'Social inclusion of youth on the margins of society: more opportunities, better access and higher solidarity'

An evidence-based policy conference on 'Youth and Social Inclusion', European Commission, Brussels, November 2011

CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

Anchored by the Policy Review of the Youth Research Cluster on Social Inclusion, the European Commission hosted a conference to listen to and debate presentations from the five studies[1] that informed that cluster. Participants came from all three corners of the triangle of youth research, youth policy and youth practice. This conference report endeavours to capture and crystallise the essence of that debate and to highlight key themes relevant to policy emerging from the research studies; it is not designed to repeat or replicate the conclusions drawn by the Policy Review, though it will at times reinforce them.

The core aim of the 'Youth and social exclusion' studies has been

> to achieve a comprehensive and integrated approach and provide policy recommendations to dealing effectively with the social exclusion of young people in terms of causes, processes, changes and prospects.

Social exclusion both as a concept and as a reality is, of course, a contested issue. It has been interrogated in many ways (see, for example, Colley *et al* 2007), can be pitched at many levels (economic, political, cultural, social), and has a variety of meanings and consequences. Put simply, however, it has to do with some form(s) of obstruction to full normative participation in society: (a deficit of) access, capacity, opportunities, motivation, information, and other factors besides. The circumstances of young people considered to be socially excluded have been prevalent for many years within some communities and amongst some social groups of young people. Today, especially following the economic crisis throughout Europe, young people more generally are facing challenges around 'pathways to inclusion' – not only in education and the labour market, but in family life, health and housing. Though lives still have to be lived, and can be lived on the margins (see Williamson 2004), they are lives often characterised by risk, vulnerability and threat – to selves, friends and family, neighbourhoods and the wider society. Hence the commitment both of Member States and the European Commission (through its 2009 Youth Strategy – see Council of the European Union 2009) to strengthen opportunities, access and solidarity for young people, especially those who are more 'disadvantaged' (otherwise sometimes depicted as those with fewer opportunities). The construction of *barriers* to prevent exclusion and marginality, and the establishment of *bridges* enabling those already on the margins to find routes back into the mainstream represent central contemporary youth policy challenges.

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[1] YiPPEE (young men and young women in public care beyond compulsory schooling); CSEYHP (homeless young people); EUMARGINS (young adult immigrants in seven urban-metropolitan areas); EDUMIGRON (young people at the turning point of leaving compulsory education in multi-ethnic urban communities); and YOUNEX (unemployed and 'precarious' youth)

The conference was introduced by some framework-setting observations (by Dagmar Kutsar, co-author of the Policy Review, and by Antonia Wulff, chair of the Council of Europe Advisory Council for Youth). There were then three thematic sessions:

- Overcoming biographical disadvantages – individual agency of disadvantaged young people
- Inclusive, accessible and affordable learning – school and society related formal and non-formal learning actions
- Pathways of transition (to adulthood, parenthood, a job, civic and social integration) – policy implications

The conference ended with a panel guiding a policy-focused discussion of the implications of these findings. This conference report does not intend to summarise the proceedings in this sequential form but instead to reflect and represent the dynamics of the debate, especially those themes that threaded through and cross-cut specific presentations and thematic sessions.

OASiS – Opportunities, Access and Solidarity in (EU) Societies

The metaphor of an oasis is, arguably, apposite for disadvantaged young people at risk of homelessness, and from care and migrant/ethnic backgrounds, who need 'watering' and who, in some significant respects, have been deserted and cut off from the support and pathways available to most young people. The acronym also captures the central planks of the 2009 EU Youth Strategy.

A composite life story

Even platforms of robust empirical research can benefit from an exercise in imagination. Here is an imaginary 'composite' young person with all the characteristics that were the focus of the five research studies, parts of whom were described at different points of the conference, who secures a successful and desirable transition to adult life through the support advocated in the Policy Review:

> *From a poor 'disadvantaged' background and a dysfunctional unsupportive family, with a migrant background, taken into public care, facing poor prospects, s/he was provided with properly resourced 'compensatory' support from an early age – in school, leisure time, and later with careers advice, training opportunities, and labour market prospects. There were 'critical people at critical moments', and access to a 'trusted adult'. Help with education and accommodation in early adulthood was made available. That supportive framework responded to the individual's basically conventional aspirations, motivated and strengthened the exercise of their voice and commitment, enabled them to make positive choices and resist negative pressures, and led to engagement and inclusion, civic and personal responsibility, human dignity, and a meaningful life.*

Terminology

Throughout the conference, terminology – beyond the routine challenges of many people engaging in what is not their native language – was contentious. It had been an issue in the Policy Review. Irrespective of the language (for example, disadvantaged, disaffected, with fewer opportunities, disengaged, excluded, marginalised, 'put out', cut off), there is general understanding of its meaning, though always scope for misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Perhaps a key issue is whether the 'negativity' of an expression has a positive mirror-image: re-engaged, integrated or included.

Evidence or evident?

