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Governing the Triple Transition: Global Inequalities, New Eco-Social Risks, and Welfare Transformations

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Abstract
The article analyses the ecological and digital transition as a non-linear process of change that produces a significant social impact. In particular, the Authors, starting from a top-down social engineering approach, problematize the teleological rhetoric of transition governance, showing how the expectations of a development taken for granted are actually overwhelmed by growing social tensions arising from ambiguities of status, lack of resources and a widespread perception of relative deprivation. In this context, the empirical analysis, which presents the reader with the first results of two research projects in progress (S.O.L.E.I.L. and RESCALE), shows that in order to overcome the scenario described it is necessary to create opportunities for the construction of social networks, as well as to go beyond the predominantly emergency welfare policies, in order to arrive at the co-construction of a "responsible welfare" capable of reducing inequalities and preventing new vulnerabilities that could be generated by the processes of the transitions in Progress. The social dimension does not represent a secondary effect or a subsequent stage of the green and digital transition, but one of its constitutive components. The empirical research recalled – from the S.O.L.E.I.L. Project to the experiments initiated with RESCALE – confirms the persistence of multiple forms of exclusion and the accumulation of vulnerability, particularly for migrant persons. From this perspective, the degree of success of the transformation processes characterising the current phase cannot be assessed solely in terms of economic growth, environmental protection and technological advancement, but must be measured in light of their effective capacity to mitigate existing social inequalities and to contain – as well as prevent – the production of new forms of exclusion.

Keywords*: capabilities; ecological and digital transition; responsible welfare; social vulnerability; triple transition; transition governance.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Ecological and Digital Transition Between Global Inequalities and the Horizon of the Triple Transition

Issues related to sustainability have now become firmly established on the political agenda of contemporary societies, becoming an indispensable point of reference both for the development of social and economic development strategies and for the redefinition of institutional priorities. In the orientations formulated by the main supranational institutions, sustainability is progressively assumed as a cross-cutting principle of public action and as a criterion through which to guide the transformation of production systems, social institutions and protection models. This transformation affects essential areas of collective well-being and social mobility – from healthcare to education, from training to access to technologies, from the labour market to welfare systems – which are being increasingly and profoundly redefined by the interaction between technological innovation, environmental crisis and changes in economic arrangements.

The ecological and digital transitions cannot be interpreted as merely technical and productive processes, nor as linear and socially neutral pathways. The interpretative hypothesis proposed here is that they constitute a field of transformation and conflict, socially and politically structured, in which the distribution of resources and opportunities, exposure to risks, occupational hierarchies, relations between territories and forms of social protection are redefined. The direction and outcomes of these processes depend, in fact, not only on the availability of technological innovations and economic investments, but also on power relations, institutional capacities, the possibilities for participation recognised to different social actors and the criteria through which the costs and benefits of conversion are distributed. From this perspective, the social dimension does not represent a secondary effect or a subsequent stage of the green and digital transition, but one of its constitutive components. It is within this analytical space that the notion of the triple transition acquires relevance, understood as the interdependence between ecological transformation, digital innovation and social change.

The development of new occupational sectors linked to the green and digital economy represents one of the most evident manifestations of this process. In these areas, environmental sustainability is intertwined with economic and social dimensions, generating new opportunities for work and development, but also new segmentations between skilled and unskilled workers, central and peripheral territories, and subjects who possess or lack the resources necessary to participate in innovation processes. The dual transition can, therefore, expand the spaces for social mobility for some groups and, at the same time, produce processes of marginalisation and exclusion for others.

This perspective can be found both in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) and in the most recent European policies. In particular, the extraordinary recovery instrument NextGenerationEU has assigned a central position to investments directed towards the green and digital transition, linking them to the objectives of economic resilience and social cohesion (European Commission, 2020). The programmatic recognition of the centrality of the two transitions does not, however, resolve the question of their social sustainability. It remains to be established through which institutions, redistributive instruments and forms of participation it is possible to prevent ecological and technological conversion from reproducing or deepening existing inequalities.

