

## Policy Brief

### Young people coping with inequalities - between fatalism, frustration and innovation

**Keywords:** Youth, inequalities, social innovation, un/employment, welfare, education, multi-level governance, exclusion, cities, neglect, distancing, uncertainty

Research has shown that the global economic crisis of 2008 has had a disproportionately adverse impact upon young people. Not only are they experiencing excessively high rates of unemployment but also threats to the social provision enjoyed by previous generations. When linked to other indicators of deprivation, it is clear that young people in the 16 to 24 age group are amongst the hardest hit and face more social and economic inequalities than any other group in society.

It is in this rapidly redrawn landscape of deprivation and inequalities across Europe, therefore, CITISPYCE seeks to examine:

- the changing nature of the inequalities faced by young people;
- the relationship between these inequalities and existing and emerging strategies by and for young people to deal with them;
- how policy-makers (at local, national and EU levels) might be assisted in their objectives to combat these inequalities.

This policy brief focuses on the inequalities faced by young people and the impact upon their lives today. We are happy to share initial findings on interrelated issues such as social inclusion, employment, education and participation, but would like to emphasise the preliminary status of these observations. At this stage we do not go on to explore the potentially innovative social practices which have been uncovered in the course of the fieldwork so far. These will be the subject of a future policy brief.



## Background

The CITISPYCE project is set against the backdrop of the rapid redrawing of social inequalities across Europe. This includes both a retrenchment of longstanding inequalities and the emergence of new or forgotten disadvantages, together with an erosion of the status and protections previously enjoyed by many citizens of European cities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Europe's cities where severe economic pressures combined with significant shifts in their demographic make-up (resulting from successive waves of migration and increase in numbers of young people) are leading to increased social, economic and spatial segregation.

We have been concerned to examine the changing nature of inequalities since the 2008 economic crisis together with the relationship between inequalities facing young people and existing and new strategies to tackle them. In particular, we have been interested in potentially innovative strategies/practices devised and engaged in by young people in which they seek to counter the causes of inequalities. CITISPYCE looks both at the content of new strategies and also their implementation, through a piloting phase (actively testing innovations) which has been an integrated part of the project design.

In spite of the barriers which young people are facing in the labour market, and in gaining access to usable welfare and education provision, there is evidence that some have chosen (or been forced) to re-imagine entry into the labour market through their own innovations in economic and social entrepreneurship. CITISPYCE, therefore, seeks to re-evaluate the potential of innovative practices of and for young people that previously may have been overlooked as examples of low-status work in the informal or semi-formal economy, or as economically and politically insignificant articulations of passing trends among young people.

### **Methodology: Multi-sectoral, multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary approach**

Given that the factors which shape social inequalities and the risk of exclusion for young people are complex and multi-dimensional, our consortium includes academics from different disciplines and theoretical perspectives and third-sector organisations with on-the-ground experience of working with young people. This allows research design and research outcomes to reflect the complexity of social inequalities,



without flattening young people's experiences to only one interpretation. We also have policy-makers involved in this project at the city level, since it is in cities that the problems are most clearly demonstrated and where some of the most innovative solutions are more likely to be found.

In addition, the project design envisaged using the macro-, meso- and micro-levels as a heuristic to guide the evolving phases of research (and to allow for appropriate and distinct research methods to be applied in each phase). This was organised through three consecutive work packages. The first examined the macro-level causes and symptoms of young people's inequalities in ten countries across the EU, especially as they play out in the ten cities where partners are located. Individual city/country reports provided material for a comparative analysis of various structural determinants and causes of inequalities affecting young people<sup>1</sup>.

The second work package looked at meso-level dynamics in the form of infrastructural causes and manifestations of inequalities in two 'case study' neighbourhoods in each city. Based on a mix of social research methods, it included document analysis, site visits and a total of 146 expert interviews in 20 neighbourhoods. These focused on the socio-spatial characteristics of the neighbourhood, the local social infrastructure, its relationship to inequalities, and incidences of social innovation. Individual city reports fed into a comparative report<sup>2</sup> and an overview of policy frameworks in place in these cities.

