



European  
Research Area

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

**UP2YOUTH**

Youth - actor of social change

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## SUMMARY

### Objectives of the research

UP2YOUTH has analysed how **young people contribute to social change** by their actions and how policies can **empower the agency of young people**. The focus is on **young parenthood, transitions to work of migrant or ethnic minority youth** and **youth participation**.

### Scientific approach / methodology

UP2YOUTH is a **thematic network** carrying out secondary analysis with a comparative perspective. Key elements are reviews of national and international research in the three themes; and workshops with policy makers, practitioners and researchers to validate intermediate findings.

### New knowledge and/or European added value

UP2YOUTH identifies blind spots in European research on youth transitions: firstly, it proposes to refer to **young people as actors**, not victims, of social change; secondly, it provides research perspectives for issues which are under-researched in European youth research; thirdly, it offers a tool for comparative youth research by adopting a 'transition regimes' model.

### Key messages for policy-makers, practitioners and civil society actors

Policy makers, practitioners and civil society actors should adopt a view of young people as actively involved in coping with uncertain and increasingly precarious lives; as well as contributing to social change. Full citizenship status while being in transition requires **universal and unconditional access to social security**.

Policy measures for young people need to be more reflexive and flexible. Starting from these active coping strategies; they need to allow for **choice** and to provide public spaces where young people can negotiate their orientations and strategies towards family, work, integration and citizenship.

## SCIENTIFIC APPROACH / METHODOLOGY

### Three thematic working groups

UP2YOUTH has been funded as a coordinated action. Three thematic working groups carried out research literature reviews:

- **young parenthood** (Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia, UK);
- **transitions to work** in the **migration** society (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Portugal, Romania);
- **youth participation** (Austria, France, Ireland, Italy, Slovakia)

The thematic working groups reviewed available national research and re-analysed them with regard to the dynamics of young people's agency, as well as to differences in comparative perspective. Thematic workshops allowed the validation of findings with policy makers and practitioners as well as youth researchers working on similar issues. Project findings are documented by

- UP2YOUTH newsletters,
- the final report,
- a youth research module for higher education students,
- an annotated collection of policy examples,
- and a network plan of youth research in Europe.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

### How does social change affect young people's decision-making processes?

There is a widely shared concern across Europe regarding the social integration of young people. This concern regards young people's opportunities and decision-making processes with regard to family, work and citizenship:

- There is increasing concern with regard to the postponement of starting a family and parenthood, including the potential abandonment of family plans. There is also a concern regarding teenage parenthood, yet this applies only to a minority.
- Migrant and ethnic minority youth are over-represented among early school leavers and unemployed youth. Precarious school-to-work transitions are seen as a key factor in failing processes of social integration and in marginalisation.
- Young people are also politically apathetic, reflected by decreasing participation in elections, declining commitment to continuous engagement in organisations and a lack of trust in politics and public institutions.

The observations on which these concerns are based are often interpreted as results of social change. Young people are seen as constrained by increasing uncertainty, insecurity and precariousness, preventing them from progressing to full social integration and citizenship.

### How do young people's decisions and actions contribute to social change?

However, there are also approaches which do not see young people as mere victims of social change. There are approaches explaining young people's decision making processes as rational choices resulting from more individualised values and life styles. Postponement of and renunciation of parenthood are attributed to the life-style and/or career orientation of young people; early school leaving and unemployment are interpreted as inherited dependency and a preference of social benefits (which undermines work ethics), especially among migrant and ethnic minority youth; declining voting rates and a fall in membership of organisations is assumed to result from hedonistic attitudes.

### Structure and agency

UP2YOUTH has aimed at elaborating a more differentiated approach in terms of conceptualising the relationship between young people's decision making processes and social change as an interplay between structure and agency. This concept is often referred to in youth and transition research while the relationship itself remains a black box. While most research concentrates on the input and output of transitions – that is values, attitudes and orientations versus qualifications, employment or family status – little light has been shed into how this relationship evolves. UP2YOUTH has been concerned with theorising the little evidence which is available and identifying some of the research gaps.