Within this framework, the concept of transition governance assumes relevance, referring to the institutional arrangements, decision-making processes and forms of multilevel and multi-actor coordination through which transformations of social, economic and productive systems are oriented. From a sociological perspective, however, the governance of the transition cannot be reduced to a matter of administrative coordination. It also concerns the capacity of actors to define collective objectives, the different possibilities of social groups to access decision-making processes, the conflict between opposing interests and the construction of the political legitimacy of the choices adopted. It is therefore necessary to ask who defines the direction of the transition, which interests are most strongly represented and which subjects or territories are called upon to bear its costs.

In the Italian context, the institutional relevance attributed to this perspective was made visible in 2021 by the establishment of the Ministry for Ecological Transition, subsequently renamed the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security. The reorganisation of ministerial competences, with the integration of environmental and energy policies, represented an important symbolic and organisational signal. The creation of dedicated structures, however, does not in itself guarantee the integration of environmental policies, industrial policies and social policies. The decisive issue concerns the capacity to transform sustainability from a sectoral objective into an organising criterion for public action as a whole, including from the outset the distributive and social effects of the decisions taken.

The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) also moves in this direction. The IPCC highlights how limiting global warming requires a rapid and profound transformation of energy systems, based on a substantial reduction in the overall use of fossil fuels, the expansion of low- or zero-emission sources, the electrification of consumption and an increase in energy efficiency (IPCC, 2023). The necessity and urgency of this transformation do not, however, eliminate the problem of the social distribution of its costs. The closure or conversion of carbon-intensive sectors, the increase in energy costs, the transformation of required skills and the territorial reorganisation of productive activities can affect social groups and local communities in profoundly differentiated ways.

For this reason, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed the perspective of a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies, based on the integration of environmental sustainability, decent work, social protection, workers' rights and social dialogue (ILO, 2015, 2023). A just transition does not simply consist of compensating workers and communities affected by industrial conversion. It requires that these subjects be able to participate in defining transformation pathways and that the opportunities produced by the green economy be distributed according to criteria of equity. The justice of the transition therefore concerns both distributive outcomes and decision-making procedures, as well as the recognition of the needs, skills and identities of the groups involved.

The combined effects of the ecological and digital transition on work and welfare systems make visible the emergence of new eco-social risks. These risks derive not only from the direct effects of climate change and environmental deterioration, but also from the socially differentiated consequences of the measures adopted to counter them. Rising energy prices, the conversion of productive sectors, the precarisation of some occupations, job losses, skills obsolescence and the digitalisation of services can accentuate already existing conditions of vulnerability. The transition therefore calls for the construction of a new eco-social pact capable of connecting environmental sustainability, distributive

justice, quality of employment and the universality of protections (Ciarini, 2025; Gough, 2013).

From this perspective, welfare cannot be conceived exclusively as a system called upon to intervene ex post to repair the negative social effects of conversion. It must be considered an institutional infrastructure of the transition, capable of proactively shaping its outcomes. Income protection policies, lifelong learning, active labour-market policies, universal public services, measures against energy poverty, housing and mobility policies, digital accessibility and the recognition of social rights constitute necessary conditions for ecological and technological transformation to take a socially inclusive direction.

The transition under way is, however, proving to be anything but linear, and its effects appear to be distributed in profoundly unequal ways. One of the most significant contradictions concerns the relations between the economically most advanced countries and territories located in peripheral positions within the global order. The reduction of emissions and the conversion of the productive systems of the Global North depend, in fact, on a growing demand for raw materials, energy resources and technological components whose extraction tends to be concentrated in countries characterised by a lower regulatory capacity and weaker social and environmental protection.

Green and digital technologies are not immaterial. The production of batteries, photovoltaic panels, turbines, electronic devices, digital networks and infrastructures for artificial intelligence requires lithium, cobalt, copper, rare earths, energy, water and land. The materiality of the ecological transition is therefore joined by that of digital transformation, often concealed by a representation of innovation as a predominantly cognitive and dematerialised process. The energy and water consumption of data centres, the expansion of extractive activities and the production of electronic waste instead show the close interdependence between the digital sphere, the environment and global inequalities.

From a long-term historical perspective, these processes risk reproducing the structures of dependency and exploitation that regulate relations between the centre and the periphery of the world economy. A broad literature has highlighted the tensions between maintaining the production and consumption models of developed countries and the asymmetric appropriation of the material and environmental resources of countries in the Global South (Beck, 2000; Dorninger et al., 2021). The growing demand for raw materials essential to the value chains of the green and digital economy may intensify these dynamics, configuring new forms of extractivism and ecologically unequal exchange (Saito, 2024).

