



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## EMPOWERING THE YOUNG FOR THE COMMON GOOD – SOCIETY

### Examining National Level Youth Policies From A Capability Perspective

15 DECEMBER 2014

#### INTRODUCTION

#### YOUTH DISADVANTAGE

**Young people are one of several groups at great risk of being, or becoming, socially disadvantaged.** Young people have been especially adversely affected by the economic recession, although the extent to which varies considerably across and within different countries. This not only important in terms of social justice and a social duty of care for the interests and wellbeing of the youngest members of society, but also the European Commission contends that *“Europe’s future prosperity depends on its young people”* and thus deserve particular support and consideration (‘Youth on the Move’). The European Commission’s ‘Social Investment Package’ seeks to strengthen people’s current and future capacities, and improve their opportunities to participate in society and the labour market. It also stresses the need for a preventative approach to policy making.

While in most countries the majority of young people do not experience problems with their education, labour market experiences etc. there are still young people who may be disadvantaged not only in ‘objective’ terms (i.e. through quantifiable measures such as employment rates) but from a ‘subjective’ point of view e.g. in terms of motivation and aspiration. Young people may also be disadvantaged in terms of demand side and macroeconomic issues (i.e. the number of available jobs).

Addressing the high levels of disadvantage amongst young people demands the development of socially innovative solutions to enable young people to live the lives that they have reason to value. Indeed the ‘Europe 2020 Strategy’ makes explicit reference to *“providing innovative education, training and employment opportunities for deprived communities”*. Participation is a crucial element of social innovation as the individual members of society cannot be seen as objects of change but rather they are the co-producers of change. The ‘EU Youth Strategy’ places particular emphasis on encouraging young people

to actively participate in society, although the focus is on democratic and political participation. The study of national policies in the report 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' also stresses the importance of taking into account the views of children, and their involvement in the development, monitoring and implementation of policy.

## CAPABILITY APPROACH

**The Capability Approach (developed by the Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen and reworked by a range of European Projects (such as Eurocap, Capright, WorkAble, SocIEtY) for the evaluation of social policies in post-industrial societies) provides an extremely fruitful framework for addressing youth inequalities that goes beyond current European and national level approaches.** A person's capabilities are the opportunity that they have to live a life that they have reason to value. The Capability Approach argues that inequalities emerge from the individual's lack of ability to convert available opportunities into a flourishing life because of internal and external constraints which become even more pressing in times of crisis and austerity. As such the Capability Approach focuses upon the individual's *potential ability* to achieve an outcome (e.g. having a job) that they value in the wider context, rather than solely looking at outcomes that have been achieved.

## NATIONAL LEVEL YOUTH POLICIES

**This policy brief focuses on the findings of a Capability Approach analysis of national level youth policies and young people's participation in 11 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Switzerland and Scotland).** Specifically this policy brief considers: (1) existing youth policies in relation to disadvantage and how inequalities are defined and measured; (2) the actors responsible for the development and delivery of policy and what the relationship is between the state and various actors; (3) the role of social innovation in the delivery and development of existing and new youth policy; and (4) the differing socio-economic conditions within which the different policies operate. Key observations are drawn adopting a comparative perspective; and recommendations to European and national level policy makers are presented regarding the development of innovative solutions to enable young people to live the lives that they have reason to value.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

### YOUTH AS A DISADVANTAGE

In this context the research has identified **a series of urgent areas of policy action.**

For many of the countries disadvantage refers not to a number of certain groups but to more or less to youth in general. **Youth as such becomes a disadvantage** e.g. acting as a barrier to labour market participation. Notwithstanding the differences between countries, in all countries similar groups of young people are affected by disadvantage: in particular young men, people with low level qualifications and early school leavers, migrants and those with poor health. During the economic crisis in some countries young people have been particularly affected by cost containment measures in social protection regimes.

### LIMITATIONS OF FOCUSING ON INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES AND DEFICITS

**Understandings of disadvantage often focus on individual attributes and deficits only.** In many countries the origin of disadvantage of youth is often seen as the result of certain characteristics of individuals and their families. Thus, there is a tendency (by for example the state, politics, society, media) to ascribe them the responsibility for their situation, rather than disadvantage being caused by wider socio-economic factors.

Personal attributes such as unemployment/'worklessness', economic inactivity, poverty and low educational attainment are only one dimension of the problems experienced by young people. In particular it seems that disadvantage is not seen as the effect of economic and labour market crisis. This means that in many countries a public discourse about the role of socio-economic and political constraints of opportunities is still lacking. Therefore, responsibility for disadvantage is not always taken by the state, and tackling inequalities and poverty among young people may not be a priority in all countries (although there are considerable national differences).

