



## OPEN LETTER

### ITALIAN UNIVERSITY NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (RUS)

#### Foreword

This time of great difficulty, which has now become worldwide, is revealing the fragility of the development model that has been adopted for years at global level. At the same time, it is increasingly clear that finding solutions to complex problems requires real collaboration between all communities and institutions, at every level: individual, local, national and international. In this context, now more than ever, policies and actions capable of outlining national reconstruction strategies in the medium and long term oriented towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda are fundamental.

The way out of the emergency can take on a twofold perspective: on the one hand, there is the possibility of starting a virtuous path that brings together the economic instances of the post-emergency with the European Green Deal project in order to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable development model; on the other, there is the risk that, in order to emerge from the emergency, too much freedom of action will be left, even giving a push in the opposite direction to sustainable development. At this delicate juncture in the history of the country and the world, the Italian University Network for Sustainable Development (RUS) wishes to make its expertise available to promote and initiate a virtuous path towards sustainability in the country.

Today more than in the past, universities have the task, and the duty, to promote a new culture, to be a model and a stimulus for social and territorial contexts, so that everyone can understand that sustainability is not a "luxury" that involves and impacts on the few, but that it can and must become an opportunity for human and social promotion, an essential vehicle through which rights, capabilities, inclusion and the future can be pursued and guaranteed for all. Aware that attention to the health emergency does not cancel out the severe global environmental and social crisis, but rather aggravates it, the RUS considers the 2030 Agenda to be a compass capable of clearly indicating the direction to be followed for a recovery that enables the resilience of people, communities and territories to be strengthened.

In order to cope with the emergency and ensure the continuity of teaching and other university activities, the universities have made an unprecedented technological and organisational leap in just a few days, providing an extraordinary demonstration of resilience and transformational capacity that it would be desirable not to lose: universities must be able to change and adapt while maintaining their nature and identity. This crisis is teaching all members of the university community (lecturers, technical and administrative staff, students, etc.) that it is necessary to go beyond rigid

disciplinary fences in order to embrace and enhance the transdisciplinary approach, which is capable of imagining and implementing holistic and integrated educational, teaching and research paths. Sectoral knowledge alone is not enough to decipher and understand today's complexity; on the contrary, a systemic approach is needed, involving and bringing into a generative dialogue all the sectors of knowledge and civil society (public administration, the world of work, the business world, the third sector, educational institutions, etc.), with a focus on ensuring a balance between the various environmental, economic and social aspects.

## Goals

Aware of these premises and needs, the RUS intends to make its main characteristic and strength available to the country, being a Network, in order to:

- **support together a vision of the future that has at its core a truly sustainable development**, supported by the skills that the university system can provide to the country, and not only; in this context, networking also means putting in place third mission skills and services capable of promoting productive reconversion policies;
- **promote a process of cultural transformation** that, at every level, can help to rethink current lifestyles, production and consumption; to redefine policies that pay attention to the environment and to people; to limit intra- and intergenerational inequalities; to combat climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Education is, as the 2030 Agenda itself emphasises, the main tool for this transformation to become concrete;
- **rethink education processes**, valuing human capital and the importance of learning for all and throughout life. **The methods, tools, timing and evaluation of the educational processes themselves will have to be reviewed.** It will be necessary to ensure that all Italian educational institutions (schools, universities, academies, training bodies, etc.) rediscover their value and educational mission, focusing on the development of skills, including transversal ones, and not so much or only on the transfer of knowledge and know-how;
- **empower people for futures other** than the one we are heading towards. A **holistic, transversal and inter- and trans-disciplinary approach** should, at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner, become the norm and not the exception in education.

## Proposals

By adopting the model of the civic university and leveraging the principles of the Third Mission and its competences, RUS proposes:

1. **to become a think tank for the country's resilience**, an independent body that supports politicians and administrators in defining local and regional interventions and actions in support of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development and the 2030 Agenda. The National Implementation Plan of the Manifesto that the Rectors signed in Udine last May 2019 and that will be published in the Network's 2020 Report, already contains many

indications on how the transition process can be implemented, so that, as the 2030 Agenda itself states, "no one is left behind";

2. **to collaborate in the national working tables**, through the activity of its Working Groups (Climate Change, Food, Education, Energy, Inclusion and Social Justice, Mobility, Waste), facilitating the definition and implementation of sustainable projects in the environmental, technological, economic, social and governance fields. The materials that each of the Working Groups has developed can offer other local and national institutions, bodies and associations scientific and relational support for the benefit of the sustainable growth of the territories;
3. **to set up "local resilience units"** and transformation from which universities can provide the technical, scientific and cultural support necessary to carry out *ex-ante* prospective analyses, monitoring and *ex-post* evaluation of projects and policies implemented, systematising what has been implemented and harmonising it with the 2030 Agenda targets and with the Fair and Sustainable Welfare indicators that have the greatest impact on the life of the country and its citizens;
4. to contribute to the **creation of academic spin-offs and/or the establishment of advanced study courses**, supporting both public administrations and the world of business and work in the identification of that knowledge, both theoretical and practical, based on the principles of sustainability, which is necessary to be able to face the cultural, technological and organisational changes that Italian society and economy will have to manage in the coming months and years, in order to emerge from the current crisis and prevent new ones;
5. to contribute to the construction of a **network laboratory to offer integrated services for the qualification of new products/processes** to support the post-COVID-19 phase, also with the aim of exchanging experiences of crisis management and pooling the benefits and results achievable at regional level.

## Conclusion

We are convinced that the experience gained by the universities in this difficult and emergency period is a valuable asset, an example of a transformative laboratory, which is fundamental for facing future challenges with a positive and constructive outlook, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. In order to lead the territories towards scenarios of sustainable development, universities must be enabled to **strengthen their commitment in terms of teaching, research, technology transfer, public and social engagement and human resource development on the themes of the 2030 Agenda**. It is only by increasing knowledge, skills and best practices and making them systemic and available to the country and its territories, the transversal skills of which universities are bearers and custodians, that our era can finally be remembered "for the awakening of a new reverence for life, for the determination to achieve sustainability, for the

acceleration of the struggle for justice and peace, and for the joyful celebration of life" (Earth Charter, 2000).

*f.to the President, the Coordination Committee, the Coordinators of the Working Groups of the Italian University Network for Sustainable Development*

*April 17, 2020*