The notion of a ‘colonial economy’ refers, in this sense, to the persistence of logics through which some territories are transformed into sacrifice zones, destined for the intensive exploitation of resources and the externalisation of environmental and health costs (Benegiamo et al., 2023). The populations living in these territories may be exposed to the undermining of livelihoods, loss of food security, deterioration of health conditions and the progressive erosion of the possibility of remaining. Human mobility therefore does not constitute an external effect of the ecological crisis, but one of its social and territorial manifestations.

The expectations placed on green growth and technological innovation thus confront configurations of inequality that interact with pre-existing ones. From an intersectional perspective, these inequalities do not merely add up, but are mutually constituted and modified through the interaction between social class, gender, racialisation processes, legal

status, age, employment condition and territorial location (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). The possibility of benefiting from the opportunities generated by the transition depends, in fact, on the unequal distribution of economic resources, skills, social networks, capacity for representation and access to rights.

The groups most exposed are those occupying fragile positions in labour markets and social protection systems or perceiving their status as vulnerable. When transformations are experienced as rapid, scarcely predictable and decided without effective social participation, they can fuel insecurity, resentment and distrust towards institutions (Kongshøj, 2023). The social sustainability of the transition therefore also depends on the capacity of public policies to build legitimacy, recognise distributive conflicts and guarantee the subjects concerned the possibility of taking part in decisions.

The interweaving of the environmental dimension, economic dynamics and social arrangements cannot be addressed exclusively through eco-sustainable development policies, nor confined to compensatory mechanisms directed at those who risk being expelled from the new socio-economic equilibria. It represents the terrain on which divergent interests confront one another and long-term transformations are condensed, destined to redefine not only the structure of labour markets, but also the architecture of welfare systems and the foundations of social citizenship.

Economic growth, ecological conversion and digital innovation are invested, in public discourse, with a regenerative function and presented as the fundamental components of a renewed model of development. At the same time, they can produce new lines of fracture, sharpen territorial and occupational inequalities and generate tensions that call into question the capacity of welfare systems and democratic institutions to govern their redistributive effects (Osti & Pellizzoni, 2015). The benefits of green growth and technological innovation tend, in fact, to be concentrated in specific segments of the population and in particular territorial contexts, while opportunities for training, mobility and professional advancement remain unequally distributed.

The question therefore remains open as to the conditions under which the ecological and digital transition can be considered socially sustainable. The issue concerns not only the capacity of public policies to mitigate its most disruptive effects, but the possibility of intervening in the ways through which these effects are produced and distributed. A social policy of transition should, in other words, act not only on the consequences, but on the very economic, institutional and territorial structures that generate vulnerability.

These processes pose particularly significant challenges to welfare systems, both in terms of the resources available and the functions attributed to social protection institutions. Protection mechanisms, built around relatively stable configurations of work and citizenship, struggle to keep pace with the speed and complexity of contemporary transformations. This gap can produce further margins of exclusion for subjects who already occupy structurally vulnerable positions, including a significant proportion of migrant persons.

Migrant persons constitute, in this sense, a privileged observatory of the distributive effects of the triple transition. This does not mean assuming that every migratory experience is necessarily forced or completely externally directed. Migrations encompass different pathways and are situated along a continuum between choice, conditioning and coercion. However, legal status, occupational segmentation, racialisation processes, gender and differential access to rights can amplify exposure to climate risks, labour precarisation and the selective digitalisation of services.

Migrant persons may be employed in sectors most exposed to the consequences of climate change and, at the same time, encounter greater obstacles in accessing social protection, training and new employment opportunities. The digitalisation of public benefits and services, if not accompanied by adequate mediation tools, can also translate into a new form of administrative inequality, especially for those with more limited linguistic, technological and institutional skills.

In this key, the category of 'transhumants' can be employed, with the necessary caution, as a heuristic proposal. It must not serve to naturalise mobility or to represent migrant persons as subjects who are inevitably wandering. Rather, it can evoke the condition of those positioned in a threshold space, crossed by territorial movements, biographical transitions, identity redefinitions and multiple belongings. The category must therefore be used to make visible the institutional constraints and power relations that structure mobility, avoiding the transformation of socially and historically determined experiences into an undifferentiated anthropological condition.