No country reported national economic growth measures to improve demand for young people on the labour market. Some examples are given in the Austrian, Italian and Scottish reports, but these seem to be the exception.

**Measures and assessments have focused on youth disadvantage and inequality from a market centred and one dimensional perspective, that does not take account of the wider contexts of young people's lives.** Our analysis has shown that socio-economic development is complex, with economic performance measures such as GDP not necessarily consistent with, or providing insight into, other measures such as those related to public health. Young people also need to be considered as a distinct (although not heterogeneous) group, as their experiences may not necessarily follow those of the aggregate socio-economic scenario. The inter-relation between young people's labour market, education, social and political participation also varies between socio-economic contexts, thus the potential corrosive influence of outcomes cannot be isolated from the wider context.

The analysis also **raises questions about the normative assumptions behind the labour market benchmarks endorsed at the European policy making level.** Understanding disadvantage as linked to certain individual and family characteristics is often closely linked to ascribing moral responsibility to young people and their families for their situation as they are seen to not be taking up available opportunities, supporting their children in an adequate way etc. Much of the focus in policy to tackle youth unemployment is on the headline employment rate indicator. As such, little or no attention is paid to job quality, which decreased between 2006 and 2012 in Europe according to analysis of data from the EU-LFS dataset (which suggested an increase in 'capability-unfriendly' job characteristics such as involuntary temporary contracts, involuntary part-time working and working time, unpaid overtime working hours and looking for another job).

**Policy measures need to take a wide and nuanced view of disadvantage.** Multiple disadvantages and young people's opportunities may be missed because of the ways in which statistics on disadvantage are categorised and collated. Disadvantage is not always understood from an intersectional or cumulative perspective, and does not seem to take into account subjective factors e.g. motivation, ability to project oneself in the future, capacity to aspire. Nor does it incorporate factors (often shaping these subjective factors) associated with wider socio-economic conditions e.g. the policy landscape, the education system, the legal framework, development of employment conditions and the quality of jobs. Hence, a multidimensional evaluation of youth disadvantage is lacking in many countries and in EU indicators.

**Programmes and measurements are often framed within a school-based and employment-centred transition regime.** Education, training or employment are framed as the route out of poverty (e.g. Austria, Germany, Denmark, Scotland, Netherlands, Belgium, Romania, Switzerland). The achievements of young people in the labour market and in formal education rely on a wide diversity of factors, some of which lie beyond the sphere of formal education and job training. Analysis of EU-SILC microdata, and macro level indicators from Eurostat and the OECD, highlights the inequalities across

**THE NORMATIVE  
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AND  
EMPLOYMENT-  
CENTRED  
TRANSITIONS**

**THE ROLE OF  
EDUCATION**

Europe in terms of young people's capability to pursue, and achieve in, education. The capability for education can be limited by personal and household circumstances, and by the policy and economic conditions in the country in which they live. However, the ways in which inequality is reinforced, reproduced and created by the different education systems, often in countries that have some of the lowest youth unemployment rates, (e.g. identified in Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland) are still not recognised and tackled in an adequate way (e.g. debates about comprehensive schooling in Austria and Germany and the negative effects of early selection).

## FRAGMENTED YOUTH POLICY

*"The purpose of youth policy is to create the conditions for learning, opportunity and experience which ensure and enable young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to be actors of democracy and to integrate into society, in particular playing an active part in both civil society and the labour market"* (Siurala, 2005: 16<sup>1</sup>). However, **youth policy is often fragmented**, covering multiple policy areas and political levels, and often takes a short, rather than long, term approach. For example, youth employment policy, social protection policies for young people and general youth promotion policies may not be coordinated. Existing programmes may not be adequately tackling youth disadvantage. Further integration of policy areas to ensure coherence and stability is needed. In Spain and Romania in particular there is a need to increase public expenditure on youth policy and policies affecting young people. The lack of systematic approaches and strategies has the effect that the needs of some 'groups' of young disadvantaged people are not recognised and adequately addressed in youth policy. Groups of young people cited by participants in this research include young people who grow and grew up in care, young offenders, and asylum seekers. There may of course be other groups of young people whose needs are not being adequately addressed. Also still lacking is a public discourse about the discriminatory practices of the education system and the labour market.

