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Rights and Responsibilities
in Social Cohesion

Seeking to address as broad a theme as youth and social cohesion in Europe, and the rights and responsibilities inherent in deepening the latter, demands an elaborate and complex analysis of the myriad challenges facing youth across the continent.

Though an article for Coyote may be limited in how far it can undertake such analysis, light can be shed, here, on some of the particular difficulties being experienced by European youth, and how we, as those committed to overcoming these difficulties, can determine responses. The urgency of this theme, both in terms of the goal of strengthening civic bonds – not least at a moment when economic, financial and climate crises compete for column inches – and, perhaps more poignantly, in terms of the impact upon individual lives, makes consideration of improving the conditions and opportunities enjoyed by young people in Europe ever more significant.

While I will focus here on youth as a distinct social group in relation to the rest of the population, it is crucial to remember that challenges of diversity and inequality occur within this group too. Moreover, despite the difficulties of defining "youth", we can acknowledge that it is a growing demographic group worldwide: in addition, changes in lifestyle and "societal structures" have extended the period of transition between childhood and adulthood, meaning that an increasing number of people are living lives and facing problems and challenges that have traditionally been seen as specific to youth. Young people today are studying for longer periods, and marrying and 'settling down' at a later age; conditions in the labour market have changed radically, offering little stability or security; at the same time, the support mechanisms being offered by society are decreasing. These changes have not only increased the challenges that young people are now facing, but they are also contributing to their marginalisation and to the feelings of insecurity that more and more have in relation to both their present and their future.

Deprived of the ability to determine the paths that they wish to embark upon, quite simply, deprived of the ability to make choices in an independent manner, a growing number of young people are limited in their development in both the public and private spheres. This negative trend is reflected in the struggle that many face in accessing not only their civil and political rights (e.g. opposition to the lowering of voting ages), but also their

economic, social and cultural rights. This necessarily impedes a young person's capacity to act as a full citizen – the result being exclusion, in varying degrees of severity, and in different sectors of one's life.

The concept of social cohesion can be defined as a process through which a society seeks to actively deal with and accommodate for its diversity and combat all forms of inequality and exclusion. Translating this to the level of the individual, social cohesion can be understood as the full enjoyment of human rights and the autonomy to make choices; further, it is also the experience of being socially recognised as competent and thereby entitled to act and/or participate in a civic context. As such, we can recognise the aforementioned trends as contributing to a lack of social cohesion.

But how can we identify growing trends of exclusion amongst young people, while governments, particularly in Europe, are devoting more resources to furthering cohesion? In view of their particular experiences, needs and demands, young people can be understood as a social category, but also one that sadly often falls through the 'nets' of protection that existing legislation and support mechanisms offer. Essentially, a lack of recognition or awareness of circumstances that are specific to this period of age, or indeed merely because of age itself, means youth are often denied (full) access to many social and economic rights – such as those related to education, employment, housing, and social services.

Looking at the first of these areas; despite the right to education being a widely established concept, many young people still struggle to get access to high-quality education. Free access to education is not only an education free from tuition fees, it is also an education with free learning materials, access to libraries and cultural institutions, as well as subsidised travel to and from school, and possible housing benefits. Furthermore, schools themselves have to demonstrate cohesion; neither extending nor reproducing patterns of exclusion. In this sense, schools should actively acknowledge the diversity of their students and create

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inclusive policies (e.g. those combating discrimination and violence; allowing students to participate in governance and in the determination of curricula).

The transition from formal education to employment is in turn proving increasingly problematic for many young people in Europe. Being employed on a permanent basis is becoming more and more unusual, while short-term contracts and temporary jobs are becoming the norm. Many young people are forced to pursue unpaid internships – some because they are told that they do not have the required experience, some because there simply are no other options. Aside from financial considerations, internships can provide a useful period for training and career preparation; however, there is significant risk of internships being used as 'cheap labour', meaning young people accumulate internships on their CVs, without the possibility to move smoothly into paid employment in a given sector.

Of course, we cannot ignore wider economic considerations when examining the situation facing young people – at a moment of global recession, negative trends can be identified in almost all areas of the labour market. Nevertheless, the global economic crisis has shown youth to be a particularly vulnerable group: according to Eurostat, in the first quarter of 2009, the unemployment rate in the EU27 for those aged 15-24 was 18.3% - equating to 5.0 million young people – significantly higher than the total unemployment rate of 8.2%. The effects of this are significant: the British Medical Journal recently noted that 'unemployment increases rates of depression, particularly in the young', with parasuicide rates in unemployed young men 9.5-25 times higher than for their employed peers (Dorling. D, *Unemployment and Health*, BMJ 2009; 338:b829).