## NEW KNOWLEDGE AND EUROPEAN ADDED VALUE

The findings of UP2YOUTH relate:

- 1) to the identification of the research gaps with regard to the three thematic areas: young parenthood; transitions to work of migrant and ethnic minority youth; and youth participation,
- 2) to the theoretical understanding of young people's agency with regard to social change, and
- 3) to an enrichment of comparative knowledge in youth and transition research.

### Complex decision-making processes in transitions to parenthood

With regard to young people's *transitions to parenthood*, current research and policies centre around the motives and values for/against starting a family and also around the demographic consequences (for wider society) of individual decision-making. Yet, the decision-making processes themselves, and the negotiation processes related to young parenthood, tend to be neglected. Analysis has focussed on

- the *discrepancy* between desired and actually born children;
- *images of the normality* of parenthood, which are produced and disseminated by societal actors (state institutions, churches or media) and reworked by young men and women according to their subjective desires and available options;

- *gendered stereotypes* of the ‘good’ mother ( in modernised terms) and ‘new’ fathers;
- growing *pressure* due to the intensification of combining parenthood with work, while in the media the ‘ideal’ employee and the ‘good’ parent are not presented as contradictions;
- *selective policy discourses*: according to which highly educated women should become mothers earlier, while low qualified women should be prevented from getting pregnant too early;
- *informal coping strategies* of young parents which aim at balancing lacking policy support and represent an implicit protest against the gendered public-private-divide.

**Migrant and ethnic minority youth coping with disadvantage and discrimination in transitions to work**

With regard to *transitions to work*, the focus was on *youth with a migrant or ethnic minority* background as they face particular disadvantage and discrimination in entering stable and satisfying work. Early school leaving, youth unemployment and precarious work conditions are key issues in most migrant and ethnic minority communities in Europe. Public discourses reflect structural factors of integration but also tend to blame migrant and ethnic minority youth for refusing integration. Our analysis in this regard focussed on how migrant or ethnic minority youth deal with such stereotype ascriptions. Based on selected case studies, the following principles of coping were identified:

- *(Re)ethnization* pertains to emphasizing and differentiating cultural group specific properties to (re)gain social recognition – at least within the own group. However, such sub-cultural processes tend to reproduce and/or even deepen underlying social and educational divisions.
- *Dominance* refers to competition among migrant or ethnic minority groups or towards the majority for example by provoking and acting out conflict including – at times violent – refusal of what is perceived as adaptive subordination.
- *Social creativity* refers to young migrants or members of ethnic minorities redefining and modifying cultural elements of their group of origin, so that they may integrate into society without giving up their cultural identity. With regard to youth cultures an example is appropriated variations of Hip-Hop. In transitions to work this is apparent in forms of ‘ethnic’ businesses, especially in the service sector.

**What does participation mean for young people?**

With regard to *participation* the analysis started from institutional preoccupations with an observed decline in young people’s political participation (e.g. abstention from elections) and membership in social organisations. This was interpreted as an increasing discrepancy in the meaning institutional actors and young people ascribe to participation. This discrepancy has been analysed with regard to the following issues:

- Formal participation is replaced by *informal and spontaneous forms of participation* yet involves only a minority of youth (e.g. anti-globalisation movement, alternative consumption);
- *Participation in education* is being reduced to preparation for formal participation later (civic education classes) while competencies of ‘student councils’ tend to be restricted to organising social events in school;
- *Participation in transitions to work* is interpreted in terms of self-responsibility rather than individual choice, reflected by the trend towards activating labour market policies;
- *Youth cultural activities* tend to be classified as non-political, hedonistic or deviant. However, they reclaim public space (skaters, sprayers) or lead to conflict with authorities (riots in suburbs or schools) and therefore can be regarded as a public articulating of individual needs and interest.

**Must all activities of young people in the public be seen as potentially participatory?**

The increasing difficulty in distinguishing participation from non-participation implies that all activities of young people in the public may be referred to as potentially participatory. Research needs to analyse the biographical meaning of participation for young people as well as analyse aspects of collectivism and the public inherent in activities classified as non-participation.

**Complex relationships between structural inequalities and different choices**

The thematic findings confirm that young people’s choices, decisions and actions are testimony of unequal resources and opportunities. At the same time, inequality is neither simply reflected by activity patterns (activity versus passivity) nor do all disadvantaged young people necessarily develop the same strategies. The dimensions of culture and learning are key to understanding *how* young people act and therefore contribute to social change.

