabilities, children and the elderly, making it essential to introduce measures to reduce or compensate for healthcare and long-term care costs for low-income individuals and families. There is therefore a clear correlation between income and access to healthcare, with healthcare systems failing to adequately protect the most vulnerable groups and inflation further exacerbating the situation, leading to delays or foregoing treatment. For Councillor Ulgiati, «the interconnection between the fight against poverty and access to healthcare shows the need to implement integrated solutions that combine the two aspects, considering one a prerequisite for the other, in the sense that combating poverty is a necessary condition for ensuring equitable access to services, such as healthcare, including through the strengthening of social safety nets».



EU, MORE INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

“Investing in Education 2025” is the title of the Report published a few days ago by the European Commission, which monitors trends in public investment in education. The upward trend in education spending, which has not yet completely closed the gap with pre-pandemic levels, shows that education is once again a driver of competitiveness and economic resilience across the European Union, albeit with significant differences between Member States. The data examined dates back to 2023 and reveals that the 27 Countries of the European Union have collectively allocated €806 billion to the education sector. However, there remains marked variability between Member States, with some Countries managing to maintain or increase investment in education, while others, such as Italy, are still struggling to recover. In fact, in the Report’s graph, Italy is the Country with the lowest percentage of public spending dedicated to education (less than 8%), while Estonia is at the top of the scale with over 14%. The Report also highlights how the strategy of investing in education is a distinctive feature of national policies, with direct implications for the future economic competitiveness of individual Countries. The disparity in approaches to education spending reflects different political priorities and fiscal capacities. The disparity in approaches to education spending reflects different political priorities and varying fiscal capacities within the Union, not least because the primary responsibility for funding education lies with national Governments. However, European funding in this area plays a crucial role in developing an adaptable and highly skilled workforce, particularly in preparation for the green and digital transition. Approximately €148 billion has been allocated to education and skills from 2021 to 2027 through EU instruments such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund+, and a further €75 billion has been made available for investment under the Recovery and Resilience Facility for the period 2021-2026. In addition, further support for research in the field of education is available through “Horizon Europe”, the EU’s framework programme for research and innovation. Furthermore, as investment in training is a key element in addressing the future challenges facing the Continent, the European Commission has already outlined its strategy for the next post-2027 budget cycle, proposing increased funding for education and skills through national and regional partnership plans, a new European Competitiveness Fund and a strengthened Erasmus+ programme.