For a long time, the social dimension of transitions received less attention than their technological, economic and environmental aspects. In response to this imbalance, the notion of the triple transition has progressively gained visibility in institutional debate. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report Towards a Triple Transition proposes adding a third, specifically social dimension to the green and digital transitions (OECD, 2023). This perspective should not be interpreted as the simple addition of compensatory measures to environmental and technological policies. The social transition concerns the transformation of labour relations, consumption models, forms of citizenship, welfare institutions and mechanisms of participation and representation.

Referring to the triple transition therefore means assuming the social determinants of green and digital conversion as constitutive dimensions of the entire process. Forms of social stratification, inequalities in resources and power, the regulation of work and welfare institutions contribute to defining the conditions, trajectories and outcomes of the transition itself. The social dimension does not represent a 'second stage' of development, intended to correct ex post the effects produced by growth, but the terrain on which the possibility of constructing an ecologically sustainable, democratically legitimate and socially just transformation is decided.

2. Methods

Within this theoretical framework lies the research developed within the Employment Orientation and Inter-regional Empowerment Services project, S.O.L.E.I.L.[1], an interregional initiative supported by the National Cohesion Fund and co-financed by the European Union with the aim of combating and preventing the labour exploitation of third-country nationals. More specifically, the programme, which is also included in the Social Plan of the Molise Region and for which the University of Molise serves as the scientific hub, is aimed at mapping configurations of social vulnerability and the capability factors (Sen, 1985) that intervene in the integration pathways of migrant persons, paying particular attention to the interweaving of structural conditions, individual

[1] Project funded by the Ministry of Labour within the National Programme for Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty 2021–2027, Priority 1 'Support for social inclusion and the fight against poverty', Specific Objective ESO4.9 and co-financed by the European Union.

endowments of resources and opportunities offered – or denied – by the institutional and social contexts in which these pathways unfold.

The study, which is still ongoing, has at this stage involved the collection and in-depth analysis of forty-two life histories of migrants[2] mostly originating from the African continent and residing in different parts of the Molise region, including Campobasso, Bojano, Isernia and surrounding municipalities[3]. These are persons who, for different reasons, are situated at the margins both of social organisation and of the dominant narratives of transition that are progressively reconfiguring the labour market. From this perspective, their biographical trajectories make it possible to illuminate 'from below' the social costs of the green and digital transition, the power asymmetries that run through it and the multiple forms of vulnerability that accompany these processes.

The sample included migrants with different legal statuses, including asylum seekers, residents of reception centres and residence-permit holders; the interviews were conducted in Italian, English and French, with cultural or linguistic mediation where necessary; the main dimensions analysed concerned waiting, work, legal uncertainty, housing, social ties, family relations and future aspirations.

The interviews also enabled participants to narrate their migration trajectories, experiences of arrival and settlement, employment pathways, relationships with the local community and experiences of accessing services and social protection measures.

The research intends to investigate the positioning of migrants in relation to emerging employment opportunities within the digital and ecological transition, examining the role of local welfare in promoting pathways of guidance and inclusion in the sectors affected by these transformations. Although these fields are frequently represented, in public and institutional discourse, as open, innovative and future-oriented sectors, paradoxically they are often inaccessible precisely to those who could derive the most significant benefits from effective inclusion pathways, both in occupational terms and in terms of full social citizenship.

The starting hypothesis is that, despite the emergence of new opportunities, the occupational inclusion of third-country nationals continues to be concentrated almost exclusively in the most fragile segments of the labour market – with particular reference to agriculture, catering, construction and care work – producing concrete effects also at the level of social inclusion.

3. Results

3.1. Migrants in the Transition: Vulnerability, Closed Networks, and the Limits of Welfare

The life histories collected reveal trajectories marked by multiple and cumulative forms of exclusion: often modest or fragmented levels of formal education, educational pathways interrupted by conflict, political instability or forced migration, and travel experiences characterised by traumatic events that have left consequences not only at the physical level, but also on the emotional and social plane.

[2] The interviews were conducted between May 2025 and February 2026.