The third work package focused on qualitative investigation at the micro-level, to capture young people's own perceptions of inequalities and their causes. The methods used to collect data included participant observation and in-depth interviews through multiple encounters with young people drawn mainly - but not exclusively - from the ten cities' case study areas. In all, 445 interviews and 26 focus groups were

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<sup>1</sup> WP2 Comparative Report (Stigendal 2103)

<sup>2</sup> "Local matters? Neighbourhoods and social infrastructure as spaces of reproducing, producing, mitigating or counteracting social inequalities in 10 European cities" (Guentner, Seukwa, Gehrke 2014)



conducted. The methods allowed a holistic approach to suit and support the complex and multi-dimensional layers of inequalities that young people are facing.

Slicing up social investigation into these three levels is problematic, as they are obviously intertwined. Yet, part of the CITISPYCE project rationale is to understand factors that are specific to each level, while also seeking to uncover the interplay between these three levels in order to help understand how social inequalities are (re)produced and how they may be counteracted. This brings into dialogue a range of different external actors at these three levels, including policy makers, practitioners, third sector/voluntary organisations, young people and networks incorporating all of these.

At the same time there is also a strong focus on the local dimension. This not only enables a clearer picture of the deprivation and inequality that exist in places, but also of the problems as they are experienced by people living and working there. Furthermore, it provides insights into the visibility and impact of policies and projects (government, private and third sector) aimed at young people in the contexts of their neighbourhoods or everyday lives.

We should stress at this point that, throughout the course of our research, we have sought to include and give voice to the young people who are at the heart of our project.

## Initial findings

### 1: Exclusionary tendencies

A comparison of the ten cities in their national contexts shows that labour markets, housing conditions and education systems still contain mechanisms which tend to exclude young people (if inadvertently). Across Europe, young people find it hard to access financial and social support. Furthermore, current reform trends are biased towards a problem-oriented approach that deals with symptoms of inequality and may be perceived by those affected as “blaming the victim” and not consulting. They rather individualise social problems than tackle underlying causes. For some groups this may be appropriate, for others not. In the latter case, individual strategies may have adverse effects. There is, therefore, an urgent need to deal with the causes of inequality.

*Current policy trends appear to treat young people as a 'problem'. Young people perceive this as 'blaming the victim'*



*Young people are left in a state of uncertainty by the shifts that have occurred in the economy as a result of the financial crisis and subsequent neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state*

The work in CITISPYCE has revealed a number of such causes. One such cause is the problem-oriented approach mentioned above. Another is financialisation (exacerbated by the economic crisis post 2008) which has deeply affected many young people by leading to a retrenchment of the welfare sector, making housing less accessible and causing indebtedness. Such causes, and also the exclusionary tendencies of the labour market, (where young people who are often employed on poor terms and conditions and with a lack of learning opportunities), leave young people in a state of uncertainty. In fact, uncertainty seems to be the most common symptom of inequality among young people across Europe. The symptoms of such causes are clearly visible in all the ten cities although to different extent and scope. The ten cities and the societies to which they belong are indeed very different.

One of the conclusions from our comparative study highlights the increasing divergence in Europe but we also stress an opposite trend, namely an increasing convergence due, in particular, to the continuing financialisation that affects societies all across Europe. An outcome of these opposing trends is that countries, cities, and indeed neighbourhoods, are becoming increasingly dependent upon each other. The lack of awareness and understanding of these interdependencies within Europe, and also between different parts of an individual city, is another cause of the inequalities that affects young people and one clearly highlighted in CITISPYCE.

*Distance (both physical and symbolic) reinforces young people's experiences of isolation*

The project shows the significance of those spaces that are created within the cities and neighbourhoods developing into a solid social distancing. It exposes how to some extent this could be mitigated by ethnic or kinship communities which offer a safe environment, or by organisations providing easy access to services within the deprived neighbourhood. This is the case that we can see, for example, in the development of the Health and Social Community Centre of Fakulteta (Sofia), oriented to provide consultations, training, and health and social assistance to young families, children and young people of the Roma community who do not tend to use services outside the area.

A related issue is an impression that young people's rights (that featured prominently in the 2012 EU Youth Report) lack effective enforcement locally. There are only a few signs of young people having a real impact.



Young people  
facing  
inequalities  
feel that their  
voices are  
ignored by  
policy-makers

“...Look, since I am not involved (in politics) I couldn’t give him/her (the politician) an advice on what to do...”