**Young people’s actions are not only about coping but also imply meaning-making**

Human action is not only about control but also about meaning in one’s own life. The *cultural* perspective reveals that – by engaging in transitions family, work and citizenship – young people *do* social integration *differently*. This applies to the gaps and cleavages between individuals and institutions, between the generations and among young men and women themselves according to gender, ethnicity, class, education, region and life style.

**“Doing social integration differently” requires informal learning**

The *learning* perspective reveals that young people have to experiment with new strategies. These require skills and competencies which cannot be developed in formal education alone but through informal and in some cases non-formal learning.

**Different constellations of young people’s agency across Europe**

The *cross-national comparative perspective* allows us to identify how institutional structures frame, enable and constrain without determining individual action. A comparative perspective was secured by applying the model of *youth transition regimes*, which has been developed in earlier EU-funded research.

The model clusters countries according to the dominant logic in regulating youth transitions (see table 1). Key dimensions are:

- Structures of education and training
- Access of young people to welfare services
- Structures of labour market entry
- Mechanisms of doing gender
- Public expenditure for education, active labour market policies and services for families and children
- Focus of policy measures for disadvantaged youth and the interpretation of disadvantage in youth transitions (individual deficits versus structural problems)
- General representations of youth in terms of societal expectations and legitimate aspirations

One aim of UP2YOUTH was to verify whether the model was also appropriate for explaining differences and similarities with regard to: transitions to parenthood; the integration of migrant and ethnic minority youth; as well as participation.

**Table 1: The model of youth transition regimes in Europe**

Regime type	School and training	Welfare provision	Labour market entry	Female employment	Concept of disadvantage	Meaning of youth
<b>Universalistic</b> <i>DK, FI</i>	Inclusive, flexible, standardised	State	Open Low risks	High	Mixed individualised and structured	Personal development
<b>Liberal</b> <i>IE, UK</i>	Flexible, variable standards	State – Family	Open High risks	High	Individualised	Economic independence
<b>Employment-centred</b> <i>A, D, F, NL</i>	Selective, standardised	State – Family	Closed Medium risks	Medium	Individualised	Allocation to occupational positions
<b>Sub-protective</b> <i>ES, I, PT</i>	Inclusive, variable standards	Family	Closed High risks	Low - Medium	Structured	Dependency
<b>Post-socialist countries*</b>						
<i>BG, SI, SK, RO</i>	Heterogeneous and changing	State - Family	Closed High risks	Decrease (low – medium)	Heterogeneous and changing	Heterogeneous and changing

\*No regime type due to heterogeneous dynamics of transformation

**Realisation of family plans depends on possibilities of reconciliation**

*Family* is a key value in young men's and women's life plans across the EU. Differences in the timing of first births or the number of born children reflects structural difference, especially with regard to the availability of child care, economic security, and housing. Yet in all contexts, young men and women develop new ways and forms of parenthood and therefore contribute to new cultural normalities of family life.

**Transitions are structured by modes of dealing with migration and minorities**

The *educational and labour market inclusion of migrant and ethnic minority youth* are not only structured by different transition structures but also by different modes of integrating migrants and minorities. The multicultural approach (UK and NL) suggests that minorities do not have to compromise with regard to their identities in education or the labour market.

**Participation depends on citizenship rights of young people.**

Cross-country differences in young people's *participation* in voting and in membership of social organisations are related to variations in societal regulations of citizenship, while knowledge is lacking on how local youth policies shape youth participation. Across different contexts individual and collective forms of raising one's voice and claiming interest in the public emerge.

**Universalistic regimes more likely to support young people's agency.**

Not all differences and similarities regarding transitions to parenthood, work and citizenship can be explained by the transition regime model. Nevertheless, societies in which the regulation of youth transitions is based on individual citizenship rights, options for choice and with flexible access to support are more likely to encourage young people to develop new life plans and lifestyles in accordance with wider society. This is primarily the case in the universalistic transition regime of the Nordic countries.