**The problems young people face in the transition to VET and employment has created intensive search processes to develop measures and institutions to structure and organise these transitions.** The comparative research has shown that measures can be differentiated between:

## TWO APPROACHES TO STRUCTURING AND ORGANISING YOUTH TRANSITIONS

- those which try to implement activities which support people in entering the standard path of VET and employment. At best they might even aim at creating opportunities to reverse the outcomes and consequences of the education system or other decisions and circumstances (such as teenage pregnancy or marriage etc.); and
- those which create additional activities and measures to tackle the problem of disadvantaged youth. This seems to rest on the assumption that for certain groups of young people the existing education pathways might be inadequate as they lack the capacity to be integrated. It seems that some of these activities are aiming to 'administer' and control disadvantaged young people and to stabilise and regulate a precarious (future), low skilled and low waged segment of the labour market.

**Even though young people are among the groups affected most by the crisis and the subsequent cuts in social policy this did not yet lead to a general reconsideration and reconfiguration of the education and transition system in European countries.** Thus, strong path dependency seems to prevail even though the existing institutional framework contributes to the growing problems of young people in many countries.

## SHAKING UP CURRENT POLICY APPROACHES

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<sup>1</sup> Siurala, L. (2005) *European framework of youth policy*. Brussels: Council of Europe Publishing.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Some examples of innovation in policy were given, as well as funding streams that seek to encourage innovation. However there does not seem to be a systemic innovative approach in government at a national level, and innovation seldom occurs in a straightforward, rationalist and goal oriented manner. Social innovation and/or good practice was often cited as happening at the local level (e.g. in Denmark, Italy, Switzerland and Scotland). These examples sometimes substituted state led social protection. This was especially the case in decentralised countries where there are local stakeholders and citizenship initiatives. Other countries had examples of top-down innovation (e.g. Belgium, Switzerland, Romania, Germany and Scotland). This raises concerns about the long-term institutionalisation and funding of socially innovative policies; as well as questions about the scaling up and transfer of innovative practice, especially in different contexts. In addition a strong path dependency in youth policies can act as a barrier to political innovation.

**From the perspective of the Capability Approach, adequate opportunities for participation (e.g. individuals being able to voice their preferences in decision making processes) are crucial to secure and improve the effectiveness of social policy measures and to reconcile them with aspects of social justice and freedom.** In some countries there is a lack of institutional or formal forms of participation, or the participation of young people is not incentivised (e.g. in France and Italy). For Spain it is even reported that youth councils are being closed. In other countries there are some forms of institutionalised participation policies or networks of organisations even though their scope/outreach and influence on policy making remains rather narrow (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Scotland). There seems to be a 'participation gap'. Participation, where it occurs, occurs through formal channels, and on adults' terms, rather than necessarily the terms of young people. Generally it seems that only 'organised' youth/those who are engaged in education or political structures have voice.

**Questions need to be asked about the effectiveness of current participative processes:**

- How inclusive are these processes, and do they privilege certain voices?
- Do they allow, and give weight and significance to, alternative voices and modes of expression?
- Under what conditions does participation take place?
- Are decisions really made within such participative processes?
- What are the ethical concerns that need to be taken into account when giving voice to disadvantaged youth in policy making (and participatory research), in order to achieve a balance between anonymity of the disadvantaged youth and at the same time giving them an individual voice?

While the 'EU Youth Strategy' emphasises encouraging young people to actively participate in society, participating or being engaged does not necessarily mean that young people's voices are being clearly heard. No country reported systematic attempts to create more informal ways of participation of young people in community life, or implementation of youth policies e.g. through structured dialogues.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented, a series of policy recommendations can be made. These recommendations draw attention to the crossroads at which the European Commission finds itself. On the one hand countries are enforcing budget cuts in response to the crisis which directly impacts on the possibility of Member States to provide policies. On the other hand the European Commission is developing initiatives to promote young people's participation by

boosting youth employment. However, guarantees for activation measures are not alone sufficient. Rather a guarantee to have the opportunity to be integrated into standard paths of VET or employment could at least be seen as an attempt to develop the capabilities of disadvantaged young people.

#### TAKING A MORE ROUNDED AND PREVENTATIVE APPROACH

The understandings of disadvantage, and the policies and programmes used to address it, should take **a more rounded and nuanced approach**; looking at for example wellbeing and quality of life and the value attached to outcomes. Without taking this approach the multiple barriers faced by many young people may be missed and not adequately addressed. If the aim is to overcome inequalities, it is necessary not only to focus on reforms of the education systems, the transition phase into employment and national employment regimes, but **also to focus on redistributive policies in favour of lone parents, low income families or the reduction of child and youth poverty as well as economic strategies to boost employment opportunities** and create sustainable growth.

