



FESTIVAL NAZIONALE

**ECONOMIA
CIVILE**

EUconomia

L'economia che fa bene,
il rumore della foresta
che cresce

**Concept Note
FNEC 2026**

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The Forest That Grows

We are immersed in a public narrative - shaped by news programmes and broadcasts - that shows us above all the trees that fall, and far less often the forest that grows. Wars, environmental crises, inequality, social conflict, economic anxiety and political instability understandably dominate public attention. These are real problems and should not be minimised. Yet when our account of reality focuses exclusively on what is breaking down, we risk overlooking what is emerging, enduring and regenerating: responsible businesses, cohesive communities, social innovation, new forms of participation, experiences of civil economy, and citizens capable of building shared responses.

We live in an extraordinary age in which the digital revolution has greatly expanded our opportunities and our capacity to act. Average life expectancy rises by several months each year and, over the course of two millennia, humanity has created the conditions - through population growth and longer lives - for an additional 539 billion years of human life on the planet. Yet the immense opportunities of our time are accompanied by significant risks and pitfalls. More than ever, self-mastery, discernment and the cultivation of what makes us fully human have become essential.

The title of the 2026 National Festival of Civil Economy, “EUconomy. An Economy for Good, the Sound of a Growing Forest”, responds to this need: to make visible the generative and cooperative energies already present in society, and to recognise that the future is not merely something that happens to us, but something we can help to build.

The Spell of the Zero-Sum Game

One of the principal cultural traps of our time is the belief that economic and social life must necessarily be a zero-sum game, like a poker match in which one person's gains must correspond to another person's losses: if someone gains, someone else must lose; if one person improves their condition, they must do so at another's expense; if new citizens arrive, opportunities for those already living in a place must automatically diminish; if we protect the environment, we must give up development; if a company invests in employee well-being, it must lose competitiveness. This outlook fuels what Spinoza called the “sad passions”: fear, envy, anger, resentment and the search for someone to blame.

When these passions prevail, people cease to see themselves as capable of shaping reality and begin to perceive others as competitors or threats. Public life becomes a permanent struggle to defend one's position, while

politics risks degenerating into a contest among competing forms of anger and fear. We enter the Hobbesian world of *homo homini lupus* - “man is a wolf to man” - rather than Genovesi’s vision, foundational to civil economy, of *homo homini natura amicus*: by nature, human beings are friends to one another.

Civil economy offers a different perspective. In the domains of innovation and relational goods, social life has historically been - and can again become - a positive-sum game whenever cooperation, trust, reciprocity, innovation and participation create value that did not previously exist. A society’s most important wealth lies not only in the resources available to it, but also in people’s capacity to connect those resources and transform them into the common good.

The Role of Communication

Communication plays a decisive role in shaping our expectations. Because of the dynamics of attention, negative, conflict-driven or alarming news tends to receive greater visibility. A falling tree makes a noise; a forest grows slowly, often without producing spectacular images or headlines capable of going viral.

The result is a distorted representation of reality - not necessarily because the news is false, but because the selection of reported facts is incomplete. If we see only failures, scandals and conflict, we eventually come to believe that cooperation is naive, trust is dangerous and self-protection is the only rational strategy. Yet economic and social life is sustained every day by thousands of experiences of collaboration. Many businesses and organisational forms pursue broader ambitions, looking beyond profit to social and environmental impact. Italy possesses an extraordinary heritage in the history of its cooperative movement and in the many forms of enterprise created to pursue these dual aims.

Across many fields, local communities build networks; citizens organise services; energy communities generate shared benefits; public authorities collaborate with Third Sector organisations; and, through effective forms of participation, workers create value through skills, relationships and creativity. Society functions because an immense amount of everyday trust exists - trust that rarely becomes news.

Telling the story of the forest that grows does not mean constructing a comforting narrative. It means offering a more complete representation of reality: one that includes the problems, but also the resources available to address them.

Positive-Sum Beliefs Are Born of Experience

It is not enough to tell people that cooperation pays. A robust body of empirical

evidence shows that positive-sum beliefs develop above all through direct experience of generative relationships.

Trust emerges when we encounter someone who behaves reliably. Participation grows when we see that our contribution produces a result. Hope becomes credible when we experience that a problem can be addressed together. Civil economy therefore cannot remain merely a theory; it must become a practice that creates opportunities for meaningful experience and real influence. It is embodied in a company that creates economic value while improving the quality of work and the local community; in a community that organises to produce clean energy; in a public authority that involves citizens in decision-making; and in an organisation that measures its success not only by profit, but also by its social and environmental impact. For these reasons, the Festival has long sought to be not a parade of experts, but an occasion for generative experiences through which a positive-sum view of reality can mature.

We live in an era in which new technologies, scientific knowledge, the ecological transition and the growth of civic networks provide tools that previous generations did not possess. The worst response would be to allow fear to paralyse us, to retreat into the impossible search for absolute security, and to vent our frustration by becoming aggressive “keyboard warriors”. Fear narrows the space for action. Generativity, by contrast, arises when we recognise that we can contribute to something larger than ourselves.

Four Steps Towards a New Perspective

Once again this year, drawing on its tradition and on the parallel work of the economists behind the Manifesto for an Economic Renaissance, the National Festival of Civil Economy will explore four transitions that are essential if Italy is to change both its outlook and its direction. The first is to understand more deeply what we are and what makes us happy. A human being is not merely an individual who maximises self-interest, but a relational person, capable of cooperation and of seeking meaning, recognition and belonging. Happiness does not depend solely on income or consumption; it also depends on the quality of relationships, health, trust, freedom, participation and the possibility of being useful to others.