[3] The research adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative social research involving potentially vulnerable populations. Participation was voluntary and all interviewees provided informed consent after being informed about the aims of the study, the use of the data for research purposes and their right to withdraw at any time. To protect anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed.

The research focused, first of all, on the subjective dimension of vulnerability, finding that most interviewees display a marked lack of confidence in their own abilities, a widespread sense of disorientation regarding the future and, as a particularly significant element, internalised forms of self-exclusion, which translate into the perception of not being entitled to access certain professional fields. In numerous interviews, in fact, a deeply rooted conviction emerges that some occupational fields – in particular those connected to digital innovation and green-transition value chains – 'are not for them', because they are considered excessively demanding in terms of skills, social recognition and cultural capital. As one of the young migrants who took part in the study summarised with extreme clarity: 'In Italy, for us there are only physical jobs'.

This framework highlights how, in biographies marked by forms of structural vulnerability, migrant persons end up internalising the idea that they are not legitimately admitted to certain social and professional spaces, progressively giving up even trying to access them and, in this way, contributing to keeping them effectively closed off (Bourdieu, 1983; Sayad, 1999). In the absence of intentional and coordinated action by public institutions, welfare systems, economic actors and civil-society organisations, this dynamic risks stabilising in systemic form, becoming sedimented in the very ways through which opportunities are selectively distributed.

The research also highlighted the ambivalent character of informal social networks, namely that set of relational ties and connections on which migrant persons rely daily for their material survival, access to information and orientation in contexts of arrival. In most cases, these networks are composed predominantly of other migrants who have been present in the country for a relatively longer period. Although these communities represent a crucial resource in terms of solidarity, mutual aid and emotional support, at the same time they can contribute to narrowing the space of perceived possibilities, because newcomers are often socialised within highly circumscribed representations of what is considered concretely attainable in Italy, with the risk of crystallising modest expectations and occupational trajectories systematically located in the least protected positions of the labour market (Ambrosini, 1999; Grignoli & Șerban, 2018).

Through these social networks, therefore, migrants are directed almost exclusively towards segments of the low-skilled manual labour market – agriculture, logistics, construction – sectors considered relatively accessible, but characterised by high precarity, modest wages and often burdensome working conditions. In sociological terms, this relational arrangement indicates a marked lack of 'weak ties', in the sense proposed by Granovetter, for whom precisely the less dense, more heterogeneous connections that cannot be reduced to the community sphere alone constitute crucial channels of access to information and, therefore, to employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1998).

As regards the migrants involved in the research, such ties are largely absent: their networks appear dense but closed, strong in terms of support and protection, but poor in

bridges towards other social contexts. They offer everyday security, but strongly limit social mobility and exposure to alternative professional models, as well as to training pathways capable of opening access to the sectors of digitalisation or the green economy. In occupational terms, the overall effect is that a significant proportion of migrants are channelled into what Ambrosini has defined as the '5P jobs': positions characterised by high precarity, modest remuneration, physical burden, at times dangerous conditions and, above all, the absence of effective prospects for professional progression (Ambrosini, 2005).

In this scenario, it is necessary to question the role played by the welfare system in addressing – or, at times, contributing to reproducing – these patterns of exclusion. The study conducted by the S.O.L.E.I.L. research group shows how social protection responses tend to be configured predominantly in reactive and fragmented terms, more oriented towards emergency management than towards the construction of medium- to long-term inclusion strategies.

Most of the training pathways offered in Molise reception centres are, in fact, generically adaptive in character: attention focuses above all on the acquisition of basic language skills and preparation for low-skilled occupations, without any real connection with the transformations under way in labour markets, particularly in the segments linked to digitalisation and the ecological transition. This results in a marked divergence between the formal architecture of inclusion programmes and the professional needs of emerging sectors; migrant persons are therefore directed towards employment positions that keep them at the margins of the socio-occupational order[4], rather than being placed in a position to undertake pathways of upward occupational mobility and to participate, in a way that is not merely residual, in the trajectories of transition that are reshaping society as a whole.