**There is a need to take a preventative approach to youth disadvantage** that acknowledges the role of structural and socio-economic factors. Efforts should be made to address youth disadvantage before young people find themselves out of work, dropping out etc. In doing this there is a need to address the wider environment (e.g. income, housing, health) that can create barriers for young people in the education system and the labour market for example, as well as exploring how opportunities can be made available to young people – for example by working with employers to increase such opportunities. While it has often been highlighted that education outcomes should better fit the immediate demands of the labour market, experiences show that this does not necessarily provide more employment opportunities. More opportunities need to be made available to young people in the labour market, and in turn a discussion needs to be raised about the mismatch between education outcomes and labour market demand. It also needs to be recognised that education should not solely be focused on meeting labour market demand. Education has a much wider scope e.g. in terms of providing opportunities for individual enrichment.

#### PAYING ATTENTION TO WITHIN AND BETWEEN COUNTRY DIFFERENCES

**More attention needs to be paid to within- and between-country differences.** To date, most studies of youth unemployment have focused on the national or individual level, neglecting within- and between-country regional differences. As such, within-country differences and opportunities for the sharing of good practice between regions that are in different countries may be missed.

**Policies to tackle the transition from education must aim at integrating young people into the standard education path, employment and welfare system.** The creation of an alternative system of education, VET and welfare for so-called marginalised groups must be avoided as this might stabilise labour market segmentation and social polarisation. This approach demands the creation of transparent and transferable qualification systems all over Europe. In this context, strategies to integrate workplace learning and school based education seem best placed in particular if such integration is adapted to, or emerges from, national education and VET traditions in an adequate way.

#### PREVENTING FRAGMENTATION OF WELFARE STATES

**Even in countries with a system of alternation it has become obvious that it cannot be only businesses that have to tackle the wider demands (other than providing VET and entry into employment systems) of young people.** The prolongation and increasing complexity of socialisation processes and adolescence for young people raises the demand for public action and support systems well beyond narrowly defined activities.

We would make three demands for policies to tackle the transition between education, VET and employment.

**(1) Reversibility of education outcomes:** Most education systems in Europe fail a number of young people. They leave school early, cannot obtain adequate qualifications, or cannot proceed to the next stage in the transition phase. Adequate measures have to be provided in all Member States to make sure that young people get a second chance in the education system.

**(2) Permeability of education systems:** Many education systems in Europe channel young people into different educational paths. This not only helps to reinforce inequalities, but might also contradict changing interests, aspirations and motivation. Thus adequate processes should be set in place to allow young people to switch between educational interests in a reasonable way.

**(3) Time:** Education systems – and in particular the system addressing the transition between education, VET and employment – must take into account the different learning speeds of young people, and young people’s different ways and experiences of socialisation and growing up, to make sure that young people develop the capabilities to reconcile and integrate the different and sometimes contradictory demands of integration into the labour market, family formation etc.

**There is a need for a dataset that allows examination, down to the regional level, the inter-connectedness of the spheres of education, employment and political and social participation, from a capabilities perspective.** This would mean the inclusion of information not only on outcomes and characteristics, but on opportunities (especially in terms of their reversibility, permeability and time aspects), and the extent to which outcomes are chosen and valued. The research indicates a need to think not only in terms of quantity but also of the quality of participation, and suggests the need to re-evaluate the appropriateness of current European targets, which focus on quantity. While our analysis has helped to identify relevant conversion factors, the extent to which it can reflect on capability sets is limited without this information.

Despite efforts at the European level, at the national level **participatory policy making and implementation processes** in the policies that affect young people are still limited. As the ‘Europe 2020 Strategy’ highlights, participation is a central part of social innovation. Paternalistic approaches should be replaced by other programmes focusing on empowering the young. There may be a gap between the policy making sphere and the day to day life of the young. The promotion of the participation of the young is not only a means to inform policy, but also an empowering process. This can also have the spill over effect of increasing the relevance of young people as policy stakeholders, giving more weight to their demands.