The second transition concerns business. Companies can and must become more ambitious: places where the creation of economic value is combined with social and environmental generativity. A business is generative when it does not merely extract value, but invests in people, places, skills and relationships. Competitiveness should not be conceived in opposition to the dignity of work or to sustainability; it can develop precisely through the capacity to create shared value.

As the evidence has now taught us, cohesion and relational intelligence are

not sunk costs but genuine competitive resources. Relational intelligence within a company and between the company and its surrounding community can generate additional value, as shown by the stronger value-added performance of businesses with higher levels of relational intelligence.

The third transition concerns indicators. We must learn to measure what truly matters for quality of life. Traditional economic indicators remain important, but they are insufficient to describe the well-being of individuals and communities. Over recent decades, we have learned that GDP growth - although fundamental to debt sustainability, job creation and the funding of welfare - is not in itself sufficient to increase well-being and enable people to live well. In many countries, including Italy, we have learned to measure multiple dimensions of well-being. One element, however, is still missing. A person may have income, health and education, yet spend the day on the sofa without knowing what to do with their life. What is missing is the “last mile” of happiness: devoting one’s life to a purpose that inspires passion. Meaning, generativity, and social and civic engagement together create the conditions for human flourishing. It is striking that both religious thought, through the idea of the common good, and secular thought, through the second paragraph of Article 3 of the Italian Constitution, arrive at the same conclusion.

The fourth transition is to become active participants in civic and economic life. We cannot limit ourselves to being spectators, passive consumers or indignant commentators. Every choice concerning consumption, saving, investment, work, voting and participation helps shape the economic system. Markets and democracy are not external realities: they also take form through our everyday behaviour. We are the market, through the choices we make each day.

From Vision to Solutions

With this indispensable cultural and operational foundation, the new edition of the Festival will address the major challenges of our time: the climate crisis, inequality, demographic winter, educational poverty, transformations in work, migration, the digital revolution and the fragility of democracies.

These are not abstract issues. They already affect people’s daily lives and Italy’s capacity to imagine its future. The climate crisis is manifest in increasingly destructive heatwaves, droughts, floods, landslides and wildfires. The floods and landslides that struck Emilia-Romagna in 2023, for example, caused 17 deaths and an estimated EUR 8.5 billion in damage. This emergency intersects with a still-profound social divide. In 2024, more than 5.7 million people - 9.8 per cent of the resident population - lived below the poverty line, across more than 2.2 million households.

Territorial disparities remain particularly pronounced: in Southern Italy, 38.4

per cent of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 11.3 per cent in the North-East.

The situation of younger generations makes the need for action still more evident. In 2024, approximately two million children and young people under the age of sixteen - 26.7 per cent of the total - lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion; in the South and on the Islands, the proportion reached 43.6 per cent. Educational poverty concerns not only access to schooling, but also the opportunity to read, participate in sport, visit cultural institutions, use technology critically and consciously, and freely develop one's own life project.

At the same time, Italy is experiencing an unprecedented demographic crisis. Fewer than 370,000 children were born in 2024, and the average number of children per woman fell to 1.18, the lowest level ever recorded. The population's average age reached 46.9 years, while the share of people under fifteen declined to 11.9 per cent. Demographic winter affects the productive system, welfare, healthcare, pensions, schools, and the very survival of inland areas and small municipalities.

Work, too, is changing rapidly. Automation, artificial intelligence, the ecological transition and new organisational models can create opportunities, but they also risk widening the distance between those who possess advanced skills and those who remain excluded. Employment growth alone is insufficient while precarious work, low wages, gender and territorial inequalities, barriers to labour-market entry for young people, and weakening social mobility persist. If the digital revolution is to be genuinely democratic, it must therefore translate into education, rights, accessibility and critical capabilities, while ensuring that innovation does not become a new source of marginalisation.

Migration represents another structural dimension of change. In 2023-2024, Italy recorded approximately 760,000 arrivals of foreign citizens, but also 270,000 departures by Italian citizens - the highest figure in the past decade. Between 2014 and 2024, the balance between departures and returns among Italian citizens produced a cumulative net loss of approximately 670,000 people. Discussing migration therefore means addressing reception and integration, rights and citizenship, while also confronting the departure of many young people, researchers and skilled workers who cannot find adequate opportunities in Italy.

Finally, all these crises test the quality of democracy. Distrust in institutions, electoral abstention, polarisation, disinformation and the concentration of communicative power in large digital platforms weaken participation and public debate.

According to International IDEA, Italy continues to perform strongly overall in democratic quality, but faces more substantial challenges in the rule of law, press freedom, judicial independence and electoral participation. The



Festival intends to address these issues without simplification and without yielding to the rhetoric of permanent emergency. It will bring knowledge, generations, experiences and places into dialogue, guided by the conviction that understanding complexity is the first step towards transforming it, and that culture, knowledge and participation are essential infrastructures for building a country that is fairer, more open, more sustainable and better able to shape its future.

Without trust, cooperation and participation, even the best technical solutions risk failure. Conversely, when citizens, businesses, institutions and social organisations recognise that they share a common destiny, new and more effective responses become possible. The growing forest is therefore a metaphor for a society that does not deny its problems, but chooses to address them by mobilising its finest energies. Making this forest visible means nurturing trust, agency and the desire to participate. In doing so, we may discover that we have not only built a more civil, inclusive and sustainable economy; we may also realise that we have helped to save our democracy.

Over the years, we have learned that the Festival is itself a major relational good and a privileged setting in which many participants have experienced a spark - an unexpected source of inspiration that has significantly helped orient the meaning and direction of their lives. This year, too, we seek to be generative and, through ideas, testimonies and experiences, to contribute as fully as we can to pathways of human flourishing.