4. Discussion

4.1. Transition and New Geographies of Poverty: Towards Responsible Welfare

The evidence collected therefore indicates the existence of a broader structural issue concerning the ways in which welfare systems today relate to the dynamics of transition. Social policies are only occasionally configured according to a genuinely anticipatory logic and, even when they declare themselves future-oriented, they are generally developed without the effective involvement of those most directly exposed to the consequences of the changes under way. They are in fact perceived and experienced predominantly as top-down interventions, conceived within normative frameworks and abstract models of integration and inclusion that struggle to engage with the biographical trajectories and concrete living conditions of migrant persons. Pushing the analysis further, a marked divergence emerges between the rhetoric of transition – green, digital,

[4] See Council of Europe (2024), Valorizzare il potenziale dei cittadini stranieri nell'accesso al mercato del lavoro, which, on the basis of ISTAT, ILO and MLPS (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies) data, highlights that more than six immigrants out of ten are employed in unskilled or manual occupations, while only 8% work in skilled occupations (compared with 37.3% of Italians). In addition, there is a marked concentration of foreign nationals in occupational niches lacking real opportunities for career progression, together with low-skill segmentation.

sustainable – and the social reality of those excluded from these processes. It follows that, even in cases where interventions appear to be driven by inclusive aims, the resulting mechanisms often end up consolidating already existing structures of exclusion rather than contributing to overcoming them, reproducing power asymmetries and inequalities in access to opportunities.

From this perspective, Ferrera et al. (2024) propose the figure of a new 'fifth estate', to indicate the emergence of a social configuration in which the traditional centrality of the industrial proletariat – progressively integrated into the middle classes also thanks to the guarantees offered by the Fordist welfare state (Barba & Grignoli, 2017) – gives way to a composite aggregate of subjects located at the margins of both the labour market and social protection systems. In addition to migrants, it includes service-sector workers exposed to advanced forms of precarity, young people with fragmented employment trajectories, workers in low-skilled occupations and adults expelled from productive cycles, who together constitute a heterogeneous set of outsiders structurally exposed to the risk of exclusion and permanent vulnerability.

In the configuration of the new geographies of poverty, therefore, an articulated constellation of factors comes into play, extending far beyond the mere absence or insufficiency of income and contributing to emptying of meaning the idea, once almost taken for granted, that simple access to employment was in itself sufficient to protect against the risk of sliding into conditions of deprivation. Exposure to poverty must in fact be read as the outcome of a stratification of vulnerabilities: alongside income instability and the growing precarisation of employment pathways are the emergence of new social risks connected to demographic transformations, the growth of care needs and the reconciliation of life and work times, the weakening of the family as the primary agency of protection, as well as persistent forms of gender discrimination, the scarcity of affordable housing and the multiplication of adverse events – from environmental emergencies to international tensions – which directly affect the increase and diversification of forms of deprivation, making them more widespread, more unstable and more difficult to identify through traditional welfare instruments (Collins, 2019; Ranci, 2002).

In this context, marked by pronounced employment instability and profound reconfigurations of the labour market, cultural and relational resources – knowledge, skills, human capital and social capital – emerge as the decisive core of processes of inclusion and mobility. On the one hand, they represent the necessary condition for accessing more highly skilled, relatively safer employment positions associated with higher levels of remuneration; on the other, they constitute for firms the prerequisite for undertaking growth trajectories based on innovation and, at the same time, for reconfiguring their productive models towards greater environmental sustainability (Hall, 2022).

The testimonies collected, however, seem to confirm the persistence of a configuration of change policies attributable to what, as noted, is defined as 'Transition 2' in the typology proposed by Guilhot (2002). In this arrangement, transformative processes do not arise from bottom-up dynamics based on democratic negotiation or participatory planning mechanisms, but are predominantly designed and governed by political-institutional elites that set objectives, define the stages of the pathway and trace a roadmap towards a future presented as common.

The critical issue, from this perspective, concerns not only the verticality of decisions, but the fact that this future is conceived for people and not together with them, with the risk of relegating the subjects most involved – and most exposed to vulnerability – to an essentially passive role, merely receiving the choices of others rather than acting as co-protagonists in defining the trajectories of transition (Maino, 2023).

The result is a marked disconnect between the governance of transitions and the social transformations that actually occur in local contexts: subjects in conditions of greater vulnerability – including migrant persons – remain substantially excluded both from the design and from the implementation phases of policies, despite being among those most exposed to their consequences. Within this framework, a significant gap emerges between declared intentions and concrete impacts, between the political rhetoric accompanying the green and digital transition and the lived experience of those who bear its social costs and asymmetries of opportunity most directly.