**Consideration needs to be given to how to include the voices of the seldom heard young people,** including young people that are not participating in formal structures and organisations. In some instances the lack of these structures and organisations may limit the opportunities for young people to have their voices heard. Promoting participation by under-represented groups forms part of the ‘EU Youth Strategy’, but this does not seem to be happening systematically at the national level. This calls for innovative participatory dynamics, including for instance the use of internet and social media. Specific barriers to participation of the young at high risk of social exclusion should also be taken into account and addressed. The role of alternative modes of expression could also be explored, as well as ways in which public authorities and other organisations could embed service user participation within their processes and structures.

**GATHERING DATA  
ON CAPABILITY  
INDICATORS**

**A MORE  
INCLUSIVE  
APPROACH TO  
PARTICIPATORY  
POLICY MAKING**

## THE NEED TO RESTORE AND CREATE PROGRAMMES

In some contexts, due to the economic crisis and cuts to public funding, policies and programmes have not been developed or have been withdrawn. Therefore in these instances a priority is to **restore and create programmes** of individualised/tailor made support. Where programmes are in place, there should be an **expansion of independent support structures** for young people at risk of social exclusion which guide them through the transition process. These structures should support young people vis-à-vis institutions such as the public employment services, education systems, social systems and employers, making them aware of their rights and the opportunities on offer, but also protecting them from paternalistic and top down approaches from these institutions. In order to enhance the capabilities of young people these new, restored or expanded support structures need to take a client-oriented perspective. As such practitioners would conceptualise and enact joined-up approaches as a renegotiation and sharing of their engagement and expertise to improve the situation of each client in collaboration with the client (i.e. the young person).

## A MORE FLEXIBLE AND SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Beyond the expansion of opportunities of participation in employment and education, spaces should also be created or expanded in the employment and education systems and beyond where young people have **the right to experiment and to engage with activities, interactions and relations which allow them to develop aspirations and goals that go beyond the prescribed paths of education, employment and family formation.**

Social innovation in policy making must not be just a local, appropriate response to larger structural problems which themselves are not tackled. In addition social innovation is not a substitute for sound social protection systems. National policies should **create a very flexible framework and encourage / support local social partners** to develop projects. Education and VET systems must develop measures and strategies to support children/young people from difficult backgrounds. Policies should include free school meals, (financial) support to buy learning materials or to enable young people to participate in school related activities, as well as tutor based systems of learning support.

**Youth work systems/institutions should be developed/expanded to offer space to young people beyond education and employment related demands (such as youth centres, which already exist in many countries).**

As a minimum these systems/institutions must give young people the opportunity to spend the leisure time without the interference of social workers. But they should offer them **low threshold access to different forms of social support** reaching beyond employment or education and training related measures to debt advice services, pregnancy counselling, support against violence, drug addiction related services, HIV etc.

## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

**The research also draws attention to areas that need to be explored in future research.** For example: (1) Future research should seek the insights of young people themselves as to whether they feel relevant European policy concepts (e.g. participation, social innovation) or strategies seem to be not sufficiently implemented at national level. (2) To what extent are national policy priorities driven by European policies, and are countries able to adequately implement European initiatives in the context of constrained budgets.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The aim of the SocIEtY research project is to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged young people through social innovation.

The project explores how young people aged 15-24 live in different European



countries today; and examines what can be done to create social and institutional opportunities which will better enable them to live the lives they have reason to value.

Using Amartya Sen's Capability Approach as a framework, the project develops a broad knowledge base to foster socially innovative policymaking. Employing quantitative and qualitative methods, SocIEtY builds knowledge on how existing policies and social practices of networks of social support tackle the problems faced by disadvantaged young people; how far, and in what ways, young people's ideas, experiences, aspirations and voices can be included in policymaking; and how social innovation can link these two issues, leading to social inclusion and to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The aim of SocIEtY is to enable an innovative and structured dialogue where every participant has equal opportunities to voice their concerns in order to improve the personal and professional situation and perspectives of disadvantaged young people in society.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** Social Innovation - Empowering the Young for the Common Good (SocIEtY)

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<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="http://www.society-youth.eu/">www.society-youth.eu/</a>
<b>FOR MORE INFORMATION</b>	Contact Dr Alkje Sommerfeld: <a href="mailto:euprojects_otto@uni-bielefeld.de">euprojects_otto@uni-bielefeld.de</a>
<b>FURTHER READING</b>	Please visit: <a href="http://www.society-youth.eu">www.society-youth.eu</a> Reports on 'Youth Policies in European Countries and their Potential for Social Innovation' 'Local Stakeholders in Youth Policies in Europe' 'Inequality, Disadvantage, Social Innovation and Participation from a Capability Perspective'