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# Young People, social inclusion and exclusion within Europe

## ► Social inclusion, exclusion and social cohesion: some definitions

Social inclusion and exclusion are often rightly closely associated with poverty and disadvantage yet the problems associated with these terms are broad ranging and complex. The language used to describe the range of issues which are of concern is constantly evolving and far from straight forward. Terms such as social inclusion, social exclusion and social cohesion have over recent years gained widespread popularity as being perhaps better equipped to capture the complex nature of the relevant issues and as a way of describing these problems which is perhaps less value-laden than some of the previous approaches which have been employed. Yet the terms themselves are far from incontrovertible and are at time used with little precision or as interchangeable.

**Levitas *et al* (2007) defined social exclusion as: ‘a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack of or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the quality and cohesion of society as a whole’.**

**Social inclusion** : might be defined as the inverse of social exclusion. It relates to the ability to fully participate in normal social activities and to be able to live one’s life to the best of one’s ability and not to be obstructed by factors beyond one’s individual control. **Participation** is often deemed to be important for effective social inclusion, which may include economic participation, political and civic participation and social and cultural participation. Most recently the term **social cohesion** has gained some recognition as perhaps a more dynamic way to understand some of these problems. Social cohesion refers to;

**‘the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation...//...in addition society’s capacity to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members** (Council of Europe 2007).

As the Council of Europe goes on to point out, Social Cohesion...

**‘encapsulates the social goals of Europe in a way that other concepts do not. In comparison to social inclusion for example, it is a broader approach and has a much stronger set of references to the functioning of democracy and the healthiness of society. Moreover, social inclusion focuses on ‘specialised’ policies and actions whereas the social cohesion concept seeks a broader, more civic and societal responsibility’.**

Whilst appreciative of the fact that social cohesion may well be a more dynamic and inclusive term, for the most part this piece relies upon the terms social exclusion and inclusion as those which are currently most widely known and accepted within youth policy fields.

Unemployment and/or limited formal educational qualifications are important in explaining social exclusion, but the problem is complex and multi-faceted and can encompass things like living in poor neighbourhoods (which are often located in close proximity to prosperous and thriving cities), limiting living conditions, widespread poverty within families as well as neighbourhoods, ill health (often across as well as within generations) young parenthood and in the worst cases homelessness, drug addiction and crime. Walther and Phol (2005) utilize the idea of ‘constellations of disadvantage’ in order to try and capture the ‘complex interrelationships which characterize social exclusion and they point to the interrelationship between socio-economic, institutional and individual factors’ (p 38) which conspire to create situations of social exclusion.

Social exclusion can be caused by, as well as hindered and inhibited by, various aspects of discrimination meaning that some groups are more vulnerable to exclusion than others. Women, those from (some) ethnic minority backgrounds and those with disabilities can be more vulnerable to exclusion. This piece describes some of the key issues facing young people in Europe in respect of social exclusion and social cohesion and ends with a brief note about future research and policy directions.

► **Youth exclusion and inclusion across Europe**

There are close to 96 million young people aged 15-29 in the EU (about 20% of the population). There is no easy way of defining youth both within and across countries and despite talk of a 'European social model' there are wide differences in the experiences of young people from different backgrounds, places and situations. Many young people from the Eastern European countries, for example, are poorer than those from the West and as Roberts (2009:2) points out, many young people in the poorer Eastern European countries are simply 'not catching up' to their wealthier Western counterparts. Recently research has drawn attention to the wide disparities which exist between those countries which are deemed to be more socially inclusive, namely the Nordic countries and those like the UK, where gross economic inequality produces many of its own social ills and problems (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Despite this clear diversity and complexity Williamson (2009:129) rightly reminds us that there are also 'strong similarities across nations' in respect of youth policy across Europe and there are a number of over-riding issues which concern young people across different places and countries. As Williamson points out, aside from the dominant issues around education, training and employment and those around health, housing, family, welfare, leisure and justice there are cross-cutting issues around participation and citizenship which are further cut across by issues of safety, multiculturalism, mobility and internationalism. Regardless

of issues of relative wealth and inequality it is clear that there are gaps across Europe between those young people who appear to be better 'socially included' and those who remain stubbornly and persistently economically marginal, sometimes facing the harshest and most damaging experiences of social exclusion. Research has shown that there is indeed much commonality for those most poorly qualified and experiencing unemployment and who are most at risk of social exclusion across different European contexts (Warner Weil *et al* 2005).

Whilst many policy makers have been rightly concerned with social exclusion and its associated problems we ought to remember that many, perhaps even most young people, are probably better 'socially included' than ever before. In respect of the UK Williamson (2009:135) notes that 'the fragmentation of the class structure and the emergence of 'globalization' have produced far greater opportunities for many young people than ever prevailed before'. Whilst such opportunities may not be evenly distributed either across or even within countries, the increasingly de-standardized nature of youth transitions has allowed many young people access to great benefits in the period which some have termed 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2006). Most young people face greater choices and opportunities than in the past and many now enjoy longer periods of family support, leading for some at least to the creation of what are sometimes termed 'choice biographies'. Indeed evidence shows that family support is widely and readily accessible for most young people, whatever their social background (although for some of the poorest young people reliance on family support might be the only way they can get by and in some cases survive in contexts of hardship and exclusion).