From a sociological perspective, therefore, what has emerged indicates a marked difficulty of social protection systems in engaging with the specificity of the contemporary phase of transition. Current welfare is unable fully to perform the function of a mediating mechanism between structural transformations and social inclusion, because it intervenes only marginally on the institutional, economic and social barriers that condition access to opportunities for the groups most exposed to existing vulnerabilities and to those produced by the change under way. In this sense, theoretical and operational tools appear inadequate in relation to the complexity of the processes: they continue to be conceived for relatively stable scenarios, while the real trajectories of transitions are fragmented, unequal and traversed by new social risks, with the result of producing interventions that tend more to manage exclusion than to transform its structural premises.

On the basis of the arguments advanced thus far, and recognising that contemporary transitions are not neutral processes, reflection on the modes of governance and policy arrangements intended to orient them in a more democratic and inclusive direction becomes indispensable, while at the same time maintaining a firm grounding in the concrete configurations of the social reality in which they unfold. In this direction, Popper's reflection constitutes a particularly coherent point of reference, beginning with the well-known distinction between 'utopian social engineering' and 'piecemeal social engineering' (Popper, 2002). The former, which can be associated with the 'Transition 2' model, refers to large projects for the overall reconfiguration of the social order, constructed around the idea of an ideal model defined a priori, in relation to which an ultimate end and a unidirectional trajectory of collective action are established, so that every assessment of means and side effects is subordinated to the realisation of the chosen telos. In sharp discontinuity with this approach, Popper develops an alternative model, based on a pragmatic orientation, rigorous attention to the plurality of points of view and to the specificity of contexts, as well as an experimental disposition that assumes the constitutive complexity of the social as an unavoidable constraint on public action. This implies the design of policies structurally open to critical revision and capable of registering and reworking unexpected outcomes, so as not to configure transitions as obligatory pathways towards a prefigured future, but rather as open and negotiated processes, subject to continuous remodulation in response to social demands and the concrete configurations of contexts. This latter model of social engineering seems to indicate the direction towards a model of 'responsible' welfare (Cesareo, 2017), based on a logic of co-responsibility among public and private actors – the State, market, third

sector, families, community networks and, above all, persons – called upon to contribute, each according to its own resources and functions, to the production of collective well-being. From this perspective, a social protection arrangement inspired by the principle of horizontal subsidiarity takes shape, in which public intervention is not limited to providing benefits, but acts as a mechanism for activating, coordinating and enhancing the capacities present in the different segments of society.

4.2. European Action for an Inclusive Transition: The RESCALE Project

In discontinuity with a management of transitions still strongly marked by the top-down model recalled above, the European Union has initiated a more systematic reflection on the social consequences of green and digital reconfiguration processes, explicitly addressing the risk of marginalisation of the segments of the labour force structurally most exposed to vulnerability. The RESCALE project[5] (https://rescale-eu.com/) is situated within this framework and can be interpreted as an attempt to translate operationally the idea of a more responsible and enabling welfare, capable not only of intervening ex post on the social repercussions of transitions, but also of following their development in itinere through instruments specifically oriented towards strengthening individual and collective capabilities.

The initiative aims to address the challenges connected with the transitions under way and the inclusion of persons most exposed to vulnerability through the creation of so-called Reskilling Labs, training and guidance structures conceived as innovative mechanisms for activating personal and social resources. These laboratories aim to improve the occupational position of participants and to strengthen, in an integrated manner, their basic competences, transversal abilities and digital and green skills, structuring pathways that combine the technical-professional dimension with the strengthening of reflective and relational competences. The methodological framework of the Reskilling Labs is based on enhancing the person-centred model through the combined use of advanced career-guidance tools, counselling practices and personalised mentoring, as well as innovative teaching materials, with the aim of fostering not only access to new employment opportunities, but also medium-term processes of inclusion, growth and resilience, supporting workers' adaptation to the changes taking place in the different economic and occupational sectors.