**KEY MESSAGES**

The main message for policy makers, practitioners and civil society actors is to adopt a view of young people as actively involved in coping with uncertain and increasingly precarious lives; as well as contributing to social change. Policy measures for young people need to be more reflexive and flexible. This includes

- recognising the often informal coping strategies of young people as active contributions to social integration;
- reducing public perception that equates difference with failure and deviance;
- taking care that welfare, education or integration measures do not stigmatise their intended beneficiaries;
- acknowledging intercultural competencies of migrant and ethnic minority youth;
- accepting different forms and meanings of young people's participation rather than expecting their conventional participation.

**See young people as actors**

The project UP2YOUTH has been primarily concerned with improving the understanding of young people’s agency in individualised late modern societies. Recommendations for policy and practice refer to how policy makers, practitioners and civil organisations should look at and address young people. This has consequences for policies for young people in general in terms of *Integrated Transition Policies* as well as for specialised policies relating to young parenthood; transitions to work of youth with a migrant or ethnic minority background; and youth participation.

**Constrained choices and geographical dilemmas**

Young people need to be seen as actors who make decisions under conditions of constrained choice. However, the destandardisation of transitions to adulthood confronts them with biographical dilemmas. Their agency to cope with these dilemmas implies a contribution to social change.

**Support and choice – redistribution and recognition**

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One-dimensional measures of education, training, support or participation risk being refused if, in using them, young people do not feel able to negotiate their identities or the complexities of their biographies and everyday lives. Social justice therefore implies balancing redistribution of resources and equal opportunities and recognition of diverse identities.

**Accept diversity in using public institutions**

Rather than segregating support in terms of separate measures support needs to be accessible and flexible within ordinary institutions. It should recognise individual coping strategies and empower rather than force them to adapt to ‘normal’ trajectories.

**Integrated Transition Policies**

The concept of *Integrated Transition Policies* provides a wider framework for an agency-based youth policy. This cross-sectoral approach coordinates all policy fields affecting young people, especially the fields of education, employment, family, welfare and youth policies. Integrated Transition Policies:

- start from and centre around young men’s and women’s *biographical perspective*;
- balance *security* (in terms of guaranteed access to material and non-material support) and *flexibility* (in terms of choice and options to reconcile different life spheres);
- require *reflexive* institutions which are able to identify different needs and to negotiate identities, aspirations and coping strategies;
- are based on the principle of *participation* in terms of choice and active influence.

**Policies for young people's to transition to parenthood**

Supporting transition to young parenthood requires:

- avoiding reducing young men's and women's choices to the timing of parenthood (too early or too late);
- recognition of the biographical dilemmas that result from the difficulties in reconciling different transition demands;
- providing both childcare and accommodation, allowing for flexible use according to individual needs;
- influencing enterprises towards implementing family-friendly working cultures in order to encourage active fathering;
- an empowerment of the informal networks of young parents by public recognition.

**Policies for migrant and ethnic minority youth**

Measures addressing youth with a migration and ethnic minority background in their transitions to work need to:

- be planned from an integrated life-cycle perspective to avoid fragmentation and misleading trajectories;
- differentiate between social and cultural factors rather than attribute disadvantage to individual lack of integration;
- allow for young people's agency and negotiation of social identities in using welfare, education or integration measures without ascribing stigma to their beneficiaries;
- encourage social and cultural creativity in formal and non-formal education settings to negotiate different identities;
- be complemented by cross-sector anti-discrimination and inclusion approaches as well as a provision of housing, child and education allowances, and support for self-employment.

**Policies for youth participation**

Enhancing young people's participation requires:

- accepting a diversity of forms of participation; and overcoming dichotomies of participation and non-participation;
- participation mechanisms in all 'hard' and 'soft' institutions regulating young people's lives and transitions;
- public spaces for expression and negotiation of individual needs and interests;
- disconnect participation rights from progress in education and transitions to work;
- recognise youth cultures as contexts in which young people develop political orientations
- conceive of all activities of young people in the public as potential participation requiring dialogue and understanding of motives and aspirations.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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## EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

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<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.up2youth.org">http://www.up2youth.org</a>
<b>Further reading</b>	UP2YOUTH newsletters and UP2YOUTH thematic reports (young parenthood, transitions to work of migrant and ethnic minority youth, youth participation): <a href="http://www.up2youth.org/downloads">www.up2youth.org/downloads</a>
<b>For more information</b>	<a href="mailto:coordination@up2youth.org">coordination@up2youth.org</a>