Most young people across the EU, however, are spending longer in education and achieving higher educational qualifications than ever before. Rising rates of educational participation mostly brings greater opportunities, which can have widespread ramifications for other aspects of young people's lives and underpins much of the drive for greater social inclusion. Rates of participation in education have generally risen across the EU with 76.85% of young people aged 18 engaged in education in 2007 (Eurostat 2009). The UK recently moved to raise the compulsory participation age to 18. Countries such as Finland, Sweden and Poland boast some of the highest rates of participation whilst a few countries, like Turkey, Cyprus and UK still have less than half 18 year olds participating in education (Ibid). Higher rates of educational participation tend to be associated with better outcomes for young people and the risks of unemployment and marginalization can be significantly reduced. In EU-27, the unemployment rate of 25-64 years olds with tertiary education stood at 3.6 % in 2007 compared with 6.0 % for people who had completed at best upper secondary education and 9.2 % among those who had not gone beyond lower secondary schooling. Data also shows an increase in income for longer participation and for those who participate in Higher Education incomes tend to



be considerably higher (EU 2008). Yet many young people across Europe continue to be subjected to processes of marginalization and suffer severe and on-going inequality and disadvantage. Significant numbers of young people are still leaving education early and with few or no qualifications. Almost one in six Europeans leaves school with a low educational attainment level. Countries like Malta, Portugal and Spain have the highest proportions (30 % or more) of low-qualified young people who are no longer in the education or training system. In nearly all Member States, women are less likely than men to be in this situation (13 % against 17 % at EU-level) (EU 2008).

Poorer educational outcomes are often closely tied to poor labour market and employment experiences. Many marginalized young people find themselves trapped in work that is low paid and insecure, exacerbating wider problems of marginalization and exclusion. The recent onset of global recession has affected some countries more severely than others. In places like the UK fears have risen over the prospect of a 'lost generation' of young people as the young feel some of the worst and most damaging effects of job losses and cut backs. Whilst there has been much policy concern around those without education, employment or training (NEETs) there is more evidence to suggest that many vulnerable young people are more likely to be circulating in and out of a fairly widespread 'low pay, no pay' cycle (Shildrick *et al* 2009). For many this cycle represents a 'poverty trap' as opposed to a stepping stone to something better and more secure. Labour market opportunities vary greatly from country to country and within countries and for some young people mobility, even within their own countries is simply not an option they can afford. Higher educated young people are more likely to be mobile and live, work or study in different countries. These young people tend to be older (25-34) and from more affluent backgrounds. There are also clear disparities between countries with those from some of the Nordic countries, i.e. Finland reporting the highest rates of mobility (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and working Conditions 2008). Bagnoli (2009) notes that engaging in gap years, backpacking, studying abroad or working as an au pair are some of the most common forms of youth travel in Europe, allowing for self discovery as well as identity creation and construction. Yet there are a growing number of poorer, economic migrants who shift countries as a means of trying to improve their lives and for these young people economic survival (and potential improvement) becomes the key goal as opposed to journeys of self discovery and youthful adventure. Research also shows that economically marginal migrants tend to face further poverty and marginalization in their countries of destination (Lelkes 2007).

## ► Conclusions: what of the future, policy and research?

One of the major strengths of the social exclusion perspective (and that of social cohesion) is that it better allows for an understanding of the complex nature of economic marginality. In some respects this is perhaps the greatest failing of policy which attempts to solve the problem of youth social exclusion. All too often the focus is far too narrowly placed on moving young people into employment yet many of those who suffer at the margins of the labour market or outside of it all together also experience a wider and multi-layered set of disadvantages and in some cases discrimination. Whilst social exclusion as a concept has been useful to capture some of this complexity, youth policies have been less successful at taking proper account of these wider aspects of exclusion and their relationship to educational and labour market participation. To give just one example, whilst young people generally are deemed to be one of the healthiest groups in all societies, poorer young people suffer much poorer health outcomes (of themselves and their families) than their more affluent counterparts. It is recognized that health is key to quality of life (Anderson *et al* 2009) yet Anderson *et al* reported that within the EU 'many workers reported problems in reconciling their family responsibilities with the demands of employment' (2009:61). The impact of bereavements, mental strain and caring responsibilities can all work to undermine young adults' attempts to better their lives and escape the worst effects of poverty and economic marginalization. Good educational and employment opportunities are at the heart of social inclusion and cohesion, yet policies will only achieve good outcomes if they are fully cognisant of the complex range of problems that intersect with, and impact upon, economically marginalized young adults' education and work experiences.

A short piece such as this could not hope to cover all the issues in respect of inclusion and cohesion or issues of exclusion of young people in Europe. Rather, it aims to give a flavour of some of the key issues and problems. Social exclusion - as well as social inclusion and cohesion - are complex and multi-faceted terms and as Williamson rightly notes, 'youth policy is a complex and challenging task' (2009:139). There can be few, if any, simple solutions. Too often a focus on shifting young people into the labour market lacks emphasis on the quality and sustainability of work and too little consideration is given to the multi-faceted, complex inter-related nature of many of the problems associated with social exclusion and marginality. Discrimination, both overt and more covert are also key issues that need to be acknowledged and addressed. Further focus could usefully be directed to those young people who escape social exclusion and marginalization. Whilst there is clear evidence that social exclusion can be stubbornly persistent across generations and as yet there is not enough evidence of how young people are able to 'escape' poverty and social exclusion (Shildrick *et al* 2009). ■





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