A further element of significance concerns the policy-learning dimension incorporated into the architecture of the project: the data and empirical evidence collected during the implementation of the Reskilling Labs are, in fact, intended to feed into the preparation of a European digital manual and a roadmap, addressed to public decision-makers, for their sustainable implementation in differentiated national and local contexts, as well as into the definition of a strategic model supporting social and labour policies[6]. In this sense, RESCALE is configured not only as an experimental intervention of active inclusion, but also as a laboratory of piecemeal social engineering, oriented towards

[5] Reskill Employees by Stimulating Connection between Actosrs of Labour Market & Education (Rescale) project project is funded by the European Union to support reskilling and upskilling for adults facing labor market challenges. Through the creation of innovative Reskilling Labs, the project strengthens transversal, digital, green and basic skills, ensuring that vulnerable groups can successfully adapt to the green and digital transitions. See https://rescale-eu.com/

[6] In close collaboration with a plurality of actors – businesses, adult education and training providers, public and private organisations – the project provides for the experimental implementation of the Reskilling Labs in seven European countries, involving a total of between 210 and 350 workers in transition, unemployed persons or inactive adults. In a first phase, a comparative analysis of educational infrastructures and labour markets at European level is planned, with particular attention to existing systems of professional updating and reskilling. On this basis, on the one hand, an assessment tool will be developed to systematically identify the skills profile of the adults involved and, on the other, an innovative European Reskilling Lab model.

producing transferable knowledge and tools to make the transitions under way less exclusionary and more consistent with the horizon of genuinely enabling welfare. The objective of the project, therefore, is to guide the definition of effective strategies for updating and reskilling the competences of workers in transition, unemployed persons and inactive adults, making current trajectories of transformation less exclusionary and more consistent with a horizon of social justice[7].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the picture emerging from the interweaving of theoretical analysis and empirical evidence calls into question the reassuring image of a green and digital transition capable, in itself, of generating widespread progress and inclusive well-being.

The rhetoric of transition governance, as it is currently articulated in the documents of international institutions and in policy discourses, continues to rely on a teleological imaginary in which the direction of change is taken for granted and success is presumed rather than verified; power asymmetries, inequalities and forms of social vulnerability often appear relegated to mere criticalities to be compensated for, rather than constituting the main lens through which to interrogate the social sustainability of the transformations under way. The conceptual genealogy reconstructed, from Marx (1973) to Guilhot (2002), from Laclau (2007) to Popper (2002), shows how the current configuration of transitions still tends to fall within the perimeter of a top-down model, in which trajectories are designed from above and entrusted to the adaptive capacity of subjects, rather than discussed, negotiated and co-produced with those who directly experience their effects.

The empirical research recalled – from the S.O.L.E.I.L. Project to the experiments initiated with RESCALE – confirms the persistence of multiple forms of exclusion and the accumulation of vulnerability, particularly for migrant persons. The biographies of those who remain at the margins of the transition show how access to the new green and digital labour markets is strongly filtered by unequal cultural and social capital, closed networks and welfare mechanisms that continue to operate according to adaptive and reparative rather than enabling logics. Therefore, the distance between inclusive rhetoric and real conditions of access to opportunities risks producing, in the medium term, new lines of social fracture, fuelling feelings of injustice, institutional distrust and latent conflict.

At the same time, attempts to rethink welfare policies in a 'responsible' key – as in the case of the Reskilling Labs experiments – can be interpreted as new models of social planning, in which the objective is to combine the strengthening of capabilities with the co-design of the actors involved. At the analytical and normative levels, this implies treating vulnerability not as a marginal outcome, but as a central indicator for assessing the quality of the transitions under way. From this perspective, the degree of success of the transformation processes characterising the current phase cannot be assessed solely in terms of economic growth, environmental protection and technological advancement, but must be measured in light of their effective capacity to mitigate existing social inequalities and to contain – as well as prevent – the production of new forms of exclusion.

[7] Statistics at European level indicate that 9% of people aged between 25 and 64 with an educational level below upper secondary education are unemployed, clearly signalling the occupational vulnerability of segments with lower educational capital. Added to this is the fact that a significant share of workers in transition, unemployed persons and inactive adults do not participate in continuing adult education pathways, thus remaining excluded from those updating and reskilling processes that should constitute the main instrument for countering the risk of marginalisation. In the background, European institutions increasingly emphasise the risk that the green transition and digital transformation may produce highly uneven effects across economic sectors, amplifying pre-existing imbalances in terms of employability, quality of work and access to opportunities (OECD, 2020).

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