In addition we can identify the specific difficulties that young people face due to multiple discrimination, with inequality linked to age intersecting and interacting with discrimination, based for example on sexuality, disability, gender, and/or race. Such discrimination can be impacted by, or directly linked to other forms of social exclusion. Without sophisticated understanding of the particular challenges and obstacles that such patterns of discrimination can reproduce, young people cannot benefit from governmental strategies designed to build cohesion: as in all the issues that concern them, here it is vital that the voices of young people are heard and central to the determination of solutions. Yet the average age of people in different decision-making structures continues to be shockingly high. One of the main obstacles

to the participation of young people is the perception of age as an indicator of competence. Young people are still often perceived as being too young, too inexperienced and too immature to be able to form an opinion or make an informed decision. Moreover, youth, as a social group, is often portrayed in a negative light – perceived as threatening, reactionary, and troublesome. Seemingly, this can result in disproportionate social policies couched as 'preventative' and based in a wider perception of public safety and order, which limit the independence of young people, and infringe their rights (e.g. the use of the 'Mosquito' device to prevent young people gathering in public spaces). In this sense, we can recognise that there is a gap between the responsibilities and duties of young people on the one hand and the actual rights they enjoy on the other.

The discussion on the rights of youth, and especially children, has for a long time been characterised by a focus on their protection rather than their potential. Ensuring youth autonomy has to be a central aim of all youth policy - meaning a shift towards a rights-based approach to youth and youth policy is absolutely necessary - and the basis of this is the acknowledgement and recognition of the potential of children and young people as well as the particular expertise that they possess. Moreover, the point of departure has to be that young people are affected by a broad range of policy areas, such as the aforementioned examples of education, employment and social services, and thus youth policy has to be cross-sectoral. As a consequence of this, an awareness of the nature and circumstances that are specific for this age group is crucial when designing policy of any kind.

A new legal framework is the only way of ensuring youth rights, the full human rights of young people. The concept of youth rights is based on the notion of young people forming a distinct social category, united not only by the lifestyle and circumstances they share, but also by the problems and challenges related to them. The concept of youth rights offers a contextual framework for responses that is based on the rights of young people and more importantly, on their right to participate in shaping policy. Moreover, the concept is cross-sectoral in its nature and thus offers us a way of not only combating the problems and challenges that youth today already face, but also to create policy with the aim of preventing marginalisation and exclusion among young people. Here, it is valuable to underline the importance of combining legal instruments with different mechanisms for implementation and monitoring, as this is the only way of ensuring that policy works and is kept up to date.

It is of course important to recognise the steps that have been taken so far – for example, within the Council of Europe and in many of its member states. Moreover, the discussion on youth rights offers the Council of Europe a great opportunity - as an institution that is devoted to defending the human rights of all Europeans and that is also celebrating its 60th anniversary this year - to be a protagonist in initiating the discussion on what human rights in the 21st Century are, as well as how the human rights of young people across Europe can be secured.

• Coyote Theme

Any debate on these issues needs to consider the valuable role that youth organisations play in promoting and contributing to "the social cohesion between youth and the surrounding society", and institutional responses to the latter concern have to ensure adequate support is provided to these organisations, both to guarantee their survival, but crucially, their independence and effectiveness. Youth organisations are a demonstration of youth autonomy, and an important arena – often when all others are absent – for civic participation, for young people to influence their (social/cultural) environments, and for them to support – and be supported by – their peers.

Of course, as for individual young people, youth organisations have both rights and responsibilities. While remaining receptive to the needs of their core constituencies, youth organisations must engage in serious efforts to ensure their own, internal, cohesion. To avoid the reproduction of certain patterns of exclusion, youth organisations must remain accessible and open to young people: in such a way, the dynamism of the youth sector can be sustained, and the most pressing needs of young people can be addressed when policies are formed (here we can consider both policy development within organisations, and also in contexts where youth organisations serve as the representatives of young people in governmental policy fora).

Youth organisations can and do lead by example in devising strategies to recognise and work with diversity; moreover, coopera-

tion and partnership within the youth sector remains a very clear and necessary demonstration of this. However, the extension of this partnership to governments and institutions at all levels, is key to enabling sophisticated policies to further social cohesion to be determined; this is at once a strategy to ensure the genuine needs of young people are addressed and itself a demonstration of social cohesion policy. By nurturing the representative and democratic participation of young people in the determination of policies that affect them, the rights of young people are recognised, exercised and promoted. In such a way, young people can play their role in building cohesion in the societies of which they are part. ■

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