And where this is the case, it may well be only the affluent and well educated who can do so. This is worrying, as early positive experiences of efficacy are a key factor for later political participation. <sup>i</sup>

## 2: Rush to ‘innovate’ may threaten basic services for young people

Across the cities  
involved in our  
research, it  
appears that  
policy-making is  
piecemeal and  
short term,  
reflecting the  
impact of  
austerity  
measures at the  
local level

As has been referred to above, there are significant differences between our case study cities and neighbourhoods e.g. in income levels and employment rates. Yet the comparative analysis and interpretation of the data indicates three sets of neighbourhood attributes in all cities which appear to contribute to the production and reproduction of inequalities: distance and isolation of the areas within the wider urban fabric, decay and neglect of places within neighbourhoods (see below) and piecemeal and inappropriate policy responses.

With regard to the latter, there is a striking lack of coherent frameworks. Policy approaches to social inclusion of young people (outside school) seem piecemeal at best, based on projects and successive waves of experimental policy. One policy fashion replaces another, jeopardising previous results. These initiatives seem to be driven more by the imperative of having to make budget savings rather than developing ‘new’ responses to young people’s needs. Worryingly, the ten city case studies are full of stories of disinvestment.

A teacher in Rotterdam observed:

*“Until 2009 there were a lot of investments in the social domain, and there was sufficient support possibilities for young people. A lot of attention was paid to school dropout. This was all abandoned from 2010 onwards [because of budget cuts as a response to the economic crisis]. There are no community centres anymore. And even if they are still open, there are hardly any groups of inhabitants making use of these. Specifically for young people there is nothing available anymore.”*

Youth services, where they are in place, seem to be bound to conflicting agendas of public order, employability, and also human rights and social inclusion in a broader sense. Resources seem scarce and limited to short-



*A general trend seems to be that, where youth services are available, their focus is narrowed to employability and preventing anti-social behaviour*

term projects rather than robust and reliable infrastructure and long-term perspectives. In such circumstances, innovative approaches to servicing seem to be about resistance against rigid and narrow policy goals, and subversive strategies of providers to stretch those agendas and make full use of the leeway they leave in implementation.

A general and not surprising observation is that locally based workers and civil society organisations seem much closer to local problems and better placed to address them than many municipal departments and civil servants. In Athens, some community-based self-help projects, initiated either by local administration or by civil society, have been set up in recent years to mitigate the dramatic economic problems and their side-effects, including social groceries and health centres, clothes exchange, communal cooking etc. A good example of how civil society may turn temporary initiatives into sustainable and inclusive local institution is the community centre Sofielunds Folkets Hus in Malmö, started exactly 20 years ago and hosting a folk high school since 2005 <sup>ii</sup>. Along these lines, several implementers of integration initiatives point out how the participation of young volunteers in the implementation of the service is of vital importance for its sustainability.

### **3: Young people's perceptions of inequalities**

A key aspect of CITISPYCE has been to engage directly with young people, especially those facing inequalities at the local level, and to gain insights into their situation through their perceptions and lived experiences.

A recurrent theme in interviews and focus groups involving more than 600 young people was the low quality of living conditions and the urban environment - overcrowded homes, squalor and run-down and neglected public spaces. This plays into those neighbourhoods being seen as less desirable areas in which to live or with which to be associated. Many of these sentiments reflected on young people's sense of their own neighbourhoods becoming polarised (Malmo) or ghettoised (Birmingham, Brno, Hamburg, Netherlands, Sofia). This trend was prevalent in all cities where the research was carried out.

The poor housing conditions and decaying and neglected public spaces in the neighbourhoods where young people lived were considered by them to contribute to their inequalities. They felt stigmatised by their address

*Many young people feel that the decaying and neglected neighbourhoods in which they live are yet another cause of their inequality*



and many saw it as another barrier to their chances of getting a job outside their area. For example, in one of the neighbourhoods in Birmingham, young people in a focus group made the point about feeling excluded from other parts of the city because of where they lived:

*'there's certain people that obviously I don't get on with because of where I'm from so it's one of them ones' 'it's postcodes'*

*'basically if you're from Handsworth you can't go Aston, Newtown, Nechells or other places'*

For these young people, the poor quality and provision of public infrastructure was yet another sign of their inequalities as it appeared that the public authorities did not see them as important. A young person in Agia Sophia, Athens, commented:

*'...It is an area offering low quality of life standards. There is nothing: no cinemas, no courts, no music scenes despite the fact that there are numerous young people with artistic interests, there is no point of reference for the youth, just a few local coffee shops. However, there is a sports club. This is not a matter of inability; it's a matter of inexistence ..... The area of Agia Sophia has been neglected since day one. It is downgrading for a fact...'*

Talking about one of the deprived neighbourhoods in Krakow, two young people observed:

*'Nothing happens here, it's so unpleasant, and I feel like being in a horror movie. (...) It means that nothing happens, it's desolated, there are no people, you do not know who is hiding behind the bushes.'*

*'I don't use any local services. There is nothing happening that would be attractive for me in terms of the services offered. (...) Actually, I find it difficult to say what should happen for the services to be attractive for me.'*

Young people who expressed despair about their conditions in terms of services and opportunities, revealed there to be a decline in key layers of support that were expected to help the transition from child to adulthood. These cutbacks in resources of the statutory agencies for information, guidance and support services appear to have reinforced a growing sense of distance between young people and those in authority.

*'The authorities only take care of the city centre, they neglect us.'*

*Distancing between young people and those in authority is reinforced by cuts in resources*



Many disadvantaged young people believe that turning to state or municipal institutions for any kind of assistance is a waste of time

These have also limited the horizons of some young people, making the transition into a new economy much more challenging.

In a similar vein, young people expressed unease about service staff and opportunities with regard to job preparation schemes. Such experiences lead some young people to rather fatalistic views on public institutions and current policies. A young person from Sofia was resigned to this lack of engagement by municipal officials:

*“They are not interested, they don’t care who does what, who is idle, who works, who does not. They just do nothing.”*

Young people also ridiculed the emphasis on quality education as a safeguard against unemployment in the light of dramatic rises in youth unemployment.

A young person from Athens told us that:

*“... I would never rely on my University degree to find a job. It’s one thing to be a plumber and another to be a political scientist! If your faucet gets broken you will call the plumber, but who will call me? There are so many political scientists who are nothing, just thin air”.*

In Rotterdam, a young woman highlighted the resignation amongst her friends at the difficulties they experienced in getting a job:

*“At the moment I see more people who have given up, because it is not leading anywhere. At a certain point they think: all the effort doesn’t pay back, so I might as well quit”*

Nevertheless, many young unemployed people are ready and motivated to enter the labour market. They just need an opportunity to get started. Dominant social security and labour market policies in the countries and cities in our study, however, tend to try to move marginalised and unemployed young people towards low-skilled jobs rather than support them towards entrepreneurship and self-employment. A young female would-be entrepreneur in Birmingham expressed her frustration at this lack of support:

*‘I went to the job centre, I’ve been with them for a year and they haven’t provided me any support for business entrepreneurship and only help people looking for jobs. I don’t want a job but want to run my own business, I often feel like I’m struggling with this battle by myself’*



## Conclusion: Inequalities

### *Exclusionary tendencies of the labour market*

*Some young people are isolated by the shifts that have occurred in the economy as a result of the financial crisis and subsequent neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state*

Two broad trends that were brought to the fore and presented in their respective regional shapes, are neo-liberalisation and financialisation, and their acceleration and accentuation after the 2008 economic and financial crisis. These have resulted in unprecedented and dramatic levels of working poor, youth unemployment and social uncertainty<sup>iii</sup>. The lack of employment opportunities and precarious working conditions are key concerns for many of the disadvantaged young people interviewed for the CITISPYCE project, regardless of their city, area of residence, gender, financial, educational or employment status.

### *Retrenchment in welfare provision*

*Young people trying to cope with their inequalities are often frustrated at the lack of support available and feel powerless to overcome the barriers facing them on their own*

For others, there is also frustration with the support services available, either for getting a job or for becoming self-employed, especially when they are motivated to find ways to maintain their independence. Some turn this into a positive driver to find alternative ways to survive and thrive (sometimes at the margins of society), whereas others become fatalistic about their situation and struggle to see beyond the barriers in their way. The cuts in services for young people and the increasing difficulties they have in finding guidance and support have led to a growing sense of isolation and powerlessness amongst some young people. This further exacerbates the sense of distancing and disconnect they feel and has, in turn, contributed to a break down in trust between themselves and those in authority.