Notwithstanding the evidence from the research studies, there was a concern that many of the issues raised were already well-documented. The question was no longer whether or not we know, but what we will, or can, do about it. There is a wealth of knowledge about the growing 'youth divide', both between and within the countries of Europe. Increasingly, concern is expressed about the extent to which labour market futures are commensurate with educational qualifications achieved. There is a recurrent issue of young people being 'stifled by their own past' – despite all personal efforts and wider support systems, they are still sucked back into the comfort zones of familiarity.

The intersection of inequalities

Half a century ago, drawing on Merton's theories of social structure, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) wrote about blocked opportunity structures and how young people 'resolved' them in different ways: through crime, retreat, resistance and rebellion. The conference repeatedly drew attention to the clustering of problems: rarely do 'disadvantaged' young people suffer from a single disadvantage, they almost invariable experience multiple challenges in their lives. These include: violence and discrimination; educational underachievement and unemployment; family illness, family conflict and a lack of family support; running away, substance misuse, criminality and criminalisation. The old 'grand narratives' of inequality – gender, race, disability, geography/locality – have certainly not disappeared in a tide of post-modernity, but are powerfully present in these research studies. They reinforce the point that, without interventions that can create 'turning points' in these young people's lives, typical and indeed predictable paths of social exclusion will persist.

A hierarchy of policy possibility

The conference noted clearly that, like a matrioska doll, there is a range of 'levels' of policy possibility and challenge that sit within each other. These are, however, perhaps best presented as a list:

- Welfare regimes (facilitating or obstructing the possibilities of inclusion)
- Youth policy (youth investment that is flexible and enabling, or rigid and regulatory)
- Public institutions (and their relationships and coherence)
- NGOs (their density, suitability and credibility)
- Those who work with young people (professional and volunteers, levels of skill)
- **Young people** (their aspirations, motivation, determination and resilience)
- Local communities and cultures
- Family (or public care) contexts

All of these can pull or push in both positive and negative directions, and in harmony or conflict. The conference was emphatic that positive public sector intervention, in conjunction with the NGO sector, can make the difference for more marginalised young people and confront some of the more adverse influences in their lives. The story, over the past decade, around public care and post-compulsory educational participation by care leavers in the UK is an exemplary illustration of this point.

What 'disadvantaged' young people told the research and the conference

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds communicated some understandably mixed messages, largely from the juxtaposition of resilience versus resignation. Some had felt that 'nobody cares': being an outsider and being treated as one had produced a loss of faith in themselves and diminished self-belief. But deeper probing over time revealed a gritty determination amongst many of these young people: a desire not to be seen as different, to be understood, to contribute and to be involved. Sometimes such purposeful motivation arose from their negative childhood experiences: they did not wish to 'be like their family'. Such perspectives reinforced one of the old mantras of youth policy and political rhetoric. Young people are resources, not (just) problems, and policy and provision can be constructed *by and with* young people, not (just) for them.

Policy winners

Some core policy messages threaded through the conference, ones that would appear to be applicable to young people from the spectrum of disadvantaged backgrounds:

- **The importance of 'lead professionals' / 'trusted adults':** Mentoring and 'key worker' attachment to disadvantaged young people has proved both a popular policy option and demonstrated some effectiveness, but the sustaining importance of the family (however dysfunctional) should not be overlooked.

- **Recognise and respect young people's agency:** Young people will always struggle to 'make a life', however adverse their circumstances. Engaging with, and supporting their personal agency is as important as addressing structural obstacles and opportunities.

- **Take the time to understand culture and motivation:** Young people may not always take sensible decisions but they usually make decisions that make sense *to them* at the time. Working out 'what makes young people tick' is a critical starting point for working out which pathways may serve them best.

- **Involve young people in design, implementation and evaluation of policy:** Beyond fulfilling the aspiration of Article 12 of the UN Convention on Children's Rights, stressing children's right to have a say in matters that concern them, the perspectives of young people are an important dimension in the formulation and execution of good policy.

- **Joining up services:** strengthening 'partnerships', encouraging 'multi-agency' approaches and 'working together' is likely to make for better policy, though clear boundaries, responsibility and accountability are still required: joint work should be viewed as a fruit cocktail, not a fruit purée!

- **Safety-nets – that can also be trampolines:** In many, if not all, localities, there are usually NGOs or municipal provision that can 'catch' the most disadvantaged – a last refuge to provide food, accommodation and warmth. Such agencies also clearly have the potential to 'launch' young people back on constructive pathways to inclusion.

- **The role of youth work in enabling (consideration of) personal change:** There would be a broad consensus that school inclusion, labour market insertion, careers guidance, and drug or crime prevention are not 'youth work's' explicit and primary objectives. Nevertheless, through the relationships, support and opportunities it extends, more disadvantaged young people (if they are reached) often contemplate changing their behaviour and the direction of their lives, and seek further support to do so. Such *personal* change is an essential pre-requisite of *positional* change.

