

## Empowering the young in an ageing society

**Influential decision makers are seldom youthful, but in Italy young adults could qualify as a marginalised minority group. Precarious and poorly-paid employment is endemic even for university graduates. Unemployment for those aged 15 to 24 is among the highest in Europe at nearly 20 per cent, and hovers roughly fourteen points higher than Italy's general population.**

Thanks to three decades of pottering fertility rates, those over 65 outnumber those under the age of 15 by almost 50 per cent. Pop culture, usually a domain of the young, sees rock stars and TV hosts unshaken from top billings well into retirement age. And if you're an Italian university student, as Selene Biffi was four years ago, the older faces of the teaching staff do not inspire hope for one's own career prospects: just 4.6 per cent are under the age of 35.



In 2004, **Selene Biffi**, had an enterprising idea to empower young people like herself. At 22, finishing her studies in Milan, she yearned to do something positive for the world, something aimed at real social change rather than blindly scrambling for solid footing on the nearest career ladder. However, she felt frustrated, unskilled, and even a bit of a pariah for the nature of her deepest aspiration.

“The idea of an activist in Italy is linked to a political party or the Catholic Church. If you are just an

individual who wants to do good, people don't know what category you belong to. It's a hangover from the 1960s. They think you are a loser, someone who couldn't make it in another field. Someone even once said to me, 'It's good to see you shower.' In the meantime, all over the world, young people are doing things to make a difference.”

During a meeting of Oxfam's International Youth Parliament in Sydney, Australia, where Biffi was a delegate, it dawned on her that many of her international peers had real skills that could unglue other frustrated young people from their sofas and enable them to do something practical about their most heart-felt causes. Armed with a web-based organisation, she could create virtual classrooms in which a young social activist from Peru, for example, could train peers anywhere from Serbia to Senegal through cost-free, online courses.

“It's an 'I can do it, too,' approach. The point is to communicate, 'There's nothing special about me. I am just passionate about something.'”

The organisation she founded in 2005, Youth Action for Change (YAC), has now certified more than a thousand young people in 130 countries to spearhead their own grassroots initiatives on issues

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like women's rights, clean water, sanitation, and sustainable development.

"This guy in Kenya, after completing a course on social leadership, took a couple of months to bicycle around villages spreading educational information on HIV/AIDS. Someone in the Philippines decided to teach local people to use cameras to document human rights abuses in villages near his home."

Thousands more have participated in the courses, but attrition is high.

"In some parts of the world, it's not always easy to have consistent internet access." Nevertheless, the organisation is a good lesson in how to accomplish a lot with very little money. Run entirely on a voluntary basis, funds for the first year of activity amounted to 150 euros. By 2008, the budget reached 7,000 euros. Biffi's talent has been to tap deep wells of two resources young people often do have: time and desire.

Still, it has been a difficult haul, with accolades and recognition far easier to procure than funding. Biffi has been showered with international awards for her civic activism, and supports herself by giving motivational speeches to major non-governmental organisations, such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the World Bank. The success of YAC has also helped her plunge into other youth advocacy initiatives, like a blog space called 'Forgotten Diaries' that gives young people living in war torn regions a voice. Biffi also launched a scholarship fund for young people in areas experiencing conflict, and is also representing the interests of youth and children at the United Nations' Commission on Sustainable Development.

"It's the only place in civil society where young people can sit at the table with designated decision makers."

But without a revenue stream, YAC depends on slim grants from international foundations. Concerns for the organisation's future helped drive Biffi to attend INSEAD's programme on social entrepreneurship. "It was one of the best courses I've ever seen in my life," she says.

Biffi is now a semi-finalist for a highly competitive Echoing Green fellowship, an initiative launched in the late 1980s by private equity managers looking to apply entrepreneurial principles to social sector investing. If Biffi wins, she'll receive 90,000 euros over two years, giving her the means to cultivate YAC into a self-sustaining organisation, as well as to buttress its institutional credibility.

She and her collaborators are assessing a plan to launch an online retailing section of YAC, to sell

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ethically-produced merchandise from underdeveloped countries. Products sold through the website would provide adequate wages for their producers, as well as revenue to support the organisation's didactic activities. Another future source of revenue may come from lending YAC's online platform tools to other institutions, or from launching a subscription magazine on youth-generated business innovations.

Biffi also hopes to garner approval from internationally-recognised NGOs and educational institutions for YAC courses. She says adding the logo of such entities to course completion certificates would not only shore up the organisation's credibility, but put a better tool for action in the hands of successful participants.

However, winning the Echoing Green fellowship is far from sure, given roughly 1,000 applicants for up to 20 slots. Current operating funds for YAC will run dry by the end of the year, shortly after Biffi will have earned her NOHA Masters in International Humanitarian Action in Ireland. The Masters degree will equip her to face the NGO job market, but she is hoping that won't be necessary.

"YAC has been my life for four years. Given the chance, I'd rather keep running it."

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