### *The urban environment*

Across all cities of the study, for young people the conditions of their local area were a source of fatalism and frustration. Some who felt resigned to their neighbourhoods were closed in at the low end of the secondary labour market or informal economy. In many cases (Rotterdam, Brno, Sofia, Birmingham) this even led to a pull towards the shadow or illicit economy.

Young people across different contexts emphasised the need to have a space where they feel valued and acknowledged by others and also spaces for self-expression. Yet often they also expressed their concern



when taking the space, as often they are accused of illegal actions when they are using spaces in ways that others do not like (e.g. graffiti). A comment from a focus group in Barcelona highlights the problem:

*“Since there are no spaces for young people, it increases the people in the street. Then the police suspects of so many young people in the streets, they must be smoking joints, [but] it is not always so, in some cases yes. But it is not their fault if they do not have a space, they won’t stay the whole day at home, overwhelmed between four walls”.*

### ***Institutional policy failure***

The individual city reports make frequent reference to policy interventions at the local level which appear to be driven by the imperative of making financial savings or by policy-makers’ characterisation of young people and their needs. It seems that hasty short-term and sometimes experimental responses to the latest policy objectives are placing basic services for young people in jeopardy. There is little evidence of placing young people’s contexts, struggles and innovations at the heart of policy approaches. Moreover, youth services, where they are in place, seem to be bound to conflicting agendas of public order, employability on the one hand and human rights and social inclusion in a broader sense on the other. The mismatch between policy-makers’ and young people’s perceptions of their needs reinforces the distancing between them. This manifests itself in the nature of services available for employment, education and for the provision of community infrastructures. In spite of consultative processes in some cities, young people’s views are listened to but seldom heard.

### **Conclusion: Potential for innovation**

An area in which there may be opportunities for innovation is in the voids or spaces left by institutions as they withdraw or reduce services for young people. Initiatives which seek to fill these gaps in ways that also help connect (or re-connect) young people with those in authority may not just be compensatory. They may also stimulate changes in the approach to policy-making and delivery which counter the current tendency to limit the scope of interventions.

Young people in transition to adulthood with limited social and cultural capital, and struggling to enter the labour market, may be fatalistic about their life chances but still enjoy music, media and socialising with their

*Rush to  
‘innovate’  
may threaten  
basic services  
for young  
people*

*Opportunities  
for innovation  
may arise  
when  
institutional  
providers  
withdraw from  
activities*

*Creative  
practices can  
offer a safe and  
non-  
judgmental  
way for young  
people to  
develop their*



friends. They may, therefore, be attracted to arts-based activities which offer opportunities to explore their own creativity with their peers and develop their social competences. In addition, the participants may gain access to networks through which they can expand their connections.

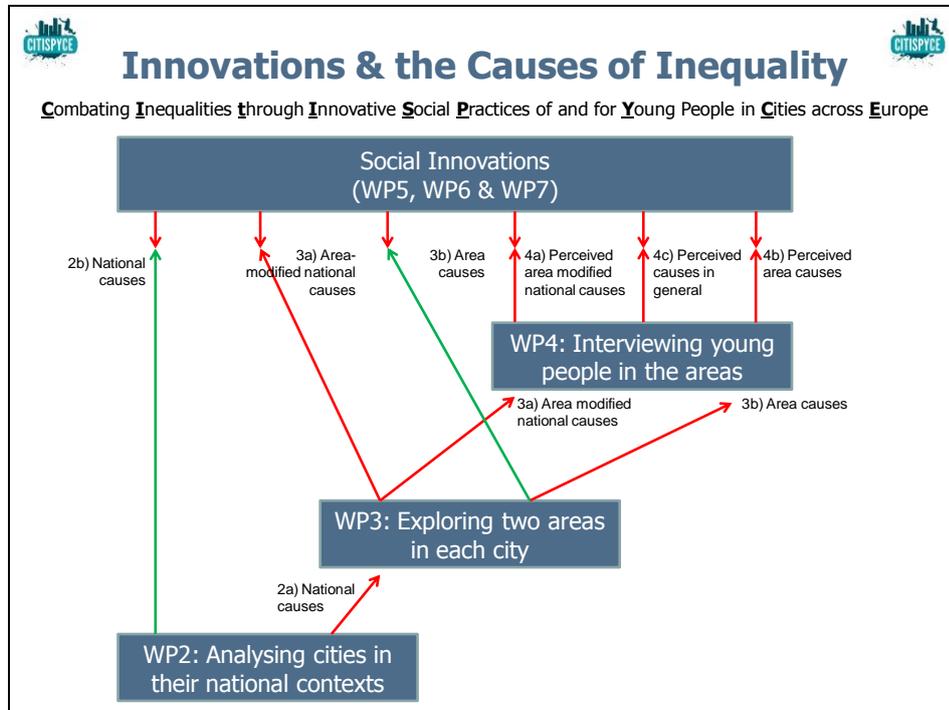
Young people with greater social competences, however, appear to be able to navigate physical and symbolic distances more effectively. Their strategies for bridging include making use of technology, social media and social networks (e.g. making connections that over time can be turned from “weak online ties” into “strong offline ties”). Maybe most strikingly, they are also able to expand their zones of familiarity (i.e. de-ghettoisation) through their uses of alternative spaces. There were numerous examples of young people seeking out public spaces such as youth centres, libraries and NGOs in alternative parts of the city. They had the skills and confidence to cross the boundaries - physical and symbolic - and appropriate such spaces in different ways. They became spaces that allow young people to experiment and interact with new people and ideas; in many ways beyond their original designs and the expectations of people and authorities managing them.