Policy challenges

The conference also identified some potential challenges in taking the policy agenda forward:

- **Policy transfer:** Because policy is so embedded in national, even regional and local cultures and traditions, even the very best of practice in one context needs to be 're-tuned' and attuned to new settings if it is going to produce an equivalent impact elsewhere.

- **Scaling up from pilot projects:** For a range of reasons (such as fresh political support, generous funding arrangements, keen professional commitment), pilot projects and programmes can demonstrate levels of success and positive outcomes that are difficult to replicate on a larger scale.

- **Windfalls v 'perverse behaviour'** [unforeseen benefits and unintended consequences]: Youth policy initiatives can produce unexpected additional outcomes that no-one really anticipated; conversely, when expectations are too rigid (with tight costs and timescales), delivery agents may not in fact reach the real target groups.

- **Hitting the target, but missing the point** (systems conspiring against professional efficacy): In a target and outcome driven policy environment, there can be a risk, at many levels, of establishing and hitting targets that in fact have little or no bearing on what really needs to be done with and for more disadvantaged young people.

- **The real influence of evidence…** Evidence will never be absolutely conclusive and always needs interpretation – occurring in the light of prevailing political and economic contexts and priorities. Quantitative data usually conceal numerous calibrations and variations – in circumstance, motivation, possibility, support – amongst any group in question that would be exposed through more in-depth qualitative inquiry. The major planks of effective policy and practice across the domains of youth disadvantage are already fairly evident.

- **… or a reason for <u>inaction</u>?**
  Since evidence can always be contested, sometimes the quest and request for 'more evidence' smacks of a political excuse for not acting. There are always exceptions to the rule. In politics and policy, evidence is made use of selectively and expediently.

- **So why bother with evidence at all?**
  Sceptics often doubt the mantra of 'evidence-based policy making', arguing that other factors (most significantly politics and ideology, but also resources and capacity) shape and influence the direction of policy more strongly. But this is not an argument to abandon the quest for 'evidence'. Even without evidence, policy will still be made. Evidence may at least forestall more impetuous and populist political decisions if not more proactively contribute to political rationality and sense. Despite populist pressures, for example, in the field of substance misuse, 'Just Say No' campaigns are completely ineffective; evidence is equally robust on the matter of drugs education – it does raise awareness, but has little effect on behaviour. Politics and policy that ignores such evidence will fail to make any progress on the challenges it seeks to address.

- **The dilemmas of targeting and the risk of stigma:** For the most excluded young people, some degree of targeting is absolutely essential, preferably within a system of 'universal service' provision. With appropriate care, labeling and stigma can be avoided, and services can be directed at those who are most in need of them.

- **A policy paradox**
  Both in the EU and its Member States (and indeed some transnational NGOs), there can be a policy rhetoric of inclusion, but a policy framework that in fact maintains exclusion. Ironically, in reference back to the point above, if policy initiatives are not carefully targeted at those most in need of support and opportunity, they can easily be taken up by young people who are already relatively included. In that way, youth policy can inadvertently exacerbate the youth divide.

- **Distinguishing policy structures from empirical realities:** Exploring what is actually happening on the ground in terms of relationships, progress, outcomes and destinations – almost irrespective of the policy framework – is an important task. The most disadvantaged young people are often, for many different reasons (fear, uncertainty, a lack of confidence, unfamiliarity, and more), reluctant to engage with new possibilities, opportunities and experiences.
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- **Choice and Compulsion:** If evidence suggests that some experiences and opportunities are 'good' for young people, how can it be *ensured* that they get them? Compulsion is a contentious and often unpopular term: perhaps it should be 'robust encouragement'. Very skilled practitioners have the best chance of getting the most alienated and suspicious young people involved.

Conclusion

The conference did not dissent in relation to the central messages conveyed by the research studies. There was clear consensus that policy development needed to intervene as early as possible in the lives of young people from the public care system, those at risk of becoming homeless, and those from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds. Community service organisations alongside public authorities could play an important role in:

- Avoiding social dislocation
- Promoting attachment
- Maintaining hope
- Providing stepping stones
- Achieving destinations

Yet, in times of austerity and recession, unconditional offers to those needing or requesting public support are rapidly receding. Young people will weigh the nature of any 'policy offer' in different ways. We all make 'trade-offs' and young people are no different – but the criteria they invoke in considering a policy offer are often quite invisible to the adult (policy maker's) eye. Hence the need to pay full attention to young people's culture and motivation (see above).

The big policy question will not necessarily be whether or not societies make the offer to young people suggested by this research, but the basis on which the offer is made. Will there be conditions? What will be the eligibility criteria? Will there be sanctions for non take-up, non-compliance or non-completion? An increasingly frequently asked question is: if society does provide the opportunities in question, will young people be *expected or required* to make the most of them? It is not unreasonable to set out conditions and expectations, but everything depends on what they are. Otherwise, there is a serious risk – irrespective of the evidential arguments promoted by this research – of policy, once more, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

References

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