*Social media and social networks can play a key part in enabling young people to move beyond their 'zones of familiarity'*

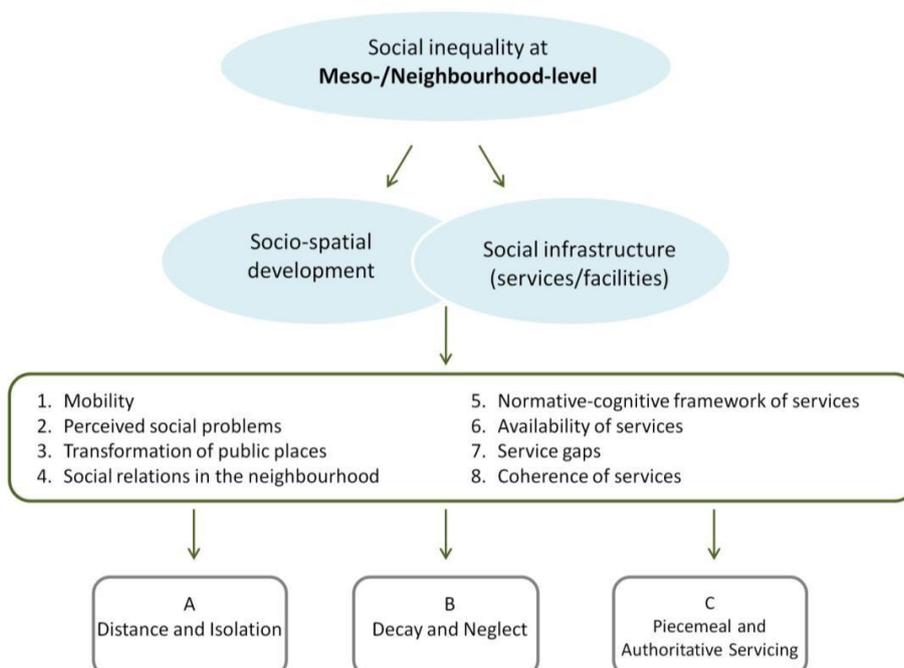
During the fieldwork, we have identified a number of potentially innovative social practices which appear to address some of the symptoms and causes of young people’s inequalities as set out above. Our next policy brief will explore, inter alia, the effectiveness of such interventions, including barriers to implementation and their potential for transferability from one context to another.

Appendix:

**Diagram 1:** Relationships between the social inequalities as identified at the macro, meso and micro levels and innovation



**Diagram 2:** Three clusters of social inequality at the neighbourhood level (WP3)





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<sup>i</sup> for more detail, please refer to the CITISPYCE WP 2 reports and the comparative WP 2 report by Mikael Stigendal

<sup>ii</sup> for more detail, please refer to CITISPYCE WP 3 reports and the comparative report by Güntner/Seukwa/Gehrke

<sup>iii</sup> Stigendal WP2